PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

(HANSARD)

SIXTH SERIES—VOLUME 336

HOUSE OF COMMONS

OFFICIAL REPORT

SECOND SESSION OF THE FIFTY-SECOND PARLIAMENT
OF THE UNITED KINGDOM OF GREAT BRITAIN
AND NORTHERN IRELAND
FORTY-EIGHTH YEAR OF THE REIGN OF
HER MAJESTY QUEEN ELIZABETH II

SESSION 1998–99

COMPRISING PERIOD
26 July—29 October 1999

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26 July 1999

THE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES
OFFICIAL REPORT

IN THE SECOND SESSION OF THE FIFTY-SECOND PARLIAMENT OF THE UNITED KINGDOM OF GREAT BRITAIN AND NORTHERN IRELAND
[WHICH OPENED 7 MAY 1997]

FORTY-EIGHTH YEAR OF THE REIGN OF
HER MAJESTY QUEEN ELIZABETH II

SIXTH SERIES **VOLUME 336**

FOURTEENTH VOLUME OF SESSION 1998–99

House of Commons

Monday 26 July 1999

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

PRIVATE BUSINESS

TRANSPORT SALARIED STAFFS' ASSOCIATION (AMENDMENT OF RULES) BILL

Read the Third time, and passed.

Oral Answers to Questions

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

The Secretary of State was asked—

Sports Strategy

1. **Dr. Phyllis Starkey** (Milton Keynes, South-West): If he will make a statement on progress with the development of the Government's sports strategy. [91339]

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Mr. Chris Smith): We are making excellent progress with the development of our sports strategy. I expect to publish it in the autumn. It will focus on three priority areas: sport in schools, lifelong participation in sport and excellence at national and international level.

Dr. Starkey: Does my right hon. Friend agree that much of the success of the American women's football team in the women's world cup can be put down to the legislation known as Title 9, which was passed in 1972 and barred schools and colleges from federal funding unless they provided equal sporting opportunities for girls and women? What will he be doing to ensure that schools and colleges in this country provide good opportunities for women and girls to participate in sport, since we clearly need to take radical action if we are to improve our sporting performance?

Mr. Smith: One of the central themes of our report will be to ensure that everyone, regardless of age, gender, ethnic background or ability, has the chance to participate in and enjoy sport. We want to make sure, in particular, that girls have full opportunities at school to develop their sporting ability. The development of the new school sports co-ordinators with support from the national lottery will, I hope, go a long way towards achieving that.

If I have a slight criticism of my hon. Friend, it is that she does not pay enough tribute to some of our national women's sporting teams, which are doing extremely well in a number of different sports.

Mr. Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley): The Secretary of State has mentioned sport in schools. Will he intervene directly with Lancashire county council, which has cut by half the amount of time in which pupils in years 5 and 6 can be taught swimming? He will appreciate not only that swimming is important as one of the best forms of exercise, but that swimming skills can save lives. The rhetoric about sport in schools is fine, but youngsters are now having only half the swimming lessons that they were receiving only 12 months ago. Will the right hon. Gentleman intervene directly with Lancashire county council to restore to youngsters the swimming lessons that they desperately need?

Mr. Smith: The hon. Gentleman is right to stress the importance of swimming, particularly for pupils' future life-saving abilities and as a good, healthy exercise for

young people. I shall certainly want to draw his remarks to the attention of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Employment.

Ms Gisela Stuart (Birmingham, Edgbaston): I am the trustee of an organisation called Local Leagues, which is based in Birmingham and aims to encourage children to play sports, particularly football and cricket, outside school hours. One of the problems that we are facing is the availability of suitable fields in the city. Will my right hon. Friend ensure that his Department co-ordinates action with the Department for Education and Employment and local government to ensure that there is access to appropriate sites and to schools outside school hours?

Mr. Smith: I will indeed. The new opportunities fund, which uses new funds from the national lottery, will assist my hon. Friend in two ways. First, the money for out of school hours clubs will mean that sporting activities can be promoted and financially supported. Secondly, the green spaces initiative, which the new opportunities fund is undertaking, will enable new green areas and playing fields to be created where they are needed.

Mr. Ronnie Fearn (Southport): What sports and initiatives for the over-50s are contained in the action plan? Will the right hon. Gentleman state what will happen to ballroom dancing, which is a major sport for the over-50s?

Mr. Smith: I can assure the hon. Gentleman that sport for the over-50s will feature in our report, because part of the report's main thrust is lifelong participation in sport and sporting activity. On the specific question of ballroom dancing, the hon. Gentleman will have to wait and see.

Mr. Gerry Sutcliffe (Bradford, South): As part of the Government's wider sporting strategy, we are bidding to host the 2006 world cup, which will act as a spur to youngsters, particularly in football. My right hon. Friend will know that the issue of Manchester United and the FA cup is causing great concern. Will he tell us what the Government's latest position on that is?

Mr. Smith: That is a matter for the Football Association and Manchester United, not the Government. However, the Minister for Sport and I have made it clear that we hope that Manchester United will be able to play in the world tournament in Brazil, because that is important for the success of our 2006 world cup bid, and if a sensible way can be found for Manchester United to participate in the FA cup as well, no one would be more pleased than us.

I take this opportunity to pay considerable tribute to the work that my hon. Friend the Minister for Sport has done in promoting our 2006 world cup bid. Indeed, if we are successful next year in securing the world cup for England, it will be in no small measure due to his efforts.

Mr. Richard Spring (West Suffolk): As the dear, revered leader and Alastair Campbell plan the Front-Bench reshuffle this week, may I express the hope that the right hon. Gentleman will survive the experience? When Rodney Walker, David Oxley, Trevor Brooking and Craig Reedie are forced to appeal direct to the Prime Minister, does he not recognise that, in practice, the Government are busily destroying sport in schools?

Mr. Smith: The hon. Gentleman is talking nonsense, and such a remark comes ill from a representative of a party that sold off more than 5,000 school playing fields during its time in office.

New Books

3. **Dr. Howard Stoate** (Dartford): What assessment he has made of the investment in new books made in each of the past three years by library authorities; and if he will make a statement. [91341]

The Minister for the Arts (Mr. Alan Howarth): Data collected by the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy show that library expenditure in England on books and pamphlets was £83.4 million in 1996–97, £74.5 million in 1997-98 and an estimated £77.5 million in 1998-99. The level of book expenditure will be covered in the new national library standards that we aim to introduce in 2000-01.

Dr. Stoate: Does my hon. Friend agree that that rather unsatisfactory result has been produced by the previous Government's failure to invest properly in libraries and education in general? What do the Government intend to do to rectify the situation, and what will their proposals mean to my constituents in Dartford?

Mr. Howarth: Sadly, my hon. Friend is right about the very destructive squeeze on libraries expenditure which we inherited. Local authorities have had their best settlement for seven years. They also have a statutory duty to provide a comprehensive and efficient service, and my right hon. Friend and I are determined that they should do so. Hitherto, a comprehensive and efficient service was never defined, but we are requiring local authorities to produce annual library plans and we are in discussion with the Library Association and the Local Government Association to develop public libraries standards, which will include a benchmark for new book purchasing.

Mr. Christopher Fraser (Mid-Dorset and North Poole): Government expenditure under this Administration is less than under the previous Administration. In 1995–96 it was £171 million; in 1999–2000 it is £90 million. How can the Minister justify that?

Mr. Howarth: I do not seek to justify the plans that we were driven to adopt from the previous Administration.

Mr. Derek Wyatt (Sittingbourne and Sheppey): In the 20th century, our use of leisure and workplace time has changed and many of us need access to libraries on Saturdays and Sundays. What discussions has my hon. Friend had with the Library Association and the Local Government Association about achieving fuller opening on Saturday afternoons and all-day opening on Sundays?

Mr. Howarth: The vision that my hon. Friend holds out is very attractive, and that is one of the matters we are considering in our discussions with the Library

Association about standards for libraries; but he will be well aware that opening libraries for the hours that we would both wish would be costly.

Regional Theatres

4. **Mr. David Ruffley** (Bury St. Edmunds): If he will make a statement on the funding of regional theatres. [91342]

The Minister for the Arts (Mr. Alan Howarth): Some 27 per cent.—more than £50 million—of grant in aid distributed by the Arts Council of England and the regional arts boards is planned to go to drama, including regional theatres, in 1999–2000. In addition, in recognition of the difficulties that many regional theatres continue to face, the Arts Council is undertaking a review of producing theatre in the regions.

Mr. Ruffley: Can the Minister give me an assurance that Eastern Arts will not cut the funding to the Theatre Royal, Bury St. Edmunds, in the coming financial year?

Mr. Howarth: Funding for Eastern Arts from grant in aid is up 15.4 per cent. It is for Eastern Arts to judge how to distribute that funding across theatres in its region.

Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours (Workington): My hon. Friend will be aware of the theatre by the lake development in my constituency—beside the lake beneath the trees. He will know that it is possibly the most innovative theatre development in western Europe. When will Ministers in his Department be coming to visit us?

Mr. Howarth: My hon. Friend's invitation is seductive. I know about his determination in representing his constituency, and it would be difficult for us, even were we minded to do so, to decline his invitation.

National Lottery

5. **Mr. Desmond Swayne** (New Forest, West): If he will make a statement about the performance of the national lottery in relation to funds raised for *(a)* good causes and *(b)* the new opportunities fund. [91343]

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Mr. Chris Smith): At the end of June 1999, over £7.7 billion had been raised for the good causes, including £564 million for the new opportunities fund. Earlier this month, the new opportunities fund announced its first awards, worth £1.8 million, for the out of school hours child care programme. That is creating a total of nearly 9,000 new out of school child care places. Twelve new summer holiday play schemes funded by NOF opened today.

Mr. Swayne: Does the right hon. Gentleman accept that some things ought properly to be paid for out of taxation and that, had that been the case, the original good causes would now be £3.7 billion better off?

Mr. Smith: I am afraid that the hon. Gentleman's arithmetic escapes him. As I said earlier, £564 million has been made available for the new opportunities fund to date. The hon. Gentleman will be aware that, during the licence period, at least £1.85 billion is available to each of the original good causes, which is more than they were originally expected to receive. Would the hon. Gentleman and his colleagues on the Conservative Front Bench remove that funding for out of school places? Would they remove the holiday play schemes and cut the funding for child care? That is the implication of what they are asking us to do.

Mr. Bill O'Brien (Normanton): May I express appreciation to my right hon. Friend for the initiative that he took to help the former coal mining areas? We look forward to further developments in that respect. May I make a special plea? Some of the mining villages, which had to depend on the Coal Industry Social Welfare Organisation for sport and recreational activities, now find that there is a tremendous shortage of such activities. Such facilities as could be provided are important for some of those villages. Will my right hon. Friend assure me that this issue is not lost and that small villages, such as Sharlstom in my constituency, can look forward to some assistance to develop their recreation and entertainment facilities?

Mr. Smith: I can, indeed, give my hon. Friend that assurance. Part of the findings of the research that we have undertaken demonstrates that the former coalfield areas have not done as well as the national average in terms of their receipt of funds from the lottery. That applies across the board, including arts and sport. We are now undertaking urgent work with the lottery distributers to try to rectify that imbalance.

Television Licence Concessions

6. **Sir Sydney Chapman** (Chipping Barnet): If he will report progress on the review of concessions relating to the television licence. [91344]

The Minister for Tourism, Film and Broadcasting (Janet Anderson): The BBC funding review panel, which is examining the structure of the concessionary licence scheme and whether a suitable alternative structure could be available, will report to my right hon. Friend very shortly. Copies of the report will be sent to all Members of the House. There will then be a period of public consultation on the panel's recommendations.

Sir Sydney Chapman: I am grateful to the Minister for that reply. I recognise that six different groups of concessions prevail, but is the Minister in favour of looking again at the rather meagre £1.25 reduction for blind people and at whether the concession should be extended to deaf people? Is not this whole problem created by the fact that this is a classic case of "create an exception and anomalies abound"?

Janet Anderson: The hon. Gentleman is right. I reassure him that the Government accept that the reduction currently available to blind people is of little help. The review panel will no doubt wish to consider this matter in the context of the concessionary arrangements as a whole, but I would not want to pre-empt its recommendations. We recognise that past attempts to address the anomalies of the concessionary scheme

individually have done nothing to improve the scheme. That is why the review panel has been asked to consider the scheme as a whole.

Mr. David Winnick (*Walsall, North*): Does not the Department receive more correspondence on this subject than on any other? Since I tried to introduce a private Member's Bill on this issue on 16 January 1987, the problem has not gone away. Why is it not possible for a scheme to be introduced giving the over-70s a reduction of a third or a half? Pensioners up and down the country are asking for a concession. They are right to do so, and it is time the House of Commons acted.

Janet Anderson: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for his work in this area to highlight the issue. He is right that the Department receives more correspondence on this matter than on any other subject. There has been some speculation in the press that the panel may recommend withdrawing the concession from existing beneficiaries. The panel has yet to report, and I cannot anticipate its recommendations. However, there is no question that the Government would withdraw the concession, and we hope that the review panel, when it reports, will propose different options to improve the scheme, one of which may be my hon. Friend's suggestion.

Mr. Peter Ainsworth (East Surrey): I welcome the fact that the hon. Lady is taking the concessions issue seriously. Does she share my surprise that an organisation that currently receives about £2.25 billion a year from a hypothecated tax seems to think that that is not enough? Should not the BBC start by redefining what the licence fee is for, before digging further into the pockets of television viewers?

I know that the hon. Lady is not short of advice on broadcasting. Indeed, the right hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mr. Mandelson) is today making a speech which provides further unsought advice. May I offer her some pleasant holiday reading? Our submission to the BBC funding review panel, entitled "Fair Funding for the BBC", contains some helpful advice on concessions.

Janet Anderson: The hon. Gentleman was a parliamentary private secretary in this Department under the previous Government, and I am glad that he continues to take a serious interest in the funding of the BBC. The BBC plays a central role in our aspirations for broadcasting and for the delivery of high-quality public service output into the digital age. The aim of the review is to ensure the BBC's continuing ability to meet its obligations to its viewers and its listeners, and to operate successfully in a competitive marketplace.

The Government have, time and again, made it plain that we believe that the licence fee is sustainable at least until the run-up to the renewal of the BBC's charter in 2006. Though an imperfect funding mechanism, it is the best means of providing the BBC with sufficient security to continue to meet its obligations to its audiences, and to invest in the future of broadcasting.

Local Commercial Radio

7. **Mr. Bob Blizzard** (Waveney): What representations he has received on the regulation of local commercial radio broadcasting. [91345]

The Minister for Tourism, Film and Broadcasting (Janet Anderson): The Government frequently receive representations on the regulation of local commercial radio broadcasting from industry organisations, radio companies and other interested parties. The Government recently published the results of our consultation on the convergence Green Paper, in which we addressed the wide-ranging responses about the licensing and regulation of radio.

Mr. Blizzard: I thank my hon. Friend for that answer. Does she share my concern that local commercial radio has become less local? I am informed that GWR owns 33 local radio stations and HBA owns 27. It often seems that the same music is played on all the stations at the same time, from a national play list. Some good local musicians and the Musicians Union are frustrated that they cannot get their music played on local radio. Can my hon. Friend suggest what can be done to make local radio more local?

Janet Anderson: My hon. Friend is right. It is certainly true that the programming of the larger groups such as GWR, Capital and Emap is based on central playlists, but there will be station variations, particularly when certain music is more popular in one area than in another.

The answer to my hon. Friend's question, essentially, is that it is for the radio stations to specify their intended formats when they apply for a licence. That could include a commitment to promote local music. It is for the Radio Authority to award a licence to the applicant that it considers offers the format that will best meet local needs. I know that that continues to be a priority for the authority, and it is precisely because of public concerns such as this that it is nervous of any further relaxation of the ownership rules.

Mr. Michael Fabricant (Lichfield): Will the hon. Lady pay tribute to Tony Stoller, the chief executive of the Radio Authority, and his deputy David Vick, for the regulation of radio? Over the past five years, radio has expanded more in this country than during any other period. Does the hon. Lady accept, however, that companies such as GWR are now interested in obtaining digital licences? What assurance can she give that there will be no added levy on either radio or television digital licences?

Janet Anderson: I am happy to join the hon. Gentleman in paying tribute to the two people who look after the Radio Authority. As for his question about speculation in the press, it was a good try, but I will not pre-empt the outcome of the review panel's findings.

Youth Sports

8. **Ms Linda Perham** (Ilford, North): What support his Department provides for youth sports. [91346]

9. **Mr. John Bercow** (Buckingham): What plans he has to increase the opportunities for young people to play sports. [91347]

The Minister for Sport (Mr. Tony Banks): The Government fund Sport England to develop programmes for young people. They do that through their active schools programme, which aims to provide every young person with the opportunity to learn foundation skills and participate in the sport or physical activity of his or her choice. Current initiatives include top play, BT top sport, coaching for teachers, sportsmark and the sporting ambassadors scheme. New developments will include the appointment of up to 600 active schools co-ordinators and the launch of the active primary schools award. In addition, Sport England will be introducing its active sports programme in the year 2000, with the aim of helping children and young people to achieve more from their chosen sport.

Ms Perham: I thank my hon. Friend for his answer. Will he join me in congratulating the young people of the London borough of Redbridge, who in each of the past 10 years have finished first or second in the London Heathrow youth games—the biggest sporting event for young people in Europe?

The millennium youth games will take place next year. What can my hon. Friend's Department do to ensure that the impetus of that event, which will involve 250,000 young people in the United Kingdom, will not be lost, at a time when local councils' sports development budgets are being cut?

Mr. Banks: I know of my hon. Friend's close association with the London Heathrow youth games. It goes back some years, as does my own. Indeed, mine goes back somewhat longer, to the days of the Greater London council and the establishment of the games. *[Interruption.]* It has all been said before, Madam Speaker.

Redbridge has done particularly well, and I congratulate it on its active promotion of school sports. I hope that my borough of Newham will achieve a similar distinction at next year's games. The London Heathrow youth games have produced some of our best athletes: Steve Backley, whom I saw at the AAA championships in Birmingham on Saturday, is one of its products, as is John Regis. It is great to see that the games can be used as a way of encouraging our young talent. We in the Department will do all that we can to ensure their further development, and to extend them throughout the country—as they will be extended in the millennium youth games.

Mr. Bercow: Many schools in my Buckingham constituency complain that there is now less time for sport than ever before, and despite the admirable efforts of the Lawn Tennis Association, only 10 per cent. of schools in Britain are currently members of the British Schools Tennis Association. What evidence can the hon. Gentleman offer the House that state schools—of which he and I are both products—now offer children more opportunities to play and learn tennis than before he took office?

Mr. Banks: It is at times like that—when I hear that the hon. Gentleman and I have had a shared experience—that I wish I had come from Eton, but I did not. There has been a marked falling off in competitive sport in schools. Between 1987 and 1994, it declined by about 75 per cent. That is not unconnected, I might add, with the disputes that the Conservative party had with teachers when it was in government. We are doing what we can to encourage competitive sport between schools and in school.

With regard to tennis, the LTA is putting a considerable amount of money—about £30 million a year—into the development of tennis at the grass roots. We have had much discussion about that. The LTA is specifically aiming at encouraging tennis in state schools and in inner-city areas, where enormous talent, we believe, is waiting to be identified and developed. I share with the hon. Gentleman a great desire for us to recapture, one day, the men's singles title at Wimbledon, which remains our most highly valued but elusive sports triumph—not excluding the world cup.

Ms Bridget Prentice (Lewisham, East): Does my hon. Friend agree that part of the reason why competitive sport in schools has failed so miserably in recent years is the fact that the Conservative Government presided over the sale of 5,000 school playing fields, as well as a drop of some 70 per cent. in competitive fixtures between state schools? Does he think that active school co-ordinators may have a role in trying to rectify that?

Mr. Banks: At this sensitive time in the political cycle, perhaps cross-party recriminations can be put on one side, although, of course, I agree with my hon. Friend: we are doing our best to clear up the mess that we inherited. The whole idea of the 600 active school co-ordinators is to bring back to our schools that degree of inter-school competitive sport that is so missing and which causes many problems in a number of team sports at national and international level. That is the co-ordinators' aim. It is also to create greater links between schools and local sports clubs.

I hope that, over the years, these policies will come to fruition, which will mean, we hope, more medals and championships, and higher quality sport at national and international level.

Mr. Roy Beggs (East Antrim): Will the Minister for Sport convey to his beloved Chelsea football club our appreciation that it has decided to come to Northern Ireland to play a match against Omagh, and to provide a training camp for young people in Northern Ireland? Does he agree that visits by top-class sporting representatives of all sports to the regions of the United Kingdom give real incentive and encouragement to young people to acquire skills and to develop their sporting interest? Will he give us assistance in Northern Ireland to ensure that the Sports Council for Northern Ireland can provide even better facilities for all our young people there?

Mr. Banks: I am delighted to be able to pass on to my friends at Chelsea football club the thanks of the hon. Gentleman. Of course, I will have to speak in tongues in order to communicate with them, but I am more than happy to do so. I look forward to going to see that match because, as he knows, I was born in Belfast. It is nice to see the way in which the two can come together.

I am not the Northern Ireland Minister for Sport. For the life of me, I do not know who is, but I am sure that someone will refresh my memory in due course. [HON. MEMBERS: "It's you."] Perhaps it is me, but no one told me.

For many years, I have thought that a national stadium for the Northern Irish football team, for example, is desperately needed. I will do everything I can to support any calls or moves to construct one in that part of the country.

Mr. Peter Ainsworth (East Surrey): May I wish the Minister well in whatever changes this week may bring? Our Monday gatherings would not be the same without him. Does he agree that, when considering how to encourage younger people into sport, the professional bodies in sport should set a good example? We have heard from the Secretary of State earlier, but I should like the Minister's views on the decision to allow Manchester United to opt out of next season's FA cup, and to shut the door on compromise solutions—which his own Secretary of State has supported—suggested by the Football Association and others. What type of example does such a decision set for young people, and what message does it send to fans?

Mr. Banks: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his concern. All I can say is that I am sure that he will keep his job a lot longer than I shall keep mine, if only because I intend to retire at 65.

My right hon. Friend has already made the point that it would have been very good—it will still be very good, if it is at all possible—to have Manchester United playing in both competitions. However, I should also tell the hon. Gentleman that considerable effort was made to try to find a way of helping Manchester United out of its fixture congestion in January, when the world club championship is due to be played, so that it could remain in both competitions. So far, although great efforts have been made in the past, and undoubtedly efforts will be made in future, it has not proven possible to do that.

Nevertheless, the idea that I could personally order Manchester United out of the FA cup—or that I could instruct the Prime Minister, the Secretary of State, the Football Association, the premier league and the board of Manchester United—would necessarily mean that my power is awesome. I am afraid that, as much as I should like it to be, it is not. Therefore, good offices will continue to be used, and I shall, as ever, keep the hon. Gentleman closely informed.

MILLENNIUM EXPERIENCE

The Secretary of State was asked—

Fire Precautions

31. **Mr. Andrew Robathan** (Blaby): If he will make a statement on fire precautions and procedures in the millennium dome. [91369]

33. **Miss Anne McIntosh** (Vale of York): If he will list the fire precautions at the millennium dome; and if he will make a statement. [91371]

The Minister for Tourism, Film and Broadcasting (Janet Anderson): Fire safety engineering has been at the heart of the designs for the millennium experience from the outset. Comprehensive strategies have been developed and employed in partnership with the New Millennium Experience Company's own fire consultants and with the local authority. The NMEC has aimed to ensure that the risk of fire occurring is minimised and that, should a fire occur, occupants are able to move to safety quickly and in a controlled manner.

Mr. Robathan: Last week, I visited the dome. Before the reshuffle, would the Secretary of State pass on my thanks, and those of hon. Members on both sides of the House, to Lord Falconer for his role in that visit?

Very many—possibly the majority—of visitors to the dome will be children, and great effort is being made to encourage disabled people to visit it. The reassuring response that the Minster has just given notwithstanding, on that visit it seemed to me and to other hon. Members that in such an enclosed space—which will contain many children and disabled people—there was the possibility of some real safety problems. Will the Minister further reassure the House and say what specific action she has taken to look after the needs of disabled people should there be a fire or any other emergency at the dome?

Janet Anderson: I am very pleased that the hon. Gentleman enjoyed his visit to the dome—140 hon. Members made the visit, and were very impressed with what they saw. It is important that the public should be reassured about public safety, and I make it clear that, in planning the event, safety—including that of the disabled and of children—has been our prime concern. I should also like to repeat the remarks of Ian Johnston, assistant commissioner of the Metropolitan police, at this morning's launch of "Big Time", which will be the new year's eve party. He said:

"We have great confidence that we can provide a safe and secure environment where the public can enjoy themselves at this exciting event."

Miss McIntosh: Will the Minister estimate how long it would take to evacuate the dome in the event of an emergency, and how long it would take for the emergency services to enter the dome in such circumstances? Do she and the Department have any plans to co-ordinate emergency procedures for the many tourists whom we hope will come from other European countries?

Perhaps they could give some guidance to those who, in the event of a fire, might be evacuated from the new ghastly European Parliament building in Strasbourg.

Janet Anderson: The hon. Lady never misses a trick—I am not sure that the building to which she refers is our responsibility.

The fire precaution strategies at the dome have ranged from careful sizing and positioning of protected corridors and exits to the selection of construction materials which themselves have a low fire load. Active measures have been adopted, with large smoke extract fans incorporated into the dome roof and sprinklers included, where appropriate, in enclosed spaces.

Mr. Christopher Fraser (Mid-Dorset and North Poole): How long would it take?

Janet Anderson: Hang on a minute. The New Millennium Experience Company has carried out a number of computer simulations including, for example, the time taken for occupants to move to safety. We recognise that the timing is important, and I hope that we can give the House some more accurate information nearer the time.

Mr. Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield): My hon. Friend has a great deal of experience in this House, and she must take with a large amount of salt the co-ordinated questions on fire safety at the millennium dome that have been tabled today. Is not it a fact that the Opposition have lost the battle? They have consistently criticised the dome and tried to undermine it as an enterprise. It is now on track to become an enormous success, and all they can do is try to raise a public scare about something that has been extremely well catered for. Are not they a pathetic Opposition, who are now realising what a success the millennium dome will be?

Janet Anderson: I have been reassured by Opposition Members' support for the project. Following conversations with Opposition spokesmen, I am aware that they now share our opinion that the project will be a great success.

Mr. Peter Ainsworth (East Surrey): Not for the first time, may I put on record the Opposition's continuing and consistent support for the project—which, you will recall, Madam Speaker, originated under the Conservative Government? It is utter nonsense to pretend that we have criticised and carped about it. I have pointed that out several times in this place.

While acknowledging that one of the many thousands of tasks that needs to be completed over the next 159 days is ensuring public safety, may I ask the Minister to join me in congratulating Jennie Page and all those working on the site, who have never lost heart in the project and have been inspired by it? That inspiration—despite the regrettable public attitude that still exists—is the best hope that the dome will soon be a great success.

Janet Anderson: I am happy to join the hon. Gentleman in paying tribute to Jennie Page, and to David Trench, the construction director at the dome. Their contribution to making sure that the project is on time and on target has been beyond the call of duty. Hon. Members will wish to know that the New Millennium Experience Company has produced its annual report and accounts, which will be available in the Vote Office. All hon. Members will receive a millennium bulletin from us shortly, which will keep them up to date with further developments.

Dome

32. **Mr. Gordon Prentice** (Pendle): What steps are being taken to ensure that cooking smells in the millennium dome are neutralised. [91370]

The Minister for Tourism, Film and Broadcasting (Janet Anderson): The majority of kitchens in the dome have an air extraction plant which takes the air out of the dome. A few have filtered air-cleaning systems. Both will ensure that cooking smells are kept to a minimum.

Mr. Prentice: That was a good answer to something that has been perplexing me. There are to be 37 eating outlets in the dome, as I learned when I joined the hon. Member for Blaby (Mr. Robathan) in a visit there a few days ago. One of the 37 is McDonald's, which will be opening its 1,000th outlet in the UK. It occurred to me that we should use the dome to celebrate the great regional dishes and culinary diversity of this country. Can my hon. Friend reassure me that the 37 outlets will include restaurants where we can sample some of the great United Kingdom dishes of which we are so fond?

Janet Anderson: I understand that the 37 outlets cover a diversity of eating opportunities. I am sure that my hon. Friend will not be disappointed.

PRESIDENT OF THE COUNCIL

The President of the Council was asked—

Millennium Compliance

41. **Mr. James Plaskitt** (Warwick and Leamington): What progress is being made on the state of readiness of the national infrastructure in preparation for the millennium date change. [91379]

The President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons (Mrs. Margaret Beckett): The latest results of the independent assessments of key sectors and processes of the infrastructure were announced at the national infrastructure forum on 13 July. They show that key elements including water, telecommunications, postal services, benefit payments, cash distribution and railway safety systems have achieved blue status, indicating that the assessments have not identified any risk of material disruption over the date change period, which is of course welcome news.

There has been good progress since the previous report in April, but there is still much to complete in some programmes. Local authorities and financial institutions have a small number of reds, indicating that they are significantly behind in their preparations and will require

a concerted effort over the next few months to avoid possible material disruption to their services over the date change and beyond.

Mr. Plaskitt: Six local authorities have been given a red classification, one of which is Warwick district council. The assessment appears to have been based on a questionnaire organised by KPMG. Warwick district council is fully ready in terms of outcomes and is of the view that there is a very low risk of material disruption, but it was given a red because of KPMG's emphasis on processes, which has given a misleading impression. Before there is a further check on progress, will my right hon. Friend review the assessment criteria so that they focus more on outcomes and less on processes?

Mrs. Beckett: My hon. Friend has made an interesting contribution and made it plain how complex these matters can be. It is not for me to say whether Warwick council deserves a clean bill of health, but the Government offices are working closely with all the named authorities and will be anxious to pursue with the council the issues that he raised.

Sir Patrick Cormack (South Staffordshire): Does the President of the Council accept that there is still considerable uncertainty, and some anxiety, about the date change and all that it implies? She has not given us a monthly report for July, as she said she would. Will we get that tomorrow in the House? Does she accept that the booklet that has been distributed is strong on reassurance but weak on warning? If she makes a statement tomorrow, will she tell members of the general public which areas they should keep an especial watch on? When will she name names?

Mrs. Beckett: I am not quite sure what the hon. Gentleman means by that last remark, because we are publishing all the information that we can. Of course he is right to say that some uncertainty remains, and that is likely to continue all the way through, because those who give certain responses do not know what they are talking about. I anticipate publishing the July results in the very near future: over the next day or so.

The hon. Gentleman said that the booklet was weak on warning. We sought to ensure that people know where to go for information, and to keep that information as up-to-date as possible. We will continue to do that. Action 2000 has been publishing the latest results in a series of newspaper advertisements that began a few days ago.

Sir Patrick Cormack: Can I take it from that reply that there will be no statement to the House until October at the earliest? Surely we should have one tomorrow.

Mrs. Beckett: No. The hon. Gentleman will recall that the practice has been a quarterly statement to the House. That will continue.

Sir Patrick Cormack: The right hon. Lady said monthly.

Mrs. Beckett: I said that we would publish the information monthly. We will publish the July information in a written answer. That will be followed through in August and September. We are seeking means to make that information available to every Member of Parliament, so we shall ensure that the House is kept informed even during the recess.

HOUSE OF COMMONS

The President of the Council was asked—

Thursday Sittings

42. **Dr. Phyllis Starkey** (Milton Keynes, South–West): What assessment she has made of the impact of the experiment in relation to sittings on Thursdays. [91380]

45. **Dr. Ian Gibson** (Norwich, North): What assessment she has made of the experiment in relation to Thursday sitting hours. [91383]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Privy Council Office (Mr. Paddy Tipping): The Modernisation Committee published a report last Monday that concluded that the majority of hon. Members consider that the experiment has been a success and should be continued in the next Session.

Dr. Starkey: Does my hon. Friend agree that, far from reducing the hours that the House sits—a misleading statement often made by the Opposition—the changes mean that a full day's business can be taken on Thursdays? On average, the House has sat for an hour longer a day since the experiment began. Is not that further proof that this Government are more open to scrutiny than the previous Administration?

Mr. Tipping: My hon. Friend is right to say that the report from the Modernisation Committee makes it clear that the same important topics are being discussed and that substantive motions have been voted on. Most important, it shows that, on Thursdays, there has been, on average, an extra hour's business. That gives the House more time to discuss important matters.

Dr. Gibson: Has my hon. Friend any evidence that the questions asked on a Thursday are classier, sharper and more political than questions asked at other times? Has he any evidence that the work done on a Friday by hon. Members who can get home to start the weekend's constituency work earlier has had benefits for our constituents?

Mr. Tipping: Hon. Members have to balance the needs of the House with those of their constituents. Finishing at 7 pm on a Thursday allows hon. Members to spend a full day extra in their constituencies. I have watched how my hon. Friend performs on a Thursday, when he is sharp and to the point. The Modernisation Committee report also found evidence that takings at the bar on a Thursday night have fallen. Perhaps my hon. Friend, given his sharpness and clarity on a Thursday, does not indulge on a Wednesday night.

Mr. Nick St. Aubyn (Guildford): Is the Minister aware that the picture is very different if the time devoted in our proceedings to procedure motions and timetable motions is subtracted from the total hours that the House sits, and that in fact less time is given to real Government scrutiny? Will he explain the benefit of taking up the House's time with measures such as the Railways Bill, which we considered last week and which cannot proceed in the time available?

Mr. Tipping: If the hon. Gentleman looks at the facts, he will see that fewer procedural motions have been tabled under this Government than under the previous Administration. He should reflect on the comments of the hon. Member for North Cornwall (Mr. Tyler), who last week rightly described the hooligan elements in the House whose actions have led to a greater focus on procedural motions. People outside the Chamber want a House of Commons that debates the core issues, not silly game-playing.

Mr. Andrew Stunell (Hazel Grove): The Liberal Democrats welcome the extension of the Thursday sittings experiment. It is rare for a measure to be popular with hon. Members and to the best advantage of the country.

Does the Minister agree that further changes are needed to ensure that the House is even more effective at holding the Government to account, at passing sensible legislation and at providing proper representation? Will he undertake that the pace and development of the Modernisation Committee's work will be maintained?

Mr. Tipping: A number of measures have made major changes to the House's work. In particular, I believe that the focus on pre-legislative scrutiny will have a profound and long-lasting effect. I am delighted that the Westminster Hall experiment will begin when we return for the next Session. That will allow an opportunity for further modernisation, and give Back-Bench Members a chance to raise matters of constituency importance. There has been change, and there will continue to be change.

Visitor Facilities

43. **Angela Smith** (Basildon): To ask the hon. Member for Roxburgh and Berwickshire (Mr. Kirkwood), representing the House of Commons Commission, what proposals the Commission has evaluated for the provision of facilities for visitors to the Houses of Parliament. [91381]

Mr. Archy Kirkwood (on behalf of the House of Commons Commission): Plans have been prepared to convert Westminster Hall cafeteria into a centre for visitors to the Houses of Parliament in 2002, after Portcullis house opens. The centre will provide alternative catering facilities. I am pleased to say that good progress on the new building means that it may be possible to bring forward the conversion to 2001. The relevant Committees and officials of the House are now examining options.

Angela Smith: Many of us welcome the hon. Gentleman's answer, but while we enjoy our constituents' visits, they are often spoiled by the lack of refreshment facilities for them. I speak as someone who was ticked off by the Serjeant at Arms Department for allowing my cubs to eat their sandwiches in the one of the W Rooms off Westminster Hall—I had to send them outside in the rain. While we welcome the proposed use of the Westminster Hall cafeteria, could we not use the hall itself, which is used for lobbies and functions, to provide special facilities in the interim period?

Mr. Kirkwood: That would be difficult. One of the difficulties that the Commission always faces is that the uses to which the precincts of the Palace—both the House of Commons and the Lords—are put are constrained by architectural and national heritage considerations. The hon. Lady's point is well made. I encourage her to continue to press the House of Commons Commission and the appropriate Committees to put pressure on all the available authorities to improve what is available for our constituents and other visitors. The conditions are certainly inadequate and need to be improved, but we are doing all that we can.

Portcullis House

44. **Mr. Paul Flynn** (Newport, West): To ask the hon. Member for Roxburgh and Berwickshire (Mr. Kirkwood), representing the House of Commons Commission, what was the original estimate and what is his latest estimate of the cost of Portcullis house. [91382]

Mr. Archy Kirkwood (on behalf of the House of Commons Commission): The estimated cost of Portcullis house, as agreed by the House of Commons Commission in 1993, was £165 million, including construction costs, furnishings, fees, value added tax and an element for risk. At the time, the forecast inflation for 1992–99 was between £51 million and £62 million. The present forecast outturn costs to the original brief for construction fees, furnishings, VAT and risk remain at £165 million at 1992 prices, but inflation in 1992–2000 is now estimated at £56 million. Approved changes to the original brief have added a cost of £4 million and £10 million is attributed to delays caused by London Underground Ltd.'s work on Westminster station. The current overall estimate is, therefore, £235 million.

Mr. Flynn: It seems unfair that inflation occurred in those years, which seems to be a total surprise to the relevant authority. Has the hon. Gentleman noted that the cost of that single building is 10 times the cost of the Welsh Assembly building? There is another difference—the Welsh Assembly building is beautiful. Is he satisfied that the Commission used the right financial rigour in its advance financial planning?

Mr. Kirkwood: The contractual arrangements that were agreed by the House in 1993 are industry-standard. The provisions made for inflation were agreed and known at the time. The estimates are not out of line. They were between £51 million and £62 million and, in the event, it looks as though inflation is likely to be somewhere between the two, at £56 million. The building should be judged on the basis of value for money. It is designed to last for 200 years. If the low maintenance and running costs meet the design specifications, the building will truly be seen to have been good value for money in 200 years' time. If the hon. Gentleman wants to hang around and make representations

at that time, I will be here to try to ensure that true judgments can be made then, when the full value of the building can be judged.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): Given that the taxpayer has to foot the bill for Portcullis house, will the hon. Gentleman confirm that all relevant work has been subject to competitive tender?

Mr. Kirkwood: Indeed it has. All the normal European and other contract compliance rules have been fully taken into account and executed in the operation of the contract. The Commission has undertaken a mid-term review, which has just been completed by the consultants, Northcroft, who confirmed that, provided that the building meets its design specification to last between 125 and 200 years, the public purse will truly get value for money from what will be an architecturally special building.

Deputy Speakers (Westminster Hall)

46. **Mr. Andrew Mackinlay** (Thurrock): What representations she has received concerning the recommendation of the Select Committee on the Modernisation of the House of Commons for the appointment of Deputy Speakers for sittings in Westminster Hall. [91384]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Privy Council Office (Mr. Paddy Tipping): A few representations on this subject have been received and a motion will be put before the House after the recess covering this and other arrangements for sittings in Westminster Hall.

Mr. Mackinlay: Will the Government restore to Parliament as a whole and to Back Benchers in particular the right to choose their own officers? Does my hon. Friend consider that it is now inappropriate for Deputy Speakers to be appointed through the usual channels and that the Government and the Opposition Front Bench should have no hand in it whatsoever? Should not this be the subject of a free vote by Back Benchers because it is our property? Secondly, and not unimportantly, Deputy Speakers tend to be a curia from which Speakers are chosen. It is appropriate that this House and Back Benchers choose our Deputy Speakers in future. What does he say?

Mr. Tipping: I say what I said a moment ago: a motion will be brought before the House after the summer recess and before the next Session. Of course, Members will have an opportunity to vote on it. Let me remind my hon. Friend that the Modernisation Committee report recommended that the four senior members of the Chairmen's Panel should acquire those posts.

NEW MEMBER

The following Member took and subscribed the Oath:

Stephen Rothwell O'Brien Esq., for Eddisbury

Points of Order

3.32 pm

Mr. David Winnick (Walsall, North): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. Could you advise me how an important issue can be raised before the House recesses on Tuesday? As someone who fully supported—indeed, urged—the military intervention in Kosovo, I am concerned, as other hon. Members are, about the slaughter of 14 civilian Serbs on Saturday, including a boy of 15. If the House were not going into recess, there would be various ways to raise the matter, including Prime Minister's Question Time. If we cannot raise it before we rise, it will be nearly three months before it can be raised on the Floor of the House.

In those circumstances, and remembering that we went into Kosovo to protect all civilians against murder and ethnic cleansing—the murder of the 14 Serbs is undoubtedly ethnic cleansing—I ask only that you reflect on how we can raise the matter today or tomorrow because much lies in your hands, for reasons that I cannot touch on.

Mrs. Alice Mahon (Halifax) *rose—*

Madam Speaker: Let me reply please.

Mrs. Mahon: It is on the same point.

Madam Speaker: Let me hear it then.

Mrs. Mahon: Further to that point of order, Madam Speaker. I understand that a precedent was set for making a statement by the Foreign Secretary when Albanians were massacred by Serb paramilitaries. It is clear from the case of the 14 Serbs that many Serbs, Roma and other ethnic minorities in Kosovo are being subjected to a reign of terror. They are hiding out and, in some cases, being protected by KFOR. Given that situation, will the Foreign Secretary come to the House to make a statement, as has been done previously? If we are to appear even-handed, and equally as concerned about whoever is massacred, that seems to be the only fair way to proceed.

Ann Clwyd (Cynon Valley) *rose—*

Madam Speaker: Is it on the same point of order?

Ann Clwyd: It is on Kosovo, but not related to the point of order made by my hon. Friends.

Madam Speaker: Perhaps I should reply to the point of order raised by the hon. Members for Walsall, North (Mr. Winnick) and for Halifax (Mrs. Mahon). I do, of course, understand their concern, especially the point about even-handedness—that is exactly what we want to see. The Government Whip on the Treasury Bench will have heard both the comments that were made. I suggest to the hon. Members that they might also make representations to the Leader of the House to see whether, in the time available—I am aware that there is little time—there can be a statement from the Foreign Office, if that is wanted.

Mr. Andrew Lansley (South Cambridgeshire): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. Have you received a request from the Prime Minister to make a statement today on the publication of the Government's annual report, or are we to deduce from the absence of such a request that the Prime Minister, although publishing the report and presenting it to Parliament, is not willing to subject it to the scrutiny and questioning of the House? Further to that point, is it in order for a Command Paper to be published and commercially available in a supermarket 24 hours before it is available to Members of this House through the Vote Office?

Madam Speaker: If my memory serves me correctly, I thought that a Labour party manifesto commitment was to publish an annual report and to do so in that way. I am aware of the sale of such a publication. As the hon. Gentleman knows, I am one of his constituents; although I went to a supermarket yesterday, I was far more interested in food than in publications, and I should not have looked for it. I am not certain whether the correct way to proceed is that it should be on sale to the public before being made available to Members of the House. However, I understand that that annual report is a publication that is not open to questioning from the House at this stage.

Ann Clwyd: Further to a previous point of order, Madam Speaker. I apologise for not giving you advance notice of this. If we are to have a statement on Kosovo, I hope that it will include some information on reconstruction. After any conflict, it is well known that it is important to reconstruct a country as quickly as possible so that people can return to a normal way of life. Reports from Kosovo are especially worrying because they suggest that, although people involved in the conflict were talking about reconstruction and redevelopment after the end of the conflict, some countries now appear to be dragging their feet over giving the necessary assistance for that reconstruction to take place as quickly as possible.

When we return to the House, we shall be in the winter months. It is important that people in Kosovo can rebuild their homes and communities as quickly as possible. We must ensure that those countries which may be dragging their feet face their responsibilities to assist those communities to do that rebuilding.

Madam Speaker: The hon. Lady will have heard what I said previously about a possible statement from the Foreign Office. I shall not reiterate what I said, but I am sure that the Government Whip will have taken note of her comments; perhaps she would make her representations known in that direction.

Ms Ann Coffey (Stockport): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. During the past two weeks, 28,000 letters have been delivered to Members of the House in the name of our constituents, but those letters were unsigned. They are part of what I understand is called the "Keep our Gold" campaign, in response to advertisements in the national newspapers. A mailing company paid almost £7,000 for the letters to be distributed in the internal mail via the Post Office. I cannot find out the name of the company behind those letters. I should like to know its name because we could all save ourselves a great deal of time and trouble by replying to it directly. I am at a loss as to why the company wants to keep its name secret. As you can

[Ms Ann Coffey]

imagine, Madam Speaker, I suspect the worst. Could you help me by inquiring further into the matter—especially as to whether you feel that it is an abuse of the internal system?

Madam Speaker: Yes indeed;, I will ask the Serjeant at Arms to investigate the matter. I do not know the company responsible—

Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody (Crewe and Nantwich) *rose—*

Madam Speaker: However, it could be that Mrs. Dunwoody does.

Mrs. Dunwoody: You flatter me, Madam Speaker; I have no idea which company is responsible. However, further to that point of order, may I point out that I sent a letter to every one of my constituents named in those unsigned letters? Today, I have received a series of phone calls from people saying that they have no idea what it is about. I asked for written confirmation before approaching anyone on their behalf. It is revealing that many of those people had their names and addresses used without their knowledge.

Madam Speaker: I am delighted to have that information. I shall certainly ask the Serjeant at Arms and the authorities here to investigate the matter.

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. While the Foreign Office is in a listening mood, will it also take into account the vast problems of toxic difficulties in Serbia, such as the pouring into the Danube of ethylene dichloride—

Madam Speaker: Order. It is not the Foreign Office that must take those matters into account: the hon. Gentleman is raising a point of order with me. The point has already been made and the House understands the views held by several hon. Members.

Business of the House

3.41 pm

The Parliamentary Secretary, Privy Council Office (Mr. Paddy Tipping): I beg to move,

That, at this day's sitting, the Speaker shall not adjourn the House until any Message from the Lords shall have been received.

I shall speak only briefly as the House has a great deal of important business before it this afternoon. This procedural motion is designed to aid the smooth progress of business. If approved, it allows you, Madam Speaker, not to adjourn the House this evening until any messages from the Lords have been received.

The order was first laid last Friday, at which time hon. Members objected to it and a large number of other measures. I make no complaint about that: those involved would simply say that they were exercising their rights. However, as we all know, rights entail responsibilities, and there is a responsibility on the Government to pursue and protect their own legislation.

I think that there is also a responsibility to try to achieve the timetable laid out in last Thursday's business statement. It was made clear then that the House would be asked to consider any Lords' messages received prior to the recess. Moreover, any legitimate concerns could have been raised during the three and a half hours that the House spent debating business issues that day. None were raised. It is perfectly reasonable to expect the House to consider messages from the Lords in the final two days before the recess. That is a long-standing practice, and precedents have been set.

I hope that we will now quickly move on to discuss the real issues affecting our constituents. The hon. Member for North Cornwall (Mr. Tyler) referred to the "hooligan" element in the House last week, and it may be that this is just another example of such an outbreak. However, if there are any real concerns, I anticipate that they will be addressed quickly.

3.43 pm

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): I am grateful to the Minister for bringing this matter to the attention of the House. It is all too rare that we have a chance to deliberate, in a calm and reflective manner, on motions that are all too often rejected or described as "merely procedural". I object to the term "merely procedural" because much of what we do in this place depends on an understanding of our procedures and on a fair and proper interpretation of them.

I am equally grateful to the Parliamentary Secretary for pointing out that, on Friday, a certain number of matters, including this important procedural motion, were objected to. As always, I was here on Friday, and I counted 39 private Members' Bills to which the Government objected. I shall not detail them—[HON. MEMBERS: "Go on."] Since my hon. Friends want me to do so, those Bills included the Cancer Care Bill, the Fuel Safety Bill, the Poverty and Social Exclusion (National Strategy) Bill, and the Concessionary Television Licences for Pensioners Bill—all killed by the Government on Friday, along with many others.

After those 39 private Members' Bills had been killed by the Government on Friday, as the Parliamentary Secretary acknowledged, I took the opportunity to object to this measure, and I shall explain why. I was interested to know

why the Government should consider it necessary to move such a motion on a Friday afternoon. I have no objection to that. As you know, Madam Speaker, I am habitually in the Chamber on a Friday, for which hon. Members are grateful, and I appreciate that. However, I was puzzled by the fact that on a Friday afternoon, at the very end of business, after they had killed the 39 private Members' Bills, the Government seemed to want to slip this motion through quietly.

The motion contains some potentially disturbing elements. As we heard in the remarks introducing the debate which may gather momentum as we get into it—right hon. and hon. Members will see its importance as I skip my way through the salient points—the motion states with seductive simplicity that you, Madam Speaker,

"shall not adjourn the House until any Message from the Lords shall have been received."

That strikes me as a procedural blank cheque.

If one glances down the Order Paper, one sees that the Government are anxious to limit debate on other important matters. The Employment Relations Bill is allocated up to three hours. A very important matter, motion No. 8—the appointment of my hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield (Mr. Fabricant) to the Select Committee on Home Affairs, no less—is allocated only one hour. The debate of such important matters as the appointment of my hon. Friend is restricted, yet the present motion contains the rather sinister element that the House shall not adjourn

"until any Message from the Lords shall have been received."

In other words, the Government apparently expect us to sit here and twiddle our thumbs, on the off-chance that a message may be received from another place. I am not sure whether that is a reasonable request at this stage of our proceedings—that is for the House to judge. However, it requires just a little thought to decide whether it is reasonable for us to prolong today's sitting, when there is a further sitting of the House tomorrow.

Although there is to be an important debate tomorrow on public expenditure—I fully accept that—I should have thought that our procedures contained sufficient leeway and flexibility for the Government to have stated that should the messages from the Lords not be received during today's sitting, it would be reasonable for us to deal with them tomorrow.

Is it not dangerous to expect us to receive a message from another place and deal with it instantly, without any possibility of consideration, when instead we could receive the message during today's sitting, ponder it overnight, deliberate and consult, and return in a proper and deliberative way to deal with the matter during tomorrow's sitting? Although the debate tomorrow is important, it is difficult to imagine that there would be no scope in tomorrow's business to allow the matter to be considered in a more deliberative manner.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for giving way. Does he accept that the truncated consideration of the Employment Relations Bill, in particular its peculiar treatment relative to the earlier motion, will be greeted with some alarm in my constituency, not least by Mr. James Naylor, a prominent business man and member of the London regional council of the Confederation of British Industry, who told me only last week of his grave concerns about the present contents of the Bill, and of the importance of every opportunity for it to be revised? Will not Mr. Naylor regard it as extraordinary that the Government intend to handle business in such a bizarre fashion?

Mr. Forth: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, who typically goes to the heart of the matter incisively and analytically. People outside will be rather puzzled when they see that a measure as important as the Employment Relations Bill is being cut off in its prime, and we are being denied proper debate. The Bill affects many businesses—the employers and the employed—yet we are apparently expected to take a leisurely and open-ended approach to whatever messages might be received from another place.

I do not know what those messages may or may not contain. I wonder whether the Government know. I suppose that they must have some idea, but they are not telling us at present. The Minister did not give us that information in his introductory remarks. He was Delphic—if I may put it that way—and opaque on the subject. We are expected to accept, as a matter of trust, that the Government must get through their business, which is apparent from the jack-booted approach that the Government take to most things these days, not least the rest of the business on the Order Paper.

The Minister had the gall to ask, as a matter of convenience to the Government, for a blank cheque in order to ensure that when messages come from another place they can be dealt with in a peremptory fashion, without the time—that is the implication—to consider them properly. I do not know whether it is within your purview, Madam Speaker, to contemplate suspending the sitting of the House when those messages arrive so that we may give them some thought. That might be one possibility if the Government continue to insist that the messages be dealt with today.

The Government might concede that point at the conclusion of this debate, which I am happy to see may continue until any hour. We can deliberate this matter at length—I am grateful for that—but the other matters of legislative importance later on the Order Paper are time limited. We therefore have the bizarre situation whereby we can, happily, debate this procedural matter about the timing of business in the House—which I regard as important—at any length, but we cannot debate substantive legislative matters at any length.

Mr. Nick St. Aubyn (Guildford): My right hon. Friend heard the earlier reference to the "hooligans". Does he not agree that he has amply demonstrated that, far from residing on the Opposition Back Benches, those hooligans are on the Government Front Bench? That is evident from the way in which the Government are treating the House and its procedures.

Mr. Forth: My hon. Friend is right. The callous and cavalier slaughter of 39 private Members' Bills in the House last Friday could also be described as a hooligan act—and I am happy to do so.

Mr. Christopher Fraser (Mid-Dorset and North Poole): I draw my right hon. Friend's attention to the fact that one private Member's Bill enjoyed the Minister's support—

Madam Speaker: Order. We will leave last Friday's private Members' Bills to last Friday. Let us deal with the motion on the Order Paper.

Mr. Forth: Indeed, Madam Speaker. I have tried to illustrate that this apparently simple procedural motion raises many questions. However, my main question is: why do the Government think it is so important to deal with this matter today when the House will sit again tomorrow, when we will hardly be pressed in terms of the business on the Order Paper? I am sure that there will be scope to return to this matter then. If this motion had been worded differently and had said that any messages received from another place today could be dealt with properly tomorrow, which would give hon. Members the chance to consider them, it would have been extremely acceptable.

I find it difficult to accept—I am reluctant to do so unless the Minister provides a further explanation—the fact that the Government have issued an instruction. They have said, "Trust us; we know what we are doing and we must get our business through"—the Government Whip is helpfully nodding, which confirms what is in the Government's mind. That attitude is not extraordinary but absolutely typical of the Government; it is the kind of attitude that we have come to expect from them.

Before I consent to this measure, I want the Government to answer one point. This motion is not only debatable but—as I think you will confirm, Madam Speaker—a matter upon which the House could vote if it so desired. Before we contemplate whether we will divide the House, I hope that the Minister will have the courtesy to tell us his thoughts on why it is so important to ram through this business today, in the way that the motion outlines, rather than allowing the House to return to it tomorrow when we will not have the same time constraints. We could then deal with it on that basis. That is my simple, modest request.

I am grateful for the Minister's courtesy in coming to the House to explain the motion, which these days is quite unusual, but I should like further explanation of why he wants to deal with that business today, rather than tomorrow. I shall then want to consider whether the matter is one that should divide the House.

Question put:—

The House divided: Ayes 318, Noes 12.

Division No. 272] **[3.55 pm**

AYES

Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Alexander, Douglas
Allan, Richard
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Armstrong, Rt Hon Ms Hilary
Ashton, Joe
Austin, John
Banks, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Battle, John
Beard, Nigel
Begg, Miss Anne
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Bell, Stuart *(Middlesbrough)*
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Benn, Rt Hon Tony *(Chesterfield)*
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Berry, Roger
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel
Boateng, Paul
Borrow, David
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brake, Tom
Brand, Dr Peter
Breed, Colin
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brown, Rt Hon Nick *(Newcastle E)*
Browne, Desmond
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Byers, Rt Hon Stephen
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell-Savours, Dale
Cann, Jamie
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chaytor, David
Chidgey, David
Chisholm, Malcolm
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain
Connarty, Michael
Corbett, Robin
Cotter, Brian
Cousins, Jim
Cox, Tom
Cranston, Ross
Crausby, David
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunliffe, Lawrence
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Dalyell, Tam
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davis, Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Denham, John
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Etherington, Bill
Fearn, Ronnie
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Galloway, George
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godman, Dr Norman A
Godsiff, Roger
Golding, Mrs Llin
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Grogan, John
Gunnell, John
Hain, Peter
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hancock, Mike
Harvey, Nick
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Healey, John
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hoey, Kate
Home Robertson, John
Hood, Jimmy
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Jackson, Ms Glenda *(Hampstead)*
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Rt Hon Barry *(Alyn)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Ms Jenny *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jowell, Rt Hon Ms Tessa
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keetch, Paul
Kelly, Ms Ruth
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
Kirkwood, Archy
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lawrence, Ms Jackie
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Linton, Martin
Livingstone, Ken
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Lock, David
Love, Andrew
McAllion, John
McAvoy, Thomas
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McCartney, Rt Hon Ian *(Makerfield)*
McDonagh, Siobhain
Macdonald, Calum
McFall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
McNamara, Kevin

McNulty, Tony
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Mandelson, Rt Hon Peter
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Marshall–Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michie, Bill *(Sheff'ld Heeley)*
Milburn, Rt Hon Alan
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin
Moffatt, Laura
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Alasdair *(Galloway)*
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Morris, Rt Hon John *(Aberavon)*
Mullin, Chris
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Oaten, Mark
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
Organ, Mrs Diana
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pendry, Tom
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Sir Raymond
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Quinn, Lawrie
Radice, Rt Hon Giles
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd
Raynsford, Nick
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Reid, Rt Hon Dr John *(Hamilton N)*
Rendel, David
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rooker, Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Roy, Frank
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Salter, Martin
Sanders, Adrian
Sarwar, Mohammad
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Sheerman, Barry
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Soley, Clive
Squire, Ms Rachel
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stoate, Dr Howard
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Stunell, Andrew
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Temple–Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Touhig, Don
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tyler, Paul
Vis, Dr Rudi
Ward, Ms Claire
Wareing, Robert N
Watts, David
Webb, Steve
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Wills, Michael
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wise, Audrey
Woolas, Phil
Worthington, Tony
Wray, James
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, Dr Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. David Hanson and
Mr. David Clelland.

NOES

Beggs, Roy
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*
Forsythe, Clifford
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Hunter, Andrew
Luff, Peter
Maclean, Rt Hon David
St Aubyn, Nick
Shepherd, Richard
Swayne, Desmond
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Wardle, Charles

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Eric Forth and
Mr. Graham Brady.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved,

That, at this day's sitting, the Speaker shall not adjourn the House until any Message from the Lords shall have been received.

Orders of the Day

Employment Relations Bill

Lords amendments further considered.

Lords amendment No. 21 agreed to.

New Clause

Lords amendment: No. 22, after clause 27, to insert the following new clause—*Employment rights: employment outside Great Britain*—

" .—(1) In section 285(1) of the Trade Union and Labour Relations (Consolidation) Act 1992 (employment outside Great Britain) for "Chapter II (procedure for handling redundancies)" there shall be substituted "sections 193 and 194 (duty to notify Secretary of State of certain redundancies)".

(2) After section 287(3) of that Act (offshore employment) there shall be inserted—

"(3A) An Order in Council under this section shall be subject to annulment in pursuance of a resolution of either House of Parliament.".

(3) Section 196 of the Employment Rights Act 1996 (employment outside Great Britain) shall cease to have effect; and in section 5(1) for "sections 196 and" there shall be substituted "section".

(4) After section 199(6) of that Act (mariners) there shall be inserted—

"(7) The provisions mentioned in subsection (8) apply to employment on board a ship registered in the register maintained under section 8 of the Merchant Shipping Act 1995 if and only if—

(a) the ship's entry in the register specifies a port in Great Britain as the port to which the vessel is to be treated as belonging,

(b) under his contract of employment the person employed does not work wholly outside Great Britain, and

(c) the person employed is ordinarily resident in Great Britain.

(8) The provisions are—

(a) sections 8 to 10,

(b) Parts II, III and V,

(c) Part VI, apart from sections 58 to 60,

(d) Parts VII and VIII,

(e) sections 92 and 93, and

(f) Part X."."

4.7 pm

The Minister of State, Department of Trade and Industry (Mr. Ian McCartney): I beg to move, That this House agrees with the Lords in the said amendment.

Madam Speaker: With this, it will be convenient to take Lords amendments Nos. 306, 325 and 329.

Mr. McCartney: Section 196 of the Employment Rights Act 1996 generally limits the operation of the Act to employees who ordinarily work in Great Britain. It is a complicated section resulting from several consolidations, some relating to legislation at least a quarter of a century old.

After careful consideration, we concluded that the complexities are unnecessary. International law and the principles of our domestic law are enough to ensure that our legislation does not apply in inappropriate circumstances. There must be some proper connection with the UK first, and in such cases it is right that UK law should apply. Other legislation has no need for such restrictions. We believe that now is the time to simplify the provisions, in line with our commitment to good regulation.

Repealing that section has a number of other significant advantages. It ensures that we fulfil our European Union obligations, which, in some circumstances, mean that rights that are derived from Europe should apply to individuals who may not currently be covered. It extends employment rights to employees temporarily working in Great Britain and thus facilitates the implementation of the posting of workers directive, which otherwise would require further regulations later this year. It also means that people who may have worked for some years in the UK, but who are nevertheless excluded from claiming under the Employment Rights Act 1996, will be able to rely on the protection of our legislation, as should be the case. The recent case of Carver *v.* Saudi Arabian Airlines demonstrates the need for this provision.

I do not claim that the amendment will have dramatic effects in practice—few cases arise, and the additional costs to employers will be minimal. Nevertheless, it takes forward an important principle, and modernises and simplifies our legislation. The position of mariners is special, and special provisions apply to them at present under sections 196 and 199. The amendment ensures that their position is unchanged.

The implications of doing otherwise can be fully examined in the longer term. The new powers in the Bill to confer rights—clause 20, which would become section 23 of the Act—will provide us with the opportunity to consult on whether changes to the provisions applying to mariners would be desirable.

The first subsection in the new clause makes a parallel change to the Trade Union and Labour Relations (Consolidation) Act 1992, removing the territorial restriction in that Act on rights to be consulted about mass redundancies. Subsection (2) is a purely technical change to powers in the 1992 Act to extend rights to offshore installations. Currently no procedure is specified for making the order. The amendments will provide for negative resolution, in line with the procedure that applies under the Employment Rights Act 1996.

Amendments 306, 325 and 329 are consequential to the repeal of section 196.

Lords amendment agreed to.

Lords amendment No. 23 agreed to.

New Clause

Lords amendment: No. 24, after clause 32, to insert the following new clause—*Transfer of undertakings*—

".—(1) This section applies where regulations under section 2(2) of the European Communities Act 1972 (general implementation of Treaties) make provision for the purpose of implementing, or for a purpose concerning, a Community obligation of the United Kingdom which relates to the treatment of employees on the transfer of an undertaking or business or part of an undertaking or business.

(2) The Secretary of State may by regulations make the same or similar provision in relation to the treatment of employees in circumstances other than those to which the Community obligation applies (including circumstances in which there is no transfer, or no transfer to which the Community obligation applies).

(3) Regulations under this section shall be subject to annulment in pursuance of a resolution of either House of Parliament."

Mr. Ian McCartney: I beg to move, That this House agrees with the Lords in the said amendment.

We indicated in our "Fairness at Work" White Paper our intention to revise the Transfer of Undertakings (Protection of Employment) Regulations 1981—commonly known as the TUPE regulations—to improve their operation. These regulations implement the European Communities acquired rights directive, and safeguard employees' rights when the business in which they work changes hands between employers.

Since the White Paper was published, we have agreed with our European partners a new, improved directive: that was a notable success for the UK presidency last year. The new directive sets out for the first time an explicit definition of the transfer of an undertaking. It also gives member states clear options to allow, but not require, independent workers' representatives to negotiate changes to terms and conditions to save jobs when the undertaking of an insolvent employer is transferred, just as they can in cases of insolvency when no transfer is involved; to provide that the transferor's outstanding debts in relation to the employees do not pass to the transferee, so as to save jobs when the undertaking of an insolvent employer is transferred; to ensure that the transferor notifies the transferee of all the rights and obligations that will be transferred in a relevant transfer so far as they are or should be known to the transferor; and to include all occupational pension rights within the terms and conditions that pass from the transferor to the transferee in a relevant transfer.

The amendment of the directive has laid the groundwork for our revision of the regulations. Officials in my Department are currently drawing up detailed proposals, in liaison with colleagues elsewhere in Whitehall and in informal discussions with the main employer and employee representative bodies and other outside interests, in line with social partnership principles. I am grateful for the constructive contribution that the Confederation of British Industry, the Trades Union Congress and others have made to this process.

There is a high degree of consensus on the main issues to be addressed in the revision of the regulations. That is particularly so in the area of public sector contracting, where we have been assisted by the TUPE forum, which is a representative body with members from the CBI, the TUC, Unison, the Construction Confederation, the Business Services Association, the Local Government Management Board, the Association of Direct Labour Organisations and others.

Our aim is to seek views on our detailed proposals by way of a formal public consultation document to be published a little later in the year, and to have the new requirements in place by next spring.

As this work has progressed, however, it has become clear that some of the changes that we may decide to make could not be achieved under the existing powers in section 2(2) of the European Communities Act 1972. In particular, extending the scope so as to give rights to individuals when they would not have them under the directive could not be done under those existing powers. That limits the options available for tackling two major areas of uncertainty in the regulations: their application to contracting-out operations and their application to transfers involving public sector bodies.

If we had to rely on the existing powers alone, we could be prevented from putting forward proposals to meet the widespread expectation—shared by employer and employee bodies alike—that the new regulations will apply comprehensively to changes that occur in service contracting. Specifically, it could prevent us from ensuring that recontracting or bringing back in-house of a contracted-out service was covered in cases where the conditions in the directive were not met, but where it was wished to provide consistent treatment.

The existing powers would also be insufficient to allow us to apply the regulations to transfers of purely administrative functions between public administrative bodies, should we wish to do so.

Amendment No. 24 seeks to remove those technical obstacles, so that we can be certain that we have sufficient powers to achieve what we are likely to be asked to achieve when we go out to formal public consultation.

4.15 pm

I should stress that we are not yet ready to present our detailed proposals for revision of the regulations. Some difficult legal issues must be addressed, and my officials are still considering them. Besides, we are obviously not in a position to prejudge the outcome of the public consultation to which I have referred.

Mr. Tim Collins (Westmorland and Lonsdale): May I express my hope, and that of many other Conservative Members, that the Minister receives the promotion that is due to him?

The Minister said earlier that consultation would take place in the autumn, and that proposals would be in place some time next spring. I appreciate that he may not be able to be precise, but can he give us some idea of the minimum period that will elapse between the conclusion of the consultation and the implementation of the regulations?

Mr. McCartney: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his initial comments. I do not know whether they were helpful or unhelpful, but they were certainly apposite, given that we are dealing with the transfer of undertakings from one job to another—although I am not sure that that covers Ministers.

The hon. Gentleman's main point is very valid. When my officials have completed their work, I shall be happy to give both the official Opposition and the Liberals a clear indication of the timetable for the proposals. That will involve consultation. This is the first opportunity that the Government have had, prior to consultation about specific regulations, to sit down with stakeholders and involve them in the preparation of a consultation document. When the timetable is produced, it will be as a result of agreement. The hon. Gentleman, however, asked a fair and reasonable question, and I shall answer it as soon as I can. If that is before the House returns from the recess, I shall write to him and to the Conservative and Liberal Democrat Front-Bench spokesmen, the hon. Members for Tiverton and Honiton (Mrs. Browning) and for Eastleigh (Mr. Chidgey).

The use to which the power will be put will, as I have said, be subject to consultation. That is why the amendment was drafted in relatively wide terms. I hope,

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however, that by describing in some detail the purposes for which we expect the power to be used, I have been able to allay any fears that hon. Members may have had. I trust that I have succeeded in making clear what are undoubtedly complex legal points.

Mr. David Chidgey (Eastleigh): It would be helpful if the Minister could clarify one point. He referred to the transfer of undertakings from the public to the private sector. May I take him back a few years, to a time when privatisation policies were in full swing and many public-sector agencies became private, contracted-out organisations?

In recent years, contracts have been re-tendered so that other private sector companies can bid for the privilege of undertaking the services. The Public Services Agency is an example. One problem that has arisen is exactly how the TUPE rights of workers are transferred to the second privatised employer who has contracted for those services. It has caused some confusion, and, as I think the Minister will know, what should happen is not made clear in the directive. Has the Minister taken this on board in the regulations, and, if not, can he assure me that he will?

Mr. McCartney: That is a fair and, indeed, important point. The whole purpose of agreeing the review with our European partners was to take account of exactly such issues.

Over the years, a complexity has arisen because of decisions made in courts and in employment appeal tribunals. There are grey areas applying to both employers and employees, which should not need to be there. A common approach is needed on the part of employers' and employees' organisations to put the matter right, which is why prior consultation is taking place. I trust that the consultation will address those issues fully and effectively, so that when the new proposals are introduced next spring there will be a sense of common ownership, and both rights and obligations in regard to what happens in the case of first, second and, potentially, third-generation contractual arrangements will be clarified.

Lords amendment agreed to.

Lords amendments Nos. 25 to 31 agreed to.

Schedule 1

COLLECTIVE BARGAINING: RECOGNITION

Lords amendment: No. 32, in page 17, leave out lines 25 to 29 and insert—

("2A.—(1) This paragraph applies for the purposes of this Part of this Schedule.

(2) The meaning of collective bargaining given by section 178(1) shall not apply.

(3) References to collective bargaining are to negotiations relating to pay, hours and holidays; but this has effect subject to sub–paragraph (4).

(4) If the parties agree matters as the subject of collective bargaining, references to collective bargaining are to negotiations relating to the agreed matters; and this is the case whether the agreement is made before or after the time when the CAC issues a declaration, or the parties agree, that the union is (or unions are) entitled to conduct collective bargaining on behalf of a bargaining unit.

(5) Sub–paragraph (4) does not apply in construing paragraph 27(3).

(6) Sub–paragraphs (2) to (5) do not apply in construing paragraph 30 or 36B.")

Mr. Ian McCartney: I beg to move, That this House agrees with the Lords in the said amendment.

Madam Speaker: With this, it will be convenient to discuss Lords amendments Nos. 72 to 74, 109, 110 and 198.

Mr. McCartney: Every time I say, "I beg to move," someone shouts.

The purpose of amendment No. 32 is to clarify the scope of collective bargaining and how it may be altered. We wanted it to be absolutely clear that, even if the Central Arbitration Committee issues a declaration of recognition, the union and employer could agree to alter the scope of collective bargaining to include other matters than pay, hours and holidays.

Similarly, amendment No. 198 clarifies the scope of collective bargaining in part III of the schedule by introducing a paragraph 70B. New paragraph 70C allows the parties to vary a bargaining method imposed by the CAC under part III. That mirrors the existing provision in paragraph 27 for bargaining methods imposed under part I.

I turn to the issue of whether a union should be required to give up an existing collective bargaining agreement to apply for recognition under part I. The CAC is required to reject applications for recognition in a bargaining unit if any union, including the applicant union, is already recognised to conduct collective bargaining on behalf of one, or more workers in the bargaining unit. One effect of that is to require a union that has a very limited, but possibly long-standing recognition agreement covering the union's role in disciplinary matters, for example, to give up that recognition to apply for statutory recognition under part I.

We do not believe that recognition for what might be called "non-core" issues should bar the union from seeking recognition through the procedure for pay, hours and holidays, if both the employer and union are happy for recognition to continue. The union should be able to seek recognition on the "core" issues of pay, hours and holidays without being forced first to tear up an existing agreement.

Therefore, amendment No. 73 provides that a voluntary agreement that does not include bargaining about pay, hours or holidays does not bar the recognised union from applying under part I. The employer will, of course, still be able to terminate the voluntary agreement if he or she wishes. It may be that an employer, faced with an application for recognition on pay and so on, wishes to renegotiate on the matters for which he already recognises the union. The Government's amendment allows that.

Amendment No. 72 is a technical change to the wording. Amendment No. 74 ensures that changes to a bargaining unit made by the CAC under part III are taken into account in deciding whether another unit is recognised.

Amendments Nos. 109 and 110 ensure that the definition of collective bargaining in relation to changing the bargaining unit is the definition already in force—what the parties have agreed, or the CAC has imposed. Amendment No. 198 is equivalent to paragraphs 2(7) and 27, and applies to a new unit that is determined under part III. It allows both the definition of collective bargaining and the method for collective bargaining to be varied, or ended if the parties agree to do so.

Those are constructive changes. I commend them to the House.

Lords amendment agreed to.

Lords amendment: No. 33, in page 18, line 12, leave out from ("registered") to end of line 14 and insert

("in the register maintained under section 8 of the Merchant Shipping Act 1995 shall be treated as ordinarily working in Great Britain unless—

(a) the ship's entry in the register specifies a port outside Great Britain as the port to which the vessel is to be treated as belonging,")

Mr. Ian McCartney: I beg to move, That this House agrees with the Lords in the said amendment.

Madam Speaker: With this, it will be convenient to discuss Lords amendments Nos. 34, 38, 41, 45, 48, 57, 62, 65, 67 to 69, 75, 78, 85, 88, 90, 100, 101, 105, 107, 108, 111, 113, 114, 128, 133, 136, 139, 145, 147 to 149, 188, 205, 208 to 210, 213, 215, 216, 219, 224, 225, 231, 234, 235, 241, 244 to 246, 251 to 253, 256, 257, 259, 261, 267, 268, 274 to 277 and 279.

Mr. McCartney: The amendments fall into several small groups, which effect minor improvements to the schedule.

Amendments Nos. 33, 100 and 209 are identical corrections to the wording of the schedule to reflect the Merchant Shipping Act 1995. The meaning of the schedule is unchanged in each case.

Amendments Nos. 34, 101 and 210 alter the power to change the 21-workers threshold for recognition. They allow the Secretary of State to make transitional arrangements and, more important, to apply the change in all three parts of the schedule in which it appears. Without the amendments, only paragraph 6 could be altered.

Amendments Nos. 113, 145 and 147 slightly increase the standard of proof required for a successful application under part III to change the bargaining unit from "prima facie evidence" to being "likely" that the original unit was not appropriate.

Amendments Nos. 274 and 275 removes references to a worker's breach of contract from the provisions on detriment and dismissal connected with recognition in part VIII of the Bill. The amendments are not intended to allow workers to breach their contracts in pursuit of union recognition, but are aimed at preventing employers from circumventing the protections for workers from detriment or dismissal arising from campaigning on recognition.

The amendments solve another potential problem. In providing that actions in breach of contract are not protected, the schedule is currently different from other detriment and dismissal provisions—in section 44 of the Employment Rights Act 1996, for example—because those provisions do not contain any mention of breach of contract. Retaining the Bill's existing text might be taken to imply that a worker is always protected under other similar provisions when he acts in breach of contract. Again, that is obviously not desirable.

Amendments Nos. 274 and 275 would continue to protect a worker from detriment or dismissal provided that the worker's action is not unreasonable. In most cases, it will be unreasonable for a worker to break his or her contract, but not, of course, when the employer has written in clauses making the actions protected by the provisions—such as campaigning for or against recognition—a breach of contract. It would not be sensible to allow such clauses to be written in.

I therefore do not believe that the change represents a substantial alteration of the provisions. The change does, however, reduce the risk of their circumvention by unscrupulous employers, and of unintended consequences on other legislation. On that basis, I hope that the House will agree that the change is desirable.

I should now like to speak to even more technical amendments. Amendment No. 75 allows for the possibility of more than one union being recognised jointly for a bargaining unit. Amendments Nos. 78, 276 and 277 insert missed or consequential cross-references, whereas amendment No. 88 is for clarity; amendments Nos. 108 and 149 are grammatical; and amendment No. 111 ensures consistent terminology. For additional clarity, amendments Nos. 128, 215, 216, 234, 235, 252, 256, 257 and 259 remove superfluous words. Amendment No. 208 corrects a cross-reference; and amendment No. 225 corrects another.

Finally, for the avoidance of doubt, amendment No. 279 requires the CAC to give notice of its declarations to the parties.

Mr. Collins: As the Minister said, this group of amendments is largely a technical one. I shall therefore confine myself to asking the Minister two questions.

First, the Minister mentioned the Government's proposal to "increase slightly" the required standard of proof in provisions on bargaining units. Will he explain to hon. Members who are not lawyers the reason behind the Government's decision to increase slightly the standard of proof?

Secondly, the Minister mentioned amendments dealing with the possibility of recognition of more than one trade union in a bargaining unit. Will he tell the House the Government's general attitude to the general desirability, or otherwise, of more than one trade union being recognised within a bargaining unit? He will know that it is often thought that one of the keys to Germany's success since the second world war has been a strong governmental imperative favouring single union recognition in specific industrial blocs. I should be very interested to know the Government's view on whether such a change is felt to be desirable, or whether it should be a matter purely for the bargaining partners themselves.

Mr. McCartney: In such matters, the burden of proof falls not only on employers, but employees. If there is a request for a change in bargaining units, it is only

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reasonable and fair that whoever makes the request should present to the CAC—which will have to decide—no more or less than substantial evidence. The provisions would simply send a signal that, if either or both parties wishes to change the arrangements and to legitimise that change, they should present no more or less than professional, reliable evidence to the CAC.

The hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Mr. Collins) also raised the issue of recognition of more than one union in a bargaining unit. As he will have noticed, various provisions in the Bill and schedule 1 address that issue.

4.30 pm

Where there are long-standing arrangements involving more than one union—and where an employer is happy with that—we do not want to disturb them. However, where there is the potential for disagreement, we will have in law a means by which people can come forward for recognition. The proposal provides a right, changes the culture and makes clear to the unions and others concerned that the CAC will not deal with issues where a dispute arises between unions over recognition. It is for them to resolve those disputes. Until they do, they will not be able to secure an agreement.

Where there is an agreement—and where it is fair and reasonable for more than one union to make a proposal—we will allow the process to continue. On green-field sites, for example, it would seem reasonable that, where an application for the bargaining unit comes in—and there has been no history of any arrangement—the CAC should request the employer to make known whether he agrees or otherwise with the proposed bargaining units. Where there is not an agreement, the CAC will seek advice and evidence before it makes a determination about the bargaining unit, including whether it should relate to single table bargaining or not.

All of the circumstances that we can think of are covered by the proposals. The point made by the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale was well made. The Government have been at pains to try to ensure that the proposals are about facilitating good employment relations and preventing disputes from arising. Where disputes arise, we will have a mechanism to deal with them. We want to try to ensure that good, modern employment relations do not lead to a situation where disputes arise. Where disputes do arise between unions, they will not be able to use the procedure.

Lords amendment agreed to.

Lords amendment No. 34 agreed to.

Lords amendment: No. 35, in page 18, line 40, leave out ("in the second period")

Mr. Ian McCartney: I beg to move, That this House agrees with the Lords in the said amendment.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: With this it will be convenient to discuss Lords amendments Nos. 36, 37, 39, 40, 42 to 44, 46, 47, 49 to 52, 64, 66, 70, 71, 76, 77, 80 to 84, 86, 87, 91 to 99, 102 to 104, 106, 112, 120, 155, 173, 175, 184, 187, 192, 199 and 200, 201 and amendment (a) thereto, 202, 203, 204 and amendment (a) in lieu, 206, 207, 211, 212, 214, 217, 218, 220 to 223, 226 to 230, 232, 233, 236 to 240, 242, 243, 249, 250, 254, 255, 258, 260, 262 to 266, 269 to 273 and 278.

Mr. McCartney: The Government's amendments deal with the procedures for derecognition. Amendments. Nos. 201 to 204, 206, 207, 211, 212, 214, 217, 218 and 220 to 223 deal with applications for derecognition by an employer on the grounds of having fewer than 21 workers. Most of them are simple clarifications of the procedure. Amendment No. 201, for example, clarifies the way in which an employer must apply, in keeping with changes to part III.

Amendment No. 203 clarifies the time in which the application must be made. If an employer believes that he or she has fewer than 21 workers over a 13-week period, an application for derecognition must be made within five working days of the 13 weeks ending. Amendment No. 211 requires the CAC to decide whether an application from an employer is valid before the union is allowed to challenge it. Obviously, if the application is invalid, there is no need to involve the union. Most of the other amendments are equally technical.

Amendment No. 217 is a substantive change, which requires the CAC to reject an application for derecognition if it is made within three years of another application for derecognition of the bargaining unit which the CAC rejected. This reflects the statement in the "Fairness at Work" White Paper that

"the CAC will not entertain an application for derecognition within three years of . . . an unsuccessful request for derecognition".

This is a logical complement to the three-year bar on applications for recognition after an unsuccessful application, and will promote stability in industrial relations.

Turning to an employer's request for derecognition, amendments Nos. 226 to 230, 232, 233 and 236 to 240 are simplifications and modest improvements to the procedure.

Amendments Nos. 228, 229, 232 and 233 are equivalent to amendments Nos. 35 to 37, 39 and 40, to which I have already spoken. Together, they consolidate the two negotiation periods in paragraphs 80 and 81. At present, the union has a first period of 10 working days to respond to a request for derecognition, and if it agrees to negotiate there is a second period of 20 working days for negotiation.

Amendment No. 233 ensures, for consistency with part I, that failure to respond to an application within 10 working days is treated as rejection of the application. Amendments Nos. 237, 239 and 240 require the response and negotiation process to have taken place.

Amendment No. 236 bars repeat applications for derecognition for three years, as I described on amendment No. 217, and amendment No. 238 is consequential. Amendment No. 242 does the same for applications by workers for derecognition, and amendment No. 243 is a consequential change.

As a result of the changes to the ballot procedures, the CAC is required to hold a derecognition ballot rather than being able to choose to do so, and amendments Nos. 249 and 250 are technical changes to reflect that. The changes are largely technical, and all are improvements. I commend them to the House.

Mrs. Angela Browning (Tiverton and Honiton): I want to speak to amendment (a) to amendment No. 201 and amendment (a) to amendment No. 204. They represent a last-ditch attempt to write something helpful to small businesses into the Bill.

Many small and medium-sized firms will not be spared from the Government's determination to force businesses to recognise trade unions for bargaining purposes, and the new law will apply to those with as few as 20 employees. It is difficult to see how a business with so few staff needs union representation and collective bargaining arrangements. Most small firms simply do not have the capacity to administer such arrangements, and Labour's failure to recognise that illustrates its near total lack of understanding of how businesses work.

The amendments would raise the threshold for a small business from 21 to 50.

Mr. Chidgey: What is the Conservative party's view on the rights or otherwise of individual employees to join or not to join a trade union?

Mrs. Browning: I made it clear last Wednesday that we believe that, notwithstanding the right of union recognition in the workplace, if that is the wish of the work force, individuals should be free to contract individually with the employer. That is the right flexibility.

The Government opposed the increase from 21 to 50 in the Lords, but so did the Liberal Democrats, who constantly say that they are the champions of small business. They, too, wanted to limit the definition of a small firm to one with only 21 employees. Representations have been received from almost every business organisation: the CBI, British Chambers of Commerce, the Federation of Small Businesses and the Institute of Directors all support increasing the threshold for exemption. The Government have ignored those calls, and the result will be a tough time for small business.

My noble Friend Baroness Miller of Hendon made a compelling case in the other place and drew to the Government's attention the fact that there is a precedent for the figure of 50. It is the defining number for a small firm in the Late Payment of Commercial Debts (Interest) Act 1998—which was introduced by the Government—and is compatible with European legislation.

Labour Members may be surprised that I should pray in aid European legislation, but the Government must be consistent. It is not acceptable for them to say that we have to harmonise with Europe and do everything that it tells us on employment legislation while refusing to acknowledge that 50 is the definition used in many parts of European employment legislation. For some reason, the Government want to draw into the scope of the Bill all companies with 21 or more employees.

I am pleased that the Minister is in his place this afternoon, as he was unable to be with us for last Thursday's proceedings. I wish that he had been, as he would then have witnessed the chaos of the debate. There was good will among Conservative Members to make progress—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael J. Martin): Order. The hon. Lady cannot go into the history of matters. She must concentrate on what is before the House.

Mrs. Browning: I stand chided, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

I look forward to the Government accepting the amendments, given that I understand that they have had a change of heart and accepted an amendment to clause 15 that they voted against last Thursday. This may be the Minister's final opportunity to represent the Department of Trade and Industry at the Dispatch Box, as it is possible that he will move on to greater things tomorrow. We all wish him well, but acceptance of the amendment would be a mark of his recognition of the importance of the small business sector in this country.

Mr. Chidgey: I draw the Minister's attention to amendment No. 93, which deals with the adjudication by the Central Arbitration Committee of a claim for recognition. I refer him to proposed new paragraph 36C(b), which states that an application would be invalid unless the CAC decided that

"a majority of the workers constituting the relevant bargaining unit would be likely to favour recognition of the union."

The Minister will recall that in our Committee proceedings, we debated at some length the process by which the true feelings of the work force could be determined when establishing the right to trade union recognition. We debated whether total reliance on a ballot would be the right way forward. In earlier speeches in the House, I spoke with some force about how the Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service had worked on that problem, and noted that on some occasions, it would reject a ballot of employees that appeared to favour recognition of a union.

The amendments seem to acknowledge that other ways exist to establish a work force's true intent with regard to recognition of a union that will act on members' behalf. Those alternative ways would recognise the needs of particular workplaces and units, and I hope that the Minister will elaborate on that when he responds to the debate.

Mr. Ian McCartney: I thank the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Mrs. Browning) for her helpful remarks.

Mrs. Browning: I hope that the Minister is well.

Mr. McCartney: I think that the Conservative party has mounted a campaign to keep me here so that I will change my mind about some matters. However, I will not do that this afternoon.

I must take issue with the hon. Lady about small and medium-sized enterprises. The previous Conservative Government closed such businesses at the rate of one every three minutes in every working day. Between 1992 and 1997, there was a net loss of 70,000 small businesses each year, and a total of 350,000 such losses in the whole period. In 1998, the first year of this Government, there has been a net gain of 38,000 in the sector. The number

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of small businesses is growing under this Government, whereas hundreds of thousands were forced to the wall by the previous Government's economic policies.

This Government have dealt sensitively with small and medium-sized enterprises. The "Fairness at Work" White Paper and what happened thereafter was a major consultation exercise on the balancing of rights and obligations in the workplace. No one except the Conservative party would argue that there are not circumstances in which it is legitimate in a disagreement for the CAC to test, by a ballot or by other means, whether recognition should proceed in a company with more than 21 employees.

4.45 pm

Many small companies already recognise unions on a voluntary basis. The Government want to encourage voluntary arrangements for recognition in companies of any size. The procedure comes into play only when there is a disagreement. There is no requirement on companies with fewer than 21 employees to go through statutory recognition procedures.

The Government are sensitive to the needs of small business. Indeed, as a Government, we advocate small business in a very big way, if I may put it like that. The introduction of the Small Business Service shortly by my hon. Friend the Minister for Small Firms, Trade and Industry is indicative of this Government's strategy of involvement and advocacy throughout Whitehall and the economy on behalf of small businesses. There are no grounds for the Conservatives to argue that the Government are anti-small business.

The hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton wants to hide behind small businesses to promote her anti-trade union feelings. That is the real issue.

Mrs. Browning: Given that the CBI, the Federation of Small Businesses, the chambers of commerce and the Institute of Directors have all said in terms that the definition of a small business in the Bill should allow more than 21 employees—the threshold that the Government insist on setting—that is clearly not a political agenda. Those businesses are sending a message to a Government who say that they are concerned about and interested in small businesses, but who are refusing even to listen to the voice of small business. That does not stack up with what the right hon. Gentleman is saying.

Mr. McCartney: The hon. Lady has got it wrong again. The Government listened to the voice of business, both in the preparation for the White Paper and in consultation so far. That is why we have the threshold. The proposal is in the Bill because we listened. Let us remember that at the start of the process there was opposition to the recognition arrangements. We accept that there is a difference of opinion about the principle of recognition, but the Government have bent over backwards to secure agreement among social partners on a range of measures within the recognition process. Where there has not been agreement, the Government have produced balanced proposals.

I have listened to the arguments of the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton and of her predecessor, the right hon. Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood), before he moved on to pastures new. We sometimes miss the right hon. Gentleman. That is not the hon. Lady's fault, but occasionally he brought a spark to our debates, given his rather extreme views on employment relations in the workplace. The hon. Lady may have similar views and, from her point of view, may put them over more convincingly than her right hon. Friend.

Mr. Tony McWalter (Hemel Hempstead): Does my right hon. Friend accept that the Opposition amendments are really inspired by hostility to trade unions, which the Conservatives see as an incubus on business? In fact, well-regulated businesses of any size receive great support and help from trade unions. They flag up employee discontent at an early stage and allow conduits for problems to be resolved satisfactorily. They flag up health and safety issues.

There are a variety of matters on which anyone who runs a business should set out to have a good relationship with the trade unions, so that the business can be run efficiently and well.

Mr. McCartney: My hon. Friend is right. Employers have increasingly moved away from the agenda of the 1980s and early 1990s, when confrontation was the name of the game and managers of companies and their owners were isolated from the work force. The Conservatives encouraged confrontation. We have now moved to an era of more partnership, where employers see equal value in ensuring that the work force have got representation that enables them to communicate effectively with them, to see them as their most important asset and to see the trade unions who represent the work force as part of the process of securing a long-term future for the company concerned.

Mrs. Browning *rose—*

Mr. McCartney: The minute that I mention trade unions, the hon. Lady is up on her hind legs.

Mrs. Browning: Indeed I am, because it was the Conservative legislation of the 1980s that set union members free to have a say. That legislation, which was opposed by the Minister and the Labour party, ensured that the people—he will be familiar with that term—got the power in the workplace. We took it away from union bosses who had abused it for decades. I am accused by Labour of not being in favour of trade unions, but the point the Minister raised about merchant seamen related to an amendment to employment legislation that I made the previous Government accept in the previous Parliament. I pioneered it on behalf of merchant seamen. I need no lectures from Labour.

Mr. McCartney: Having been sacked under a Conservative Government for seeking to recruit people to trade unions, I think that the hon. Lady's comments have a hollow ring. The Conservative party and its Front-Bench team have made their views clear. They oppose trade unions and effective trade unionism. They undermine at each stage the concept of partnership in the workplace, and continue with the old language of us and them and the old concept of employee representation. We have

moved on decades, but the hon. Lady is still back in the 1970s, 1980s or early 1990s. As we go into the next century, we are trying to provide through this Bill a new basis of partnership in the workplace, with rights and responsibilities. That is what we have set out our stall with, and it increasingly has the support of the business community.

I have not found the hon. Lady's arguments so far convincing. The amendments would allow a union to be recognised on the basis of 21 workers, but derecognised on the basis of 50. That is hardly logical or sensible. I shall address the underlying point of the 21-worker threshold for recognition and derecognition.

Mr. John Healey (Wentworth): My right hon. Friend might be interested to know that I held a two-hour consultation with small and medium-sized businesses in the Dearne valley through the Dearne valley business club on Friday. They welcomed the Small Business Service and when we discussed taxation and regulation, not one employer raised a concern about our recognition proposals. Does he agree that despite the protestation of the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Mrs. Browning) that she is making a last-ditch attempt to protect small business, there is in fact a large last-ditch attempt to extend the licence of some employers unilaterally to deny the right of workers to representation through a trade union, even if there is a strong majority in support in the firm?

Mr. McCartney: The hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton cannot in 18 minutes of this debate wash away the 18 years of incompetence towards small business of the previous Government. She is trying to curry favour with small businesses.

Mr. Andrew Robathan (Blaby): Small Ministers.

Mr. McCartney: As well as being anti-union, Conservative Members are sizeist. I can see the hon. Gentleman eye to eye from here and if he wants to contribute, he is welcome.

No small businesses in Britain will be impressed by the Conservative party's deathbed conversion to looking after their interests in this place. Most small businesses see the Conservative party as irrelevant to the needs of the next decade, to the development of their businesses and the economy, and to the stable macro-economic policy that goes with it. The hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton is trying to do a disservice to the tens of thousands of small businesses that recognise trade unions and want to continue that. Increasingly, since the introduction of this Bill, employers are asking trade unions to talk to them about recognition. The culture is changing out there. The hon. Lady may want to stand on the beach and stop the tide coming in, but she will not—she cannot. Employers want effective, good working relationships with trade unions.

I understand the hon. Lady's stated desire to protect small firms from onerous demands; I shall return to that point in a moment. My hon. Friend the Member for Wentworth (Mr. Healey) was right to point out that in all the discussions held by Labour Members, whether Ministers or not, there is continuing dialogue with small businesses—in our constituencies, regionally and nationally. They come to us with practical problems and issues; they are not fundamentally opposed to their employees having a say, or being represented in the workplace by a union of the employees' choice. Nor are they opposed to effective information and consultation processes in the workplace.

Small businesses have an entirely different agenda, which is more practical and down to earth. They want the Government to be alongside them; that is why the Small Business Service will be an outstanding success as an advocate for small businesses in their relationship with the Government.

My hon. Friend the Member for Wentworth introduced the Bill that became the Employment Rights (Dispute Resolution) Act 1998—another ground-breaking piece of legislation which assists in the prevention of disputes or in their resolution so that they do not go before employment tribunals. That was another attempt by the Government to provide new services, especially so that small businesses and employees could resolve their differences without having to go to a tribunal. The Government are putting in place a range of measures to help to improve employment relations but, if disputes arise, those measures will help to resolve them effectively and quickly.

Mrs. Browning: If everything is so wonderful, why does the right hon. Gentleman think that in the Institute of Directors "Fairness at Work" research paper, a company states:

"We employ less than 20 people at present and with the Government's current attitude we're likely to stay that way."?

Is the agenda to keep small businesses small?

Mr. McCartney: The hon. Lady knows that the previous Conservative Government were not even interested in keeping them small. They buried them—for every three minutes of every working day, one small business went bust under the Tories. Under the Labour Government, small businesses are flourishing—a 38,000 net gain in 1998 during our first year in government. We are determined to see a growth in the small and medium-sized business sector; that is why we reduced corporation tax from 23 to 20p in the pound—the lowest rate ever, and it will be kept there, or below, for this Parliament. We introduced a 10p starting rate of tax to help new companies to get established, and to be effective in maintaining and achieving growth. That is why we have put huge sums into investment in small businesses and given them access to venture capital. The Government are serious about the promotion of small businesses in the economy.

I could list a range of measures. However, I advise the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton to read my speech in *Hansard* of 25 June, when we debated innovation and enterprise. That whole debate was on the Government's strategy for small and medium-sized enterprises. The hon. Lady is just plain wrong. It goes back to the point I made earlier. She cannot get off the hook; she is anti-trade union. She does not want unions to be effective in the workplace.

As for the point about the Institute of Directors, I have a good working relationship with the institute. I cannot call its members "comrades", as I call my colleagues in the Confederation of British Industry—I am not quite sure that I can use that word of my colleagues in the Institute

[Mr. McCartney]

of Directors. There are some matters on which we disagree and the matter raised by the hon. Lady is one of them. The Institute of Directors has been opposed to the whole concept of recognition. I accept that its members hold that view. However, that does not prevent me from having a fair and effective working relationship with the institute on a range of other issues. I want a good relationship with the institute and I have one. This is just one of the issues on which we disagree.

However, it is interesting to note that many of the companies that are members of the institute recognise trade unions. For all the huffing and puffing, when it comes to the practicalities and the day-to-day arrangements for effective consultation processes and working relationships, they are more than happy to engage with trade unions—increasingly so.

Mr. Phil Woolas (Oldham, East and Saddleworth): Does my right hon. Friend agree that as well as being hostile to trade unions, the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Mrs. Browning) misunderstands the point? It is quite possible in a firm of 19 or 20 employees, under the rights of individual representation—rather than the recognition given by the Bill—for a trade union to have access to an employer 19 times over. In every business, there comes a point when an employer would sooner deal with one collective representative than try to deal with a series of individual problems. Given that the balance has to be struck somewhere between those two points—collective recognition and individual representation—do not many companies, especially those in the clothing and textile sector—

5 pm

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman should not make such long interventions.

Mr. McCartney: That intervention took longer than 21 seconds, so it is not allowed under the statutory procedures of the House. However, my hon. Friend's point is fair and valid, and would be echoed by all Labour Members. Employers want to have effective relationships in the workplace, and we as a Government are trying to get the balance right between individual and collective rights. At disciplinary and grievance proceedings, all employees will, for the first time, have the statutory right to be represented, or to have someone with them, whether that is a full-time, part-time or voluntary trade union official or a fellow employee.

The basis of the argument advanced by the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton is a stated desire to protect small firms from onerous demands, but I believe that that is only a shield to cover her anti-trade union views. However, the Government share her stated views: we do not and will not place onerous demands on small businesses. That is why, at the end of the consultation process, we were able to confirm the White Paper's statement about arrangements for businesses employing fewer than 21 workers.

Unlike the hon. Lady, we thought that that limit would not place a terrible burden on small businesses. After taking evidence and discussing the matter with various firms, we could have chosen a larger or smaller figure if we had thought it appropriate; however, we decided that, on balance, 21 reflected our judgment of the best figure. I am happy to repeat the assurances that we have given previously. We believe that 21 is a sensible and workable figure, but we have taken powers to amend it if, in practice, it turns out to be too low or too high.

Let me remind the House why we introduced the recognition procedure: it is to promote voluntary agreements between unions and employers, and to allow workers who want the protection and representation of a union in bargaining their pay, hours and holidays to have a right to that protection and representation, if that is what the majority of workers want. That is a common sense approach. The issue has been discussed both here and in the other place, and every time the Conservatives have expressed the assumption that trade unions are necessarily bad for business. That is not true.

An increasing number of members of the Institute of Directors, the Confederation of British Industry, the Federation of Small Businesses and similar organisations accept and involve trade unions in their activities and in the workplace. Industrial relations are not a zero sum game: that one side gains does not mean that another loses. Our proposals are balanced. Workers, whether or not they are union members, will benefit from working in partnership with their employer, and the employer will benefit as well. It is a question of mutual trust and mutual involvement, instilling a sense of belonging and involvement and so helping the business to grow.

I cannot agree with the hon. Lady's amendments, either in the letter or in the spirit. Therefore, forlornly, I ask her not to press them to a vote.

Question put, That this House agrees with the Lords in the said amendment:—

The House divided: Ayes 350, Noes 121.

Division No. 273] **[5.4 pm**

AYES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Alexander, Douglas
Allan, Richard
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*
Armstrong, Rt Hon Ms Hilary
Ashton, Joe
Austin, John
Ballard, Jackie
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Battle, John
Bayley, Hugh
Beard, Nigel
Begg, Miss Anne
Beggs, Roy
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Bell, Stuart *(Middlesbrough)*
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Benn, Rt Hon Tony *(Chesterfield)*
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Berry, Roger
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel
Boateng, Paul
Borrow, David
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brake, Tom
Brand, Dr Peter
Breed, Colin
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brown, Rt Hon Nick *(Newcastle E)*
Browne, Desmond
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Butler, Mrs Christine
Byers, Rt Hon Stephen
Cable, Dr Vincent
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell-Savours, Dale
Cann, Jamie
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chaytor, David
Chidgey, David
Chisholm, Malcolm
Clapham, Michael

Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain
Connarty, Michael
Cooper, Yvette
Corbett, Robin
Cotter, Brian
Cousins, Jim
Cox, Tom
Cranston, Ross
Crausby, David
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunliffe, Lawrence
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Dafis, Cynog
Dalyell, Tam
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Denham, John
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Etherington, Bill
Ewing, Mrs Margaret
Fearn, Ronnie
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Foulkes, George
Fyfe, Maria
Galloway, George
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godman, Dr Norman A
Golding, Mrs Llin
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Gorrie, Donald
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Grogan, John
Gunnell, John
Hain, Peter
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hancock, Mike
Harman, Rt Hon Ms Harriet
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Healey, John
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hewitt, Ms Patricia
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hoey, Kate
Home Robertson, John
Hood, Jimmy
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Jackson, Ms Glenda *(Hampstead)*
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Rt Hon Barry *(Alyn)*
Jones, Mrs Fiona *(Newark)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Ms Jenny *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jowell, Rt Hon Ms Tessa
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Keetch, Paul
Kelly, Ms Ruth
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
Kirkwood, Archy
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lawrence, Ms Jackie
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Linton, Martin
Livingstone, Ken
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Love, Andrew
McAllion, John
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McCartney, Rt Hon Ian *(Makerfield)*
McDonagh, Siobhain
Macdonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
McFall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
McNamara, Kevin
McNulty, Tony
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Mandelson, Rt Hon Peter
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Marshall–Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michie, Bill *(Sheffld Heeley)*
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll & Bute)*
Milburn, Rt Hon Alan
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin
Moffatt, Laura
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Alasdair *(Galloway)*
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Morris, Rt Hon John *(Aberavon)*
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Oaten, Mark
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
Organ, Mrs Diana
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Pendry, Tom
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Sir Raymond
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Primarolo, Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Quinn, Lawrie
Radice, Rt Hon Giles
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd
Raynsford, Nick
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Reid, Rt Hon Dr John *(Hamilton N)*
Rendel, David
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rooker, Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Roy, Frank
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Salter, Martin
Sanders, Adrian
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Sheerman, Barry
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Smyth, Rev Martin *(Belfast S)*
Snape, Peter
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Ms Helen
Squire, Ms Rachel
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stoate, Dr Howard
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Stunell, Andrew
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Temple–Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tyler, Paul
Vis, Dr Rudi
Ward, Ms Claire
Wareing, Robert N
Watts, David
Webb, Steve
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Wills, Michael
Wilson, Brian
Winnick, David
Wise, Audrey
Woolas, Phil
Worthington, Tony
Wray, James
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, Dr Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. David Hanson and
Mr. David Clelland.

NOES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Atkinson, David *(Bour'mth E)*
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Blunt, Crispin
Body, Sir Richard
Boswell, Tim
Brady, Graham
Brazier, Julian
Browning, Mrs Angela
Burns, Simon
Butterfill, John
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Clappison, James
Clarke, Rt Hon Kenneth *(Rushcliffe)*
Collins, Tim
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cran, James
Curry, Rt Hon David
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham)*
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*
Day, Stephen
Duncan, Alan
Duncan Smith, Iain
Emery, Rt Hon Sir Peter
Evans, Nigel
Faber, David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Flight, Howard
Forsythe, Clifford
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Fox, Dr Liam
Fraser, Christopher
Gale, Roger
Garnier, Edward
Gibb, Nick
Gill, Christopher
Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Gray, James
Green, Damian
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Hague, Rt Hon William
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hammond, Philip
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John
Heathcoat-Amory, Rt Hon David
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Hunter, Andrew
Jenkin, Bernard
Johnson Smith, Rt Hon Sir Geoffrey
Key, Robert
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Lansley, Andrew
Leigh, Edward
Letwin, Oliver
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lidington, David
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
Lyell, Rt Hon Sir Nicholas
MacGregor, Rt Hon John
MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
Maclean, Rt Hon David
McLoughlin, Patrick
Malins, Humfrey
Maples, John
Maude, Rt Hon Francis
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Moss, Malcolm
Nicholls, Patrick
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Pickles, Eric
Prior, David
Randall, John
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Laurence *(Tewk'b'ry)*
Roe, Mrs Marion *(Broxbourne)*
St Aubyn, Nick
Sayeed, Jonathan
Shephard, Rt Hon Mrs Gillian
Shepherd, Richard
Simpson, Keith *(Mid-Norfolk)*
Soames, Nicholas
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spring, Richard
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Streeter, Gary
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Townend, John
Trend, Michael
Tyrie, Andrew
Viggers, Peter
Walter, Robert
Wardle, Charles
Waterson, Nigel
Wells, Bowen
Whitney, Sir Raymond
Whittingdale, John
Wilkinson, John
Willetts, David
Wilshire, David
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Woodward, Shaun
Yeo, Tim
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown and
Mrs. Jacqui Lait.

Question accordingly agreed to.
Lords amendment agreed to.

Mrs. Ann Winterton (Congleton): On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I have before made a point of order about the hurdles facing hon. Members who are working in their offices in Norman Shaw North. If the traffic lights are against them when they are crossing the top end of Bridge street to enter the parliamentary estate to try to vote in a Division, they are held up probably by a minute and a half, which is critical during a Division. I have just missed a Division for that reason. I hope that, as this is the second time that I have raised this issue, the authorities will take it into consideration for the convenience of hon. Members on both sides of the House.

Mr. Michael Fabricant (Lichfield): Further to that point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. May I reply to the hon. Lady? The hon. Gentleman cannot make a further point of order until I have done so. This business is time limited, so points of order are taking up time that is allotted to hon. Members who may want to debate the business. However, to answer the hon. Lady, I recall her raising this matter before, and I hope that the House authorities will take note of her remarks because this is not a matter for the Chair.

Sir Peter Emery (East Devon): Further to that point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I apologise for taking up any of the time that is allotted for the business, but postponing points of order until after the Division means that the Chair has no way of correcting problems. My hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Mrs. Winterton), who was locked out of the Lobby at the last moment, as everyone saw, might have been allowed to enter the Lobby to vote. The Chair has, on occasion, allowed late-comers to enter the Lobby, but that facility is useless if one cannot make a point of order until the vote is over. I do not ask you to make a ruling now, Mr. Deputy Speaker, because I should hate a hasty decision to stand for ever, but will you discuss the matter with Madam Speaker and bear it in mind?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I note the right hon. Gentleman's point.

Mr. Nicholas Winterton (Macclesfield): Further to that point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: The hon. Gentleman may raise a point of order if it relates to this matter. I made the point that we are taking up time allotted for this business, and I have given an adequate reply.

Mr. Winterton: I have an agreeable and close relationship with my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Mrs. Winterton), who raised the original point of order. It is a matter about which I, too, am concerned. During Divisions, could the traffic lights be manned by a member of the Metropolitan police, particularly when there are so many tourists in London, to ensure that Members of Parliament can gain ready and speedy access to the precincts of the House of Commons?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I take on board what the hon. Gentleman has said.

Lords amendments Nos. 36 to 279 agreed to.

Schedule 3

BALLOTS AND NOTICES

Lords amendment: No. 280, in page 60, line 8, at end insert—

("Separate workplace ballots

("Separate workplace ballots

. The following shall be substituted for section 228 (separate workplace ballots)—

"Separate workplace ballots.

228.—(1) Subject to subsection (2), this section applies if the members entitled to vote in a ballot by virtue of section 227 do not all have the same workplace.

(2) This section does not apply if the union reasonably believes that all those members have the same workplace.

(3) Subject to section 228A, a separate ballot shall be held for each workplace; and entitlement to vote in each ballot shall be accorded equally to, and restricted to, members of the union who—

(a) are entitled to vote by virtue of section 227, and

(b) have that workplace.

(4) In this section and section 228A "workplace" in relation to a person who is employed means—

(a) if the person works at or from a single set of premises, those premises, and

(b) in any other case, the premises with which the person's employment has the closest connection.

Separate workplaces: single and aggregate ballots.

228A.—(1) Where section 228(3) would require separate ballots to be held for each workplace, a ballot may be held in place of some or all of the separate ballots if one of subsections (2) to (4) is satisfied in relation to it.

(2) This subsection is satisfied in relation to a ballot if the workplace of each member entitled to vote in the ballot is the workplace of at least one member of the union who is affected by the dispute.

(3) This subsection is satisfied in relation to a ballot if entitlement to vote is accorded to, and limited to, all the members of the union who—

(a) according to the union's reasonable belief have an occupation of a particular kind or have any of a number of particular kinds of occupation, and

(b) are employed by a particular employer, or by any of a number of particular employers, with whom the union is in dispute.

(4) This subsection is satisfied in relation to a ballot if entitlement to vote is accorded to, and limited to, all the members of the union who are employed by a particular employer, or by any of a number of particular employers, with whom the union is in dispute.

(5) For the purposes of subsection (2) the following are members of the union affected by a dispute—

(a) if the dispute relates (wholly or partly) to a decision which the union reasonably believes the employer has made or will make concerning a matter specified in subsection (1)(a), (b) or (c) of section 244 (meaning of "trade dispute"), members whom the decision directly affects,

(b) if the dispute relates (wholly or partly) to a matter specified in subsection (1)(d) of that section, members whom the matter directly affects,

(c) if the dispute relates (wholly or partly) to a matter specified in subsection (1)(e) of that section, persons whose membership or non-membership is in dispute,

(d) if the dispute relates (wholly or partly) to a matter specified in subsection (1)(f) of that section, officials of the union who have used or would use the facilities concerned in the dispute." ")

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House agrees with the Lords in the said amendment.—*[Mr. Ian McCartney.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: With this, it will be convenient to discuss Lords amendments Nos. 281 to 283.

Mr. Nicholas Winterton: I am most interested that more than 100 amendments from the other place have been agreed to by the House. Does that not demonstrate the most outstanding performance by the House of Lords in constructively amending this Bill? The Government of the day, who are hostile to the role of the House of Lords, have found it possible to agree to dozens and dozens of amendments proposed in the upper House.

I draw this to the House's attention to show my support for the House of Lords and the valuable job that it does.

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst) *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I must inform the hon. Gentleman that he cannot use amendment No. 280 as a means of supporting the other place. I was hoping that the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) would not do so, either.

Mr. Forth: I was about to endorse amendment No. 280 and to say that we should be grateful to the other place for deliberating as it has on this and many other amendments.

Mrs. Browning: If my right hon. Friend looks at the Bill, he will see that, since it left this place, it has been amended substantially by the other place, which is why there are so many amendments on the amendment paper.

Mr. Forth: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that intervention. We should pay tribute to the quality of the work that has been done by the other place. It is reflected in amendment No. 280 and in many other amendments—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The right hon. Gentleman mentioned many other amendments. He can discuss only the amendments in the group. This is not an opportunity for a general debate on the other place; it is specifically on the amendment before us, which covers trade union ballots.

Mr. Forth: Indeed, Mr. Deputy Speaker. On the subject of ballots, above any other, the fascinating thing is that the other place should have taken such a view and that the Government should be asking this House to agree with it. That, in itself, is quite remarkable. The Government's original criticism of the other place was that it was not supported by a balloting procedure, yet here we have the other place amending legislation in the whole area of ballots. I shall not digress, Mr. Deputy Speaker, but it so happens that I support the concept of an elected upper House, which would involve ballots.

Mr. Edward Leigh (Gainsborough): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I have given a ruling. The make-up of the other place has nothing to do with

[Mr. Deputy Speaker]

the amendment before us. It might be helpful to the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst if he thinks of these as normal amendments. He gets confused only if he starts dealing with the other place. I call Mr. Forth.

Mr. Forth: I give way to my hon. Friend.

Mr. Leigh: I wanted to remind my right hon. Friend that we are trying to take forward a process, with regard to trade unions, that furthers democracy. We are talking about ballots. Would it not be absurd if, in a trade union, there were only two voters for a particular post, so that, if one died, the remaining voter had a unique opportunity to elect the remaining member? If there were only three members and three voters, and one died, it would be possible to come to an agreement. That is precisely what is happening in the other place. If one of the two remaining Labour hereditary peers dies—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman is totally out of order. If the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst continues down this line, I shall have to ask him to resume his seat, because he is not keeping within the terms of the amendment before us.

Mr. Forth: I wholeheartedly endorse the excellent work done by the other place and the contribution that it has made in the context of this amendment. I find it heartening that it is now being supported by the Government. We should take note of that, and I hope that the House will wish to record its satisfaction with the contribution that the other place has made to the quality of this legislation.

Lords amendment agreed to.

Lords amendments Nos. 281 to 322, No. 323 and Government amendment (c) thereto, and Nos. 324 to 331 agreed to.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: We now come to the motion on the Reasons Committee.

Mr. Forth: I recall that this motion is debatable. We have debated it on previous occasions, and I think it appropriate to take this opportunity to explore its implications. I say that particularly in the context of a motion that the House considered earlier, and on which, in fact, it divided.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. Under the guillotine, the motion is not debatable; I must put the Question forthwith.

Question put and agreed to.

Committee appointed to draw up Reasons to be assigned to the Lords for disagreeing to certain of their amendments to the Bill: Mrs. Angela Browning, Mr. Stephen Day, Mr. Frank Doran, Mr. Ian McCartney and Mr. Greg Pope; Three to be the quorum of the Committee.—[*Mr. Hill.*]

To withdraw immediately.

Reasons for disagreeing to certain Lords amendments reported, and agreed to; to be communicated to the Lords.

Employment Relations Bill (Supplemental Allocation of Time)

Ordered,

That the Order of the House of 22nd July 1999 be supplemented as follows—

Subsequent stages

1. The Speaker shall put forthwith the Question on any Motion made by a Minister of the Crown for the consideration forthwith of any further Message from the Lords on the Employment Relations Bill.

2. The proceedings on any further Message from the Lords shall, if not previously brought to a conclusion, be brought to a conclusion one hour after their commencement.

3. For the purpose of bringing those proceedings to a conclusion the Speaker shall—

(a) put forthwith any Question which has been proposed from the Chair and has not been decided, and the Question on any Motion made by a Minister of the Crown which is related to the Question already proposed from the Chair,

(b) put forthwith the Question on any Motion made by a Minister of the Crown on or relevant to any of the remaining items in the Lords Message, and

(c) put forthwith the Question, That this House does agree with the Lords in all the remaining Lords Proposals.

Reasons Committee

4. The Speaker shall put forthwith the Question on any Motion made by a Minister of the Crown for the appointment, nomination and quorum of a Committee to draw up Reasons and the appointment of its Chairman.

5. A Committee appointed to draw up Reasons shall report before the conclusion of the sitting at which it is appointed.

Miscellaneous

6.—(1) This paragraph applies to proceedings on any further Message from the Lords on the Bill and to proceedings of the kind mentioned in paragraph 4.

(2) Standing Order No.15(1) (Exempted business) shall apply to the proceedings; and the proceedings shall not be interrupted under any Standing Order relating to sittings of the House.

(3) Where proceedings on a Motion for the Adjournment of the House would, by virtue of Standing Order No. 24, commence at a time when proceedings to which this paragraph applies are in progress, the proceedings on the Motion shall be postponed to the conclusion of the proceedings to which this paragraph applies.

7. If the House is adjourned, or the sitting is suspended, before the time at which proceedings on any further Lords Message are to be brought to a conclusion, no notice shall be required of a Motion made at the next sitting by a Minister of the Crown for varying or supplementing the provisions of this Order.—[*Mr. Hill.*]

Local Government Bill (Supplemental Allocation of Time)

5.38 pm

The Minister for Local Government and Housing (Ms Hilary Armstrong): I beg to move,

That the Order of the House of 24th March 1999 be supplemented as follows:

Lords Amendments

1. Proceedings on Consideration of Lords Amendments shall be completed at this day's sitting and, if not previously concluded, shall be brought to a conclusion three hours after the commencement of the proceedings on this Order.

2. (1) For the purpose of bringing proceedings to a conclusion in accordance with paragraph 1 the Speaker shall—

(a) put forthwith any Question which has been proposed from the Chair and has not been decided and, if that Question is for the amendment of a Lords Amendment, the Question on any further Amendment of the Lords Amendment moved by a Minister of the Crown and on any Motion made by a Minister of the Crown, That this House does agree or disagree with the Lords in the Lords Amendment or, as the case may be, in the Lords Amendment as amended.

(b) put forthwith the Question on any Amendment moved by a Minister of the Crown to a Lords Amendment followed by the Question on any Motion made by a Minister of the Crown, That this House does agree or disagree with the Lords in their Amendment or, as the case may be, in their Amendment as amended,

(c) put forthwith the Question on any Motion made by a Minister of the Crown, That this House does disagree with the Lords in a Lords Amendment, and

(d) put forthwith the Question, That this House does agree with the Lords in all the remaining Lords Amendments.

(2) As soon as the House has agreed or disagreed with the Lords in any of their Amendments the Speaker shall put forthwith a separate Question on any other Amendment moved by a Minister of the Crown relevant to the Lords Amendment.

Subsequent stages

3. The Speaker shall put forthwith the Question on any Motion made by a Minister of the Crown for the consideration forthwith of any further Message from the Lords on the Bill.

4. The proceedings on any further Message from the Lords shall, if not previously brought to a conclusion, be brought to a conclusion one hour after their commencement.

5. For the purpose of bringing those proceedings to a conclusion the Speaker shall—

(a) put forthwith any Question which has been proposed from the Chair and has not been decided, and the Question on any Motion made by a Minister of the Crown which is related to the Question already proposed from the Chair,

(b) put forthwith the Question on any Motion made by a Minister of the Crown on or relevant to any of the remaining items in the Lords Message, and

(c) put forthwith the Question, That this House does agree with the Lords in all the remaining Lords Proposals.

Reasons Committee

6. The Speaker shall put forthwith the Question on any Motion made by a Minister of the Crown for the appointment, nomination and quorum of a Committee to draw up Reasons and the appointment of its Chairman.

7. A Committee appointed to draw up Reasons shall report before the conclusion of the sitting at which it is appointed.

Miscellaneous

8. This paragraph applies to—

(a) proceedings on Consideration of Lords Amendments,

(b) proceedings on any further Message from the Lords, and

(c) proceedings of the kind mentioned in paragraph 6.

9. Standing Order No. 15(1) (Exempted business) shall apply to proceedings to which paragraph 8 applies.

10. Proceedings to which paragraph 8 applies shall not be interrupted under any Standing Order relating to the sittings of the House.

11. No dilatory Motion with respect to, or in the course of, proceedings to which paragraph 8 applies shall be made except by a Minister of the Crown; and the Question on any such Motion shall be put forthwith.

12. Where proceedings on a Motion for the Adjournment of the House would, by virtue of Standing Order No. 24, commence at a time when proceedings to which paragraph 8 applies are in progress, the proceedings on the Motion shall be postponed to the conclusion of the proceedings to which paragraph 8 applies.

13. If the House is adjourned, or the sitting is suspended, before the expiry of the period at the end of which proceedings to which paragraph 8 applies are to be brought to a conclusion, no notice shall be required of a Motion made at the next sitting by a Minister of the Crown for varying or supplementing the provisions of this Order.

The Local Government Bill left the House of Commons on 24 March for another place, and has now completed its passage through the Upper House. It has been further improved by my noble Friends, and we therefore have a few amendments to consider. The Bill has already been subjected to extensive scrutiny both here and in another place, and I think it entirely appropriate to limit the amount of time available for discussion of the amendments.

Local government needs to be clear about exactly when the Bill will become an Act, so progress on it is very important. We need to make progress on, in particular, work relating to best value.

I understand that, in the main, the debates in the upper House were conducted in an excellent spirit, with noble Lords committed to clarifying the Bill and its implications. I hope that something of that spirit still attaches to the Bill and that we can have a productive and constructive discussion. All the amendments that we have to consider were introduced in another place by the Government, whether to clarify existing provisions or to meet concerns that had been expressed by noble Lords. They are intended not to be controversial, but solely to improve the Bill.

Therefore, I shall spend no further time discussing the guillotine motion and hope that we can move on as soon as possible to considering the amendments.

5.40 pm

Mr. Nigel Waterson (Eastbourne): By any standards, this is an extraordinary motion, but, sadly, all too typical of the Government. There is a danger of regarding such motions as an everyday event. Indeed, they are almost becoming that; they are becoming a habit with the Government. Better than any glossy annual report, the motion reveals the Government's true state: it shows vividly their control-freak tendency.

We have to ask ourselves first: what has the motion to do with the Bill? The Minister referred to the history of the Bill. During the debate on the timetable motion, she talked about the scrutiny in Committee. She said:

"Debate was conducted in good spirit: it was overwhelmingly constructive, and there was a general intention to improve the Bill, not to wreck it."—[*Official Report*, 24 March 1999; Vol. 328, c. 399.]

Ms Armstrong: Hear, hear.

Mr. Waterson: I assume from that sedentary intervention that the Minister still stands by those sentiments. She made some complaint at the time that the Report stage was taking too long, hence the allocation of time motion. She will have read carefully the debates in the Lords. Indeed, she has conceded that the Lords had, to use her word, improved the Bill. One hesitates to think what will happen after the Lords have been emasculated by the Government.

The Lords debates have been constructive and concise. Many amendments were discussed in the other place and not pressed to a vote. There was clearly no attempt to delay the Bill. The Minister has implicitly conceded that point.

Ms Armstrong *indicated assent.*

Mr. Waterson: The Minister does so again from a sedentary position.

We shall discuss an amendment on consultation with outside bodies over best value. That point, which was raised by Opposition Members in the Lords, was accepted in principle by the Minister in the other place and reproduced in the form of a Government amendment. That is just one concrete example of how the other place has set about the Bill in a constructive and workmanlike fashion—so much so that, in effect, all today's amendments are Government amendments, many of them technical in character.

I have a shrewd suspicion that debating all the amendments will take less time than is allocated for in the timetable motion. Therefore, why are we having the motion at all? It clearly has nothing to do with the business that is before us.

We shall not, of course, have the opportunity, because of the utter reasonableness of their lordships, to debate again some of the big issues in the Bill. The Government's desire to be over-prescriptive and over-centralising in their attitude to local government contrasts starkly with the Conservative party's approach to local government: it wants to localise and to repatriate powers to it. The Bill will, of course, give the Government unprecedented and draconian powers against local government.

The Government were not willing to accept in the Bill even a sunset provision. As the Bill now makes no such provision, we shall not be able to debate the matter. Neither does the Bill contain de minimis provision. Neither shall be we be able to debate the continuation, under another name, of capping—despite the Government's clear general election pledge to get rid of it.

I return to my question: why exactly are the Government pressing their timetable motion today? Why use a sledgehammer to crack a nut? There can be no suggestion of the Opposition seeking to disrupt the passage of this business. Just a few days ago, on 22 July, my right hon. Friend the Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir G. Young) rightly said—it applies also to this motion—that the Government's guillotines are

"caught up in some wider Government agenda".

He went on to say:

"The guillotine has nothing to do with these two Bills; it is revenge"—

for something else that happened.

I endorse those remarks entirely in the context of this guillotine. I also entirely agree with the shadow Leader of the House's remarks, made in the same debate, that

"The guillotine is therefore unnecessary and vindictive . . . it is an attempt to unite the Labour party after its well-advertised splits and tensions, and it does so at the expense of the freedoms of the House."—[*Official Report*, 22 July 1999; Vol. 335, c. 1363-67.]

The fact is that the Government are becoming positively promiscuous in their use of such motions to crush dissent and stifle debate. The motions reveal business managers' nervousness half-way through this Parliament, and after local and European election results and the recent Eddisbury by-election. I was pleased to see my new hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury (Mr. O'Brien) take his seat earlier today.

As we approach the next general election, Government Whips will begin to find Labour Back Benchers less easy to control. We are also now entering the much-heralded so-called "year of delivery". However, between now and the next general election, glossy brochures will no longer be sufficient: the Government will have to start delivering on some of their pledges.

I am sure that there are other reasons for the motion—such as Labour Members who like to be tucked up in bed at an early hour; and Ministers who do not like facing the fast-bowling, or want to get off on their holidays. Perhaps the impending reshuffle, however, is the most significant reason for this ill-judged motion. I wish the Minister—I am sure that my right. hon. and hon. Friends will agree—nothing but the best in the impending reshuffle. We enjoy having her where she is, and wish her a long and happy stay in that position. However, reshuffles affect not only Ministers, but Whips.

Sir Paul Beresford (Mole Valley): My hon. Friend was very selective. I wonder whether he was being so deliberately?

Mr. Waterson: I was probably being selective accidentally, if that is of any help to my hon. Friend—who made a cogent point, if only I knew what it was.

The fact is that such motions are a matter of not merely Ministers and Labour Back Benchers but Government Whips—who wish to appear macho, to protect their own jobs. It remains to be seen how successful they are in that endeavour.

As for the Opposition, I shall certainly not be seeking to divide the House on the motion. The Government, with their large majority, could certainly—yet again—steamroller it through. However, in the context not only of the Bill and its provisions, but of Parliament and its rights and duties, it is important that we should make it absolutely clear that we wholly deprecate the motion, and think that it is wholly unnecessary.

5.49 pm

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): In the Minister's brief introduction to the debate, she relied fairly heavily on the argument that the matters that we shall be considering were "non-controversial"—I think that that was the term that she used. She seemed to imply that the provisions had been eased quietly through another place—where little debate on them was necessary—and that they were all just jolly good, non-controversial things on which we need not detain ourselves for too long. That in itself is controversial. It is not good enough for a Minister to say that something is non-controversial simply because she says so, and that therefore the House should pay little or no attention to it. That assertion needs to be challenged.

That would be so in any case. However, when one looks, even cursorily, at the headings for the groupings of amendments to be covered in three hours, if we agree to the motion—which I am reluctant to do without further clarification—one sees that we are to deal with matters such as "Consultation on performance indicators." That is a very broad subject. Consultation is never uncontroversial—maybe not the fact of it, but its extent. Those who are to be involved in consultation is a matter for debate.

We are then to be asked to consider:

"Inspections: housing benefit and council tax benefit."

What could be more controversial than these matters? The House could easily spend three hours on each of them. Then we come to:

"Powers of the Secretary of State, and commencement".

If there is one thing that should make the House anxious, it is the phrase:

"Powers of the Secretary of State".

These matters have been debated with passion in Standing Committee and on the Floor of the House time and again, and rightly so. In that innocuous phrase could lie any number of controversial matters which the Minister has sought to brush under the carpet and slide through the House without further consideration. That is to say nothing about commencement which, I confess, may be relatively uncontroversial. However, in other circumstances, the nature and timing of the commencement of a Bill can be a matter for some argument.

We then come to an amendment charmingly headed "Minor and drafting". If ever I saw a candidate for closer inspection, that is it. How often have we come across matters of great importance buried under that innocuous-sounding heading?

Sir Paul Beresford: One aspect of "Minor and drafting" concerns the Greater London Authority, as the Government have had to shift the numbering of 10 clauses because the first 60 clauses have had another 10 added. Is not that an indication of the quality of the drafting and the thinking of the Department in proposing the Bill?

Mr. Forth: I am grateful to my hon. Friend who reinforces my point. Concealed within this heading can be any number of changes—some of which, I accept, may be reasonable. However, others may well materially affect the substance of the Bill, and therefore deserve further consideration.

Last but not least, we are to consider "Council Tax and precepts"—a matter which, in the past, has often given rise to debates that have lasted a whole day. In your many years of distinguished service to the House, Mr. Deputy Speaker, you will have been party to debates in Standing Committee, if not on the Floor of the House, in which "Council tax and precepts" alone could have given rise to many hours of impassioned debate by hon. Members. So many aspects of this matter would normally require detailed consideration and debate.

I am beginning to wonder whether the motion to restrict debate is remotely acceptable. I hope that the Minister will feel it necessary to expand on what she said to reassure us why she believes that only three hours is sufficient to deal with all these important matters. I do not accept her characterisation of these matters as non-controversial. How could council tax and the powers of the Secretary of State be non-controversial? I have never heard of such a thing.

It is getting towards the end of term, and the Minister has her bucket and spade on her mind—some of her right hon. Friends have caravanning on their minds. Ministers are all worried sick about the reshuffle, about which the Prime Minister seems unable to make up his mind. However, those are not good enough reasons to hurry through the business this evening. Ministers are all worried out of their minds about losing their gigantic ministerial salaries, private offices and chauffeur-driven cars, but they are paid enough and they should be prepared to be here as long as necessary to do justice to the matters before us. They should not say insultingly that they want to rush business through in three hours so that they can go to their offices and worry about whether they will still be in their jobs tomorrow.

I hope that the Minister will seek to expand on these matters as I ponder whether I wish to support the guillotine motion.

5.57 pm

Mr. Adrian Sanders (Torbay): I listened closely to the hon. Member for Eastbourne (Mr. Waterson), the Opposition spokesman, and I heard nothing worthwhile to support his objection to the guillotine motion—a motion which, on principle, Liberal Democrats would normally want to oppose. However, we need reasons for opposing the motion.

A great deal of time has been spent on this Bill in this House, in Committee and in another place. We will spend some time on it tonight, and there will be opportunities in future to spend more time on it.

The reasons given by the official Opposition seem to have nothing to do with the business before us, and are simply opposition for opposition's sake. I hope that we can draw this debate to a fairly prompt close so that we can get on with debating the Lords amendments.

5.58 pm

Mr. Edward Leigh (Gainsborough): That was an extraordinary speech from someone who claims to represent a party which is seeking to hold the Government to account.

Mr. Desmond Swayne (New Forest, West): Will my hon. Friend acknowledge that it was hardly an extraordinary speech? It was a typical speech from a Liberal Democrat.

Mr. Leigh: I agree, and to take my hon. Friend the Member for Eastbourne (Mr. Waterson) to task for what I thought was an over-moderate speech and for daring to speak one word of opposition to the Government was ridiculous of the hon. Member for Torbay (Mr. Sanders).

I wish to refer to timetable motions, which were quite rare. There were no timetable motions at all in the House until the controversies of the Government of Ireland legislation in the last century, when the Bill raged back and forth on Report alone for some 80 days and the Speaker had to stay in his seat literally for hour after hour. The whole Government were in danger of crumbling because they could not keep their people on the Benches for those hours.

When I entered this House, I did not think that timetable motions were applicable to minor amendments at this late stage of a Bill. The Government cannot have it both ways. If these amendments are uncontroversial, surely there is no need for a timetable motion. Surely nobody suspects that my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) would talk for hour after hour and hold up the Government's business. In fact, we will not be able to hold anything up, because there is no major business to conclude before we all go on holiday tomorrow.

Three hours is not long for any debate, but if my right hon. and hon. Friends wanted to spend three hours on the timetable motion, there would be no time at all to discuss the amendments. My right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst maintains that the amendments are not uncontroversial. That may be part of the truth, but they contain nothing that is likely to detain the House for hour after hour.

The House will have to come to a sensible conclusion about timetable motions if we are to protect our traditional role of scrutinising the Executive. Are we entering a period when virtually every Bill is timetabled? Some think that that would be a good idea.

Ms Armstrong *indicated assent.*

Mr. Leigh: Some believe that one should have an agreement from the word go, to stop filibustering and prevent the Opposition from talking for hour after hour in Committee while Government Back Benchers are told by their Whips to say nothing. That is a perfectly justifiable point of view.

Mr. Forth: My hon. Friend mentioned filibustering. I hope that he will accept that that is impossible in the House because of the diligence and wisdom of the occupants of the Chair, who will always prevent any suggestion of time wasting or frivolity.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: The right hon. Gentleman should not try to draw the Chair into the argument.

Mr. James Gray (North Wiltshire): My hon. Friend may not have noticed just now that the Minister showed that she wholeheartedly agreed that the more business was guillotined, the better it was from her point of view.

Mr. Leigh: The Minister is an honest lady who is entitled to her point of view. She believes that all business should be timetabled. That is a rational and logical point of view. That might be convenient for the Government, because it would mean that they could plan their business exactly, but it might not be entirely convenient for the Opposition or, more important, for the process of democracy, which relies on Oppositions using the one power that is available to them—to speak. That power has not been taken lightly and has often resulted in the harsh light of scrutiny being thrown on Bills.

Are we playing a game in the House, in which the Government say their piece, we say ours, and they get their business through with some cosy arrangement agreed through the usual channels; or is this a living and vibrant place in which people feel passionately and use the power available to Back Benchers to talk and talk and subject the Executive to scrutiny, perhaps thereby making the Government slip up? That is what we are paid to do. It is a noble and important role for Oppositions.

Mr. Swayne: When programme motion after programme motion was agreed between Government and Opposition Front Benchers during the passage of the Scotland Bill—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman does not need to give me the history of the Scotland Bill. I was sitting here at the time. We do not want to get into that.

Mr. Leigh: This is not the Scotland Bill; it is not a matter of huge controversy. In the 1970s, we took weeks and weeks to discuss devolution legislation. The hon. Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell) was there day after day—as were the late Mr. Enoch Powell, and Mr. Michael Foot—holding the Government to account. What is wrong with that?

We will not have hour after hour and day after day of controversy on the Bill, but we are saying that it is treating the House with contempt to allow only three hours for our deliberations, including the timetable motion. The Government should be ashamed of themselves.

6.5 pm

Mr. Desmond Swayne (New Forest, West): The problem when a programme motion is agreed between Government and Opposition Front Benchers is that, in the ordinary course of debate, issues are discovered that require further elucidation by the Minister or, indeed, by Back Benchers. The timetable motion, agreed in advance, simply cannot take account of that. That is why such motions should be avoided if at all possible.

The motion is entirely avoidable. It may be that we will not come across issues that could have detained us long, but it remains a possibility. That is why it is pointless to have a programme motion when one is clearly not needed.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That the Order of the House of 24th March 1999 be supplemented as follows:

Lords Amendments

1. Proceedings on Consideration of Lords Amendments shall be completed at this day's sitting and, if not previously concluded, shall be brought to a conclusion three hours after the commencement of the proceedings on this Order.

2. (1) For the purpose of bringing proceedings to a conclusion in accordance with paragraph 1 the Speaker shall—

(a) put forthwith any Question which has been proposed from the Chair and has not been decided and, if that Question is for the amendment of a Lords Amendment, the Question on any further Amendment of the Lords Amendment moved by a Minister of the Crown and on any Motion made by a Minister of the Crown, That this House does agree or disagree with the Lords in the Lords Amendment or, as the case may be, in the Lords Amendment as amended.

(b) put forthwith the Question on any Amendment moved by a Minister of the Crown to a Lords Amendment followed by the Question on any Motion made by a Minister of the Crown, That this House does agree or disagree with the Lords in their Amendment or, as the case may be, in their Amendment as amended,

(c) put forthwith the Question on any Motion made by a Minister of the Crown, That this House does disagree with the Lords in a Lords Amendment, and

(d) put forthwith the Question, That this House does agree with the Lords in all the remaining Lords Amendments.

(2) As soon as the House has agreed or disagreed with the Lords in any of their Amendments the Speaker shall put forthwith a separate Question on any other Amendment moved by a Minister of the Crown relevant to the Lords Amendment.

Subsequent stages

3. The Speaker shall put forthwith the Question on any Motion made by a Minister of the Crown for the consideration forthwith of any further Message from the Lords on the Bill.

4. The proceedings on any further Message from the Lords shall, if not previously brought to a conclusion, be brought to a conclusion one hour after their commencement.

5. For the purpose of bringing those proceedings to a conclusion the Speaker shall—

(a) put forthwith any Question which has been proposed from the Chair and has not been decided, and the Question on any Motion made by a Minister of the Crown which is related to the Question already proposed from the Chair,

(b) put forthwith the Question on any Motion made by a Minister of the Crown on or relevant to any of the remaining items in the Lords Message, and

(c) put forthwith the Question, That this House does agree with the Lords in all the remaining Lords Proposals.

Reasons Committee

6. The Speaker shall put forthwith the Question on any Motion made by a Minister of the Crown for the appointment, nomination and quorum of a Committee to draw up Reasons and the appointment of its Chairman.

7. A Committee appointed to draw up Reasons shall report before the conclusion of the sitting at which it is appointed.

Miscellaneous

8. This paragraph applies to—

(a) proceedings on Consideration of Lords Amendments,

(b) proceedings on any further Message from the Lords, and

(c) proceedings of the kind mentioned in paragraph 6.

9. Standing Order No. 15(1) (Exempted business) shall apply to proceedings to which paragraph 8 applies.

10. Proceedings to which paragraph 8 applies shall not be interrupted under any Standing Order relating to the sittings of the House.

11. No dilatory Motion with respect to, or in the course of, proceedings to which paragraph 8 applies shall be made except by a Minister of the Crown; and the Question on any such Motion shall be put forthwith.

12. Where proceedings on a Motion for the Adjournment of the House would, by virtue of Standing Order No. 24, commence at a time when proceedings to which paragraph 8 applies are in progress, the proceedings on the Motion shall be postponed to the conclusion of the proceedings to which paragraph 8 applies.

13. If the House is adjourned, or the sitting is suspended, before the expiry of the period at the end of which proceedings to which paragraph 8 applies are to be brought to a conclusion, no notice shall be required of a Motion made at the next sitting by a Minister of the Crown for varying or supplementing the provisions of this Order.

Local Government Bill

Lords amendments considered.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael J. Martin): I must draw the attention of the House to the fact that privilege is involved in Lords amendments Nos. 14 and 20, which are to be considered today. If the House agrees to either of the amendments, I shall ensure that the appropriate entry is made in the Journal.

Clause 4

PERFORMANCE INDICATORS AND STANDARDS

Lords amendment: No. 1, in page 3, line 36, leave out ("such persons as he thinks fit.") and insert—

("(a) persons appearing to him to represent the best value authorities concerned, and

(b) such other persons (if any) as he thinks fit.")

6.6 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. Alan Meale): I beg to move, That this House agrees with the Lords in the said amendment.

The amendment further refines subsection 4(3) by placing a requirement on the Secretary of State, or the National Assembly for Wales, to consult persons who appear to them to represent best value authorities, and other persons, if any, as they consider appropriate, before specifying performance indicators or standards under the clause.

The Government have made it clear, both in the local government White Papers published a year ago and regularly during the passage of this Bill through both Houses, that we intend to consult widely on performance indicators and standards before they are specified under the clause. Hon. Members will be pleased to see that commitment set out in the Bill. I hope that they will also be pleased to hear that we intend to consult on our draft suite of best value performance indicators and standards shortly.

Mr. Nigel Waterson (Eastbourne): The Minister rightly said that the amendment is about consultation. It was a constant theme in the Bill's earlier stages both here and in another place that, given that the Government are taking draconian powers, there should be as wide a consultation as possible. The clause originally referred to the Secretary of State consulting anyone whom he saw fit to consult, so we welcome the amendment.

I agree with what the Minister said about the provenance of the amendment. It arose from a debate in the other place. It would insert into the Bill a requirement to consult with representatives of best value authorities when consulting on performance indicators and standards. That matter worried the Local Government Association and other bodies representing local government. The amendment reflects the views on all sides of the House of Lords.

Sir Paul Beresford (Mole Valley): All hon. Members will agree with what my hon. Friend is saying, but amendment No. 6, to which we will come later, would speed up the introduction of the provisions on best value. Any delay would therefore mean that matters reserved for consultation would not be ready in time for the introduction of the legislation. Should not the Government delay implementation, or at least confine it to those measures that are on the face of the Bill?

Mr. Waterson: My hon. Friend makes a very practical point, which we shall debate in connection with amendment No. 6. I hope that the Minister responding to that debate will take my hon. Friend's remarks into account.

The amendment reflects the cross-party views of the House of Lords. We have always argued that, if the Government were to insist on taking such draconian powers, the consultation involved should be as wide as possible. The amendment also reflects the concerns of local government organisations, and those raised by Baroness Miller in the House of Lords. I welcome it.

Mr. Adrian Sanders (Torbay): I wish only to emphasise that the amendment enjoyed cross-party agreement in the other place, where it was accepted that consultation was vital and should be as wide as possible. I hope that the Minister will spell out the limits of the consultation and assure the House that sufficient time will be available for it.

Mr. Meale: I assure the House that all appropriate authorities and associations will be consulted. Moreover, I can tell the hon. Member for Eastbourne (Mr. Waterson) that there will be no delay. The Government believe that we can get the Bill on the road in time.

Lords amendment agreed to.

New Clause

Lords amendment: No. 2, after clause 13, to insert the following new clause—*Inspections: housing benefit and council tax benefit*—

".—(1) The following shall be substituted for section 139A(1) and (2) of the Social Security Administration Act 1992 (reports on administration of housing benefit and council tax benefit)—

"(1) The Secretary of State may authorise persons to consider and report to him on the administration by authorities of housing benefit and council tax benefit.

(2) The Secretary of State may ask persons authorised under subsection (1) to consider in particular—

(a) authorities' performance in the prevention and detection of fraud relating to housing benefit and council tax benefit;

(b) authorities' compliance with the requirements of Part I of the Local Government Act 1999 (best value).

(2A) A person may be authorised under subsection (1)—

(a) on such terms and for such period as the Secretary of State thinks fit;

(b) to act generally or in relation to a specified authority or authorities;

(c) to report on administration generally or on specified matters."

(2) In section 139C(1) of that Act (reports) for the words from "in particular" to the end there shall be substituted "in particular—

(a) in the prevention and detection of fraud relating to benefit, or

(b) for the purposes of complying with the requirements of Part I of the Local Government Act 1999 (best value).""

The Minister for Local Government and Housing (Ms Armstrong): I beg to move, That this House agrees with the Lords in the said amendment.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: With this, it will be convenient to take Lords amendment No. 8.

Ms Armstrong: Throughout the passage of this Bill in both Houses of Parliament the Government have stated that they are committed to ensuring that the legislative framework for best value should be as transparent as possible. The new clause in amendment No. 2 is therefore designed to put the benefit fraud inspectorate's powers on as clear a statutory footing as possible.

The benefit fraud inspectorate's work on the administration of housing benefit and council tax benefit is very much in keeping with the ethos of best value, but the existing powers are framed in very specific, rather than general, terms. We want to make absolutely sure that the inspectorate can contribute its expertise to the best value scrutiny of this very important area of local authority work. This is, therefore, a technical amendment, designed to provide clarity about the extent of the BFI's powers to inspect authorities for the purposes of best value.

Amendment No. 8 is a technical amendment that will ensure that clause 28(2)(b) correctly identifies the provisions that confer powers reserved to the Secretary of State that will not be exercisable by the National Assembly for Wales. The amendment inserts two additional references into clause 28(2)(b). The first is to clause 23, which makes provision for inspection and other arrangements in respect of police authorities. The second new reference is to the new clause included in amendment No. 2, making arrangements in respect of inspection of council tax benefit administration and housing benefit administration. This again is a technical amendment designed to tidy up the Bill, clarify its application and take account of changes that we are making elsewhere.

6.15 pm

Mr. Waterson: I shall not detain the House. The Minister rightly said that amendment No. 8 is purely technical. Amendment No. 2 is somewhat more substantial, and would have the effect of clarifying that pursuit of benefit fraud is part of the best value process. Lord Whitty made that point in the debate in the House of Lords, stating that

"we wish to make absolutely sure that this very important area of local authority work is subject to the same best value scrutiny as will exist elsewhere."—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 17 June 1999; Vol. 602, c. 514.]

Although Conservative Members might have reservations about the implementation of best value and about its centralised and prescriptive approach, all hon. Members agree that it is important to bear down on benefit fraud, wherever and however it occurs. It is clearly right that pursuit of fraud should be placed firmly in the best value regime. We support the amendment.

Mr. Sanders: I am worried about the problems encountered by the housing benefit authorities in the verification process. Increasing regulation and checks on claimants have caused significant delays for claimants and landlords. Although the amendment would permit investigation into whether the relevant administration is administering housing benefit correctly, the process of that investigation could impact on claimants and landlords alike. I hope that the Minister will clarify that.

Sir Paul Beresford: I, too, intend to be brief and helpful. I echo the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Eastbourne (Mr. Waterson). All hon. Members are in favour of the benefit fraud inspectorate chasing up fraud, especially in housing benefit, where the problem is notorious. It makes sense to apply best value criteria to the new inspectorate.

However, the hon. Member for Torbay (Mr. Sanders) was right to say that the new inspectorate will look closely at the work of local authorities. That will involve studying how their computer systems are run. Given the recent difficulties with student grants, it is easy to see the difficulties that might arise.

The BFI will be yet another body looking at best value. The most recent edition of the *Municipal Journal* shows that there are inspectorates for best value, housing, benefit fraud, social services, fire services and for police. Given that there is also the Office for Standards in Education, the Government have set up what amounts to a forum—or collegiate collection—for best value inspectorates that meet twice a year. To my surprise, the Minister had the audacity to be photographed in the middle of the inspectorates' membership. Her colleagues were wise enough to stand further to the back, but some are too tall to remain invisible.

The problem is that those inspectorates cost money. In all the tiers of local government, there are lots of non-productive jobs that cost an enormous amount of money, and the growing list of inspectorates will add to that.

The problem is that the inspectorate, in applying best value, will cost local authorities money. There is no indication of the costs. Perhaps the Minister can explain. To get some feeling for the likely costs, one has only to consider those for some of the other inspectorates. For example, I understand that the chief executive of Newham now heads the best value branch of the Audit Commission on a salary of £150,000 a year.

There is no indication in the amendment or the notes—or in the Minister's speech—of what that inspectorate will cost. One local authority in London estimates that an auditor will spend 150 days a year on best value alone. That will cost £300 a day, which is £45,000 a year—half the cost of a new council house. If we multiply that by 33, for each London authority, we realise that it will mean phenomenal costs for London alone and, for some of the inspectorates, it is for some doubtful benefit. In addition—ignoring those costs of £300 a day, or £45,000 a year, when an inspectorate arrives at a local authority—the authority must also allocate time for council officers to produce reports. Knowing some of the

Labour-controlled authorities, when they get a report on best value from the inspectorate, they will produce reports on the reports. There will be meetings, discussions and further reports, all costing enormous sums of money and requiring extra manpower.

I do not expect the Minister to be able to answer me now, but perhaps she could write to me with an estimate of the manpower increase for best value, the extra costs and where the costs of those services—if one can call them that—have been distributed.

The Minister cannot use the basis of the savings. Applying the provision across the average, it will not apply to some authorities, which are good and efficient. The savings will be negative. After all, compulsory competitive tendering saw to that.

Ms Armstrong: I thank hon. Members for the constructive way in which they have approached these amendments. The hon. Member for Torbay (Mr. Sanders) asked about the verification framework and the significant delay in the collection of some housing benefit. That is not the issue that we are debating, but through best value we will discover more effectively those authorities that are dealing with housing benefit efficiently whatever the problems, ensuring that payments are made on time and they are reducing fraud.

One of our main aims is to learn about and celebrate good practice and ensure that we spread that. The administration of housing and council tax benefit varies considerably. The hon. Gentleman may also have noticed that housing management and aspects of benefit that cover both the Department of Social Security and local authorities are both part of the beacon council scheme this year, which was intended to spread good practice.

Mr. Sanders: I understand what the Minister is saying. My concern is that introducing another tier or inspection may cause further delay. Officers' minds will be turned to the inspection process, rather than the delivery of the benefits regime.

Ms Armstrong: I am disappointed by that intervention. As we said in Committee, at every stage in best value, councils have the opportunity to take a hold on matters. The intervention powers that we are discussing under the amendment are there to be used if everything else has failed. The amendment links in the benefit fraud inspectorate, which already exists and has a statutory basis. It is intended simply to ensure that that statutory basis coincides with best value and the best value regime.

Both the hon. Members for Torbay and for Mole Valley (Sir P. Beresford) rightly made considerable play in Committee of the fact that the inspectorates needed to co-ordinate effectively and that there needed to be clarity. Much time is spent on the police inspectorate and how we would ensure that it was still able to continue its work with integrity and fit into best value. The amendment simply deals with the benefit fraud inspectorate and its statutory basis. It will ensure that that basis none the less allows and enables it to be involved in the best value regime. We are not talking about another tier, but about carefully ensuring effective co-ordination and co-operation.

I understand the hon. Member for Mole Valley wanting to make fun of a number of matters. I heard him talk enviously about the reshuffle and I know that he wishes that he was part of the speculation. We have set up a forum so that we can ensure that each inspectorate co-operates effectively and is planning its programme of work so as to ensure that local authorities do not face huge additional burdens because of inspectors arriving all at the same time and so forth. The amendment will ensure effective co-ordination.

Sir Paul Beresford: I understand the Minister's reasoning and point of view but will she agree to answer in writing my question on costs and increasing manpower? I realise that it is impossible for her to answer it today.

Ms Armstrong: In Committee I promised that we would produce an effective regime for the payment of the inspectorate, which will be a balance between Government grant and contributions from local authorities, and I shall fulfil that promise. That will be the way in which we will measure the additional contribution that local government will have to make. As the hon. Gentleman conceded in his speech, there will none the less be savings. On that basis, I conclude my remarks.

Lords amendment agreed to.

Clause 14

SECRETARY OF STATE'S POWERS

Lords amendment: No. 3, in page 10, line 20, leave out paragraph (d)

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. Jon Owen Jones): I beg to move, That this House agrees with the Lords in the said amendment.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: With this, it will be convenient to discuss Lords amendments Nos. 4 to 7 and 9.

Mr. Jones: The Government have introduced three amendments to clause 14, which are all technical and intended to clarify its effect. I shall deal first with amendments Nos. 3 and 4, the first of which paves the way for the other.

Amendments Nos. 3 and 4 have been introduced to make a technical change to clause 14. They would make what was paragraph 14(2)(d) into a free-standing subsection. Hon. Members will note that the wording of the new provision would remain identical to that of the original, and would not extend the powers of the Secretary of State or the National Assembly in any way. The amendment has been proposed simply to clarify the scope of the existing provisions.

Amendment No. 5 deals with a number of situations in which the exercise of subsection 14(5) powers by the Secretary of State or the National Assembly might cause difficulties. These relate to cases in which there is a right of recourse to the Secretary of State, or he has an existing role or power in relation to a best value authority. Amendment No. 5 is designed to clarify the operation of the clause in such situations and tackles the problem by introducing two new subsections to clause 14. I emphasise that the circumstances in which the provision would apply are exceedingly rare.

6.30 pm

We have always maintained that intervention under clause 14(5), where the Secretary of State takes over responsibility for a function, would be the exception, not the norm, and that it would be to address the very worst failure in service delivery. We envisage that, in the handful of cases where a direction was issued under clause 14(5), most often, the Secretary of State would not exercise the function himself, but would appoint an independent person to carry it out. Where nominees were appointed, they would, in most cases, be considered to be independent from the Secretary of State, and the difficulties that I outlined relating to the Secretary of State's powers would not arise. Although the circumstances in which the provisions would be necessary are very rare, the amendment is essential for ensuring the proper function of the clause in all circumstances.

I stress that Lords amendment No. 5 is not about increasing the powers of the Secretary of State or the National Assembly, but about ensuring that their existing roles and powers can continue to be exercised sensibly. When the Secretary of State takes over a function, he does so on behalf of local people to ensure that a higher standard of service is delivered. Local people's rights of appeal and other such entitlements should not be compromised to enable that to happen. The amendment will help to ensure that such a circumstance does not arise.

Lords amendment No. 9 is technical and ensures that the new regulatory powers that we propose to introduce under clause 14(5A)(a) can be used effectively in Wales. The Bill provides that the National Assembly will exercise the full range of intervention powers set out in clause 14(5). The Secretary of State will not take action under that clause in respect of failure in Wales, as he has no powers to do so. Where the Assembly wishes to make regulation in respect of functions where powers have been transferred to it, it is a relatively straightforward process. However, there will be some cases where the Assembly intervenes under clause 14(5) and judges it necessary to make use of the consequential regulatory power at clause 14(5A)(a), but in an area where powers have been reserved to the Secretary of State. If those regulatory provisions are necessary, it is clearly unsatisfactory to leave the Assembly with no powers to make them as that would either lead to the creation of mutually conflicting provisions or, worse still, inhibit the Assembly from taking clause 14(5) action at all, even where it is the most appropriate form of intervention.

Lords amendment No. 9 addresses the potential anomaly by providing that in circumstances where the Assembly might wish to make regulatory provision in respect of a reserved area following intervention, it may do so, but only with the express approval of the Secretary of State. The Government believe that that is consistent with the principles of Welsh devolution, but will ensure that the National Assembly has the same flexibility to use the powers in clause 14 as would be available to the Secretary of State in England. That will provide consistency and ensure that the National Assembly will have the same freedoms to act to protect the interests of local people in Wales as exist elsewhere.

Lords amendment No. 7 is technical. Clause 27(2) lists the order-making and regulatory powers that, in England, would be subject to the negative resolution procedures of either House of Parliament. The amendment adds the new regulatory powers set out in Lords amendment No. 5 to that list.

Lords amendment No. 6 is also technical. Hon. Members know that the Government's approach to commencement is designed to provide best value authorities with some certainty about when their statutory obligations will begin, while providing an opportunity to commence certain provisions promptly, where it is sensible or helpful to do so. The amendment will help to achieve that by allowing, if necessary, early commencement of provisions relating to police and fire authorities in both England and Wales. The previous wording of clause 26 did not achieve that and we have therefore made this necessary adjustment to allow the Government to align commencement of best value for those authorities in both countries.

Mr. Shaun Woodward (Witney): I am delighted to respond to the amendments and even more delighted to see almost as many Ministers as Government Back Benchers. I cannot think why they need to demonstrate their performance today, but I suspect the fact that they keep their pagers on will reveal to the House what is in store.

We do not intend to delay the House long, but we have some questions. The Minister described the amendments as technical, tidying-up amendments. We want to test what he means by "technical". By and large, when Ministers say amendments are "technical", they are centralising measures that grab power for the Secretary of State wherever possible.

The amendments are described as technical, but they increase the centralising powers of the Secretary of State's Department. We should not be surprised because the Green Paper stressed that best value was designed to bring about "cultural change", and the Government's 1997 manifesto said:

"The basic framework . . . of local service provision must be for central government."

The amendments show the Government grabbing whatever power they can.

Lords amendments Nos. 3 and 4 are in one sense strictly technical, so my questions seek clarification. On Report in another place, the Minister, Lord Whitty, remarked:

"the wording of the new provision remains identical to the original."—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 17 June 1999; Vol. 602, c. 514.]

If so, perhaps the Minister can explain why the words have to be changed. Can he confirm that that interpretation is correct? As he said, clause 14(2)(d) permits the Secretary of State to direct an authority

"to take such other action as in the Secretary of State's opinion is necessary and expedient".

Crucially, the amendment would permit the Secretary of State to direct an authority to take not "such" but "any" action that he considered necessary or expedient. What is the difference between "such" and "any"? If "any" is the same as "such", why did the word have to be changed? In what circumstances would the Secretary of State take "any" action and what would such action be?

Lords amendment No. 5 extends the powers of the Secretary of State. The Minister was at pains to say that the amendments do not extend his power, but it is nonsense to suggest that. Even a cursory glance at this amendment reveals that it does. It creates a new regulatory power and puts it into the hands of the Secretary of State. Lord Whitty said that its use would be "exceedingly rare" in any circumstances, but it is a far-reaching provision which gives the Secretary of State the power to disapply or modify an enactment that confers a function on him in respect of a function of a best value authority.

Mr. Tony McWalter (Hemel Hempstead): Does the hon. Gentleman suggest that it would be better to leave such a function in the hands of a failing or lamentably inefficient authority than for someone to come in and recognise the importance of getting it discharged efficiently?

Mr. Woodward: The difference between the Opposition and the Government is that the Conservatives believe in local democracy; the electorate can always get rid of councillors—as the Government found out in this year's local elections when they began rapidly to lose seats throughout the country. The hon. Gentleman should realise that the Conservatives do not believe in centralising power; the Government believe in centralising power—giving more and more power to the Secretary of State and taking it away from local authorities.

Sir Paul Beresford: Does my hon. Friend agree that the boot is on the other foot? The intervention by the hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead (Mr. McWalter) referred to the Minister stepping in. There is a great deal of flag waving for that, but the headline in the *Municipal Journal* is

"Intervention 'will be kept to a minimum'".

In other words, the Minister will probably not step in anyway.

Mr. Woodward: As always, the Deputy Prime Minister is all over the shop—or all over the train perhaps, as we have begun to see. He has a disastrous disintegrating transport policy, as well as disintegrating local authority power.

The amendment gives no small power; once again, it is a Henry VIII measure. Secondary legislation will be used, so we have concerns about the amendment—in the context of the centralisation of power to the Secretary of State. Once again, our questions to the Minister are principally about the times when that power would be exercised. It is not good enough for the Minister simply to say that it would be used only in exceptional circumstances. It is in exceptional circumstances that power is abused. It is incumbent on the Minister to explain to the House the precise circumstances in which that power would be used.

The Government should tell us why they are introducing the amendment at such a late stage, if they believe that the matter was such an important part of the Bill all along. The Minister should give the House examples in which the Secretary of State's powers under clause 14(5) would be exercised. Today, the Minister has not justified why there should be such a right of recourse to the Secretary of State and why the Government are unable to trust local democracy.

My hon. Friend the Member for Mole Valley (Sir P. Beresford) has already expressed some concerns about amendment No. 6 which he may wish to adumbrate. The amendment empowers the Secretary of State to order the early commencement of provisions relating to police and fire authorities in Wales. Ordinary commencement is 12 months after the passing of the Bill. Unamended, clause 28 gave the power to the National Assembly for Wales; amended, it shifts the power to order early commencement of

"sections 15 to 17 or section 26",

and the new section on housing benefit and council tax benefit to the Secretary of State. The amendment reduces the commencement order powers of the National Assembly and gives them to the Secretary of State.

Why has the Minister done that? On what occasions would that measure be used? As Lord Whitty said, in another place—*[Interruption.]* The Ministers on the Treasury Bench are chatting among themselves; they do not want to listen to what their noble Friend said. However, it might be as well if they listened. Lord Whitty said that the measure would allow early commencement

"where it is sensible or helpful to do so".—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 17 June 1999; Vol. 602, c. 514.]

Will the Minister tell the House what "sensible" and "helpful" mean in that case, so that we can understand the purpose and meaning of the legislation, instead of the obfuscatory way in which he has delivered the amendments to us today?

Mr. Sanders: The fundamental question has remained unanswered in Committee and in the other place, although perhaps we shall receive a glint of light this evening: what are the exceptional circumstances? Secretaries of State already have powers to intervene in local government—for example, in a social services department. If there is any hint of abuse in a placement, the Secretary of State can intervene. In a failing school, the Secretary of State can intervene. Powers of intervention exist. Why is there a need for additional powers?

In his opening statement, the Minister said that the powers were there to protect local people. What is the purpose of the ballot box in a local election if it is not to give the people the power to remove a failing local authority? Why should a Secretary of State make that decision? Under best value regimes, it is the Secretary of State who sets the standard and monitors whether it is being met. The Secretary of State sanctions and judges whether that standard has not been met. Why is the additional power needed? It would be extremely helpful if we could have an answer on what the exceptional circumstances are.

6.45 pm

Miss Julie Kirkbride (Bromsgrove): I should be interested in the answer to a more specific question about the Secretary of State's new powers in the measure. What are the Secretary of State's powers to intervene in local government procedures when the contracting-out arrangements—or non-contracting-out arrangements—are being changed? I have in mind a specific example from my constituency, where confidential council records were abused.

Bearing in mind that such records might end up in the hands of third parties under the new contracting arrangements, I want to know what action the Secretary

[Miss Julie Kirkbride]

of State would take if, for example, a situation arose similar to the one in which we were left in Bromsgrove during the local government election campaign. During the campaign, information was targeted on various named individuals who were eligible for free bus passes. Their names were held in confidence by the local council, but the individuals were specifically targeted, by name, address and a code marking used by the council. They were sent Labour party political propaganda that suggested—from records that should not have been available to the party—that, if the Conservative party were to win in Bromsgrove on 6 May, we would abolish free bus passes. The House will be pleased to hear that we have not done so. What action would the Secretary of State be prepared to take if information was abused in that way?

It transpired that the person responsible for that act was Councillor Peter McDonald, who is now the leader of the Labour opposition on Bromsgrove district council—I am pleased that he is in opposition. The chief executive of the council has given me clarification that those letters were sent and that Councillor Peter McDonald was in possession of the records. The chief executive told me that he had handed a copy of those sensitive records to Councillor McDonald.

When we took up the matter after an article about the abuse of that information had appeared in *The Birmingham Post*, the chief executive told me

"it would seem reasonable to assume that the information used to 'target' the Labour Party literature was largely based on information obtained from Council sources.

His letter continued:

"It is fair to point out that Mr Fisher"—

one of the council officials—

"initially declined to provide such information and, as a result, was subject to considerable 'pressure' from Councillor McDonald. In eventually yielding to that pressure Mr Fisher told Councillor McDonald of his reservations in supplying the information and indicated that under no circumstances should the data be used for Party political purposes. He also advised Councillor McDonald that before using the information for any purpose he should discuss the situation with myself"—

that is, the chief executive.

The letter continued:

"Councillor McDonald chose to ignore this and has never discussed the information, or its use, with me.

In retrospect, and assuming that the Labour Party are unable to offer an alternative version of events, it would appear that Mr Fisher's trust in Councillor McDonald was misplaced."

The letter then goes on to justify the actions of the council officer who handed over the information.

If Councillor McDonald is found guilty of an offence, it could be a criminal offence under the Data Protection Acts. He would be guilty of bringing the Labour party into disrepute. It would seem that a sleaze allegation could be made against Bromsgrove Labour party, and I should be grateful if the Minister clarified whether the Secretary of State's new powers would deal with events such as those.

Sir Paul Beresford: To be helpful to the Minister, my speech will give him time to work out how to respond to the outrageous accusation clearly spelled out by my hon. Friend the Member for Bromsgrove (Miss Kirkbride). That councillor's actions are merely a classic example of the sort of behaviour that we remember from many previous occasions and have come to expect.

The amendments are wonderful amendments to an amazing clause. They give huge powers to the Secretary of State, especially amendments Nos. 3 to 5. Any regulation that the Secretary of State likes, he can add to, and any he does not like, he can remove—there is no democracy and no discussion. In Committee, the clause was referred to as the "trust me" clause, and its provisions would suit Ministers if there was a slack local council or a trade unionist who needed to be pleased.

We have heard brave words about how the amendments would enable the Secretary of State to intervene, and the *Municipal Journal* headline reads, "Intervention 'will be kept to a minimum'" Failures triggering the provisions of amendments Nos. 3 to 5 fall into two groups. The first is "Failures of process", which we are told are unlikely to trigger intervention; the second group is "Failures of substance", which we are told are more likely to trigger intervention.

Under "Failures of process" is listed first:

"a failure to consider competition".

That is the crux of getting a decent value-for-money, best-value services, but it is out of the window. Next, we find "a failure to consult", but that could be avoided pretty easily, with a couple of sweeps of the local wards to make sure everything sounds all right. Then, we have

"a failure to set performance targets".

I can understand why local authorities might not meet that requirement, especially as they are still awaiting Government guidance on some of those matters. Finally, we have

"a failure to publish benchmarking data."

Given the struggle of some of the inner London Labour authorities to find benches, let along benchmarks, one would hardly be surprised if they failed to meet that requirement.

Under "Failures of substance", we find first:

"a failure to meet any single national performance standard".

As we feared, the Secretary of State can choose selectively to pick on any local authority that is not in favour that month. A second failure of substance is

"persistently high costs not warranted by service excellence or need".

I can think of innumerable Labour local authorities, especially in London, that fail by that standard. Next, we find

"a failure to improve standards".

The difficulty with that is that, in some areas, it might be impossible to do so. Take ground maintenance: a dry summer means that grass cutting is kept to a minimum, but a wet summer means that the contractor or the in-house team will struggle to keep up, with the result that the local authority is held to have failed to improve standards. Finally, under "Failures of substance", we find

"a failure to act on critical inspection reports".

One of the difficulties with that is that, every so often, there is what one might call an oddball inspector. That provision might mean that a local authority got into distinct difficulties merely because the Secretary of State chose to accept the report of a single oddball inspector.

My greatest concern about the amendments is that they would allow soft joint ventures, local authority company guarantees and even municipal trading. At no stage in proceedings on the Bill have Ministers made it clear that municipal trading will be outlawed. That causes me great concern because, if that matter is not dealt with, we shall have returned to the position of the late 1970s. Compulsory competitive tendering brought local authorities back into line. Many Conservative Members feel that best value is the next logical step from CCT but, the more I listen to the Minister, the greater my doubts about that.

Amendment No. 6 appears to be a reshuffle of the original amendment, but the original concern stands. We expect Royal Assent on this Bill in August 1999 and the Bill should come into force in autumn 2000, but many local authorities are way behind in preparing for best value. They have mixed reasons for that—some are waiting for Government guidance. We need to recognise that it will be at least five years—2005—before the best value programme is fully up and running and we can expect to see any results from it. Meanwhile, there is a great clamour to get rid of CCT, which goes on 2 January 2000, five years before the best value results can be expected. To the recipients of services and to those who pay for them, those could be five years of heavy damage.

Mr. Jon Owen Jones: The—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. It would be appropriate if the Minister asked for the leave of the House before replying to the debate.

Mr. Jones: I apologise, Mr. Deputy Speaker. With the leave of the House, I shall reply to the debate.

The hon. Member for Mole Valley (Sir P. Beresford) entertained the Committee with several speeches, but, as far as this Bill is concerned, he appears to be stuck in a rather schizophrenic state. From his experience in local government, he gives many reasons why local authorities, all carefully chosen to be Labour authorities, did not perform adequately or efficiently. Those comments are balanced by attacks on the Bill for placing too onerous a responsibility on local authorities to perform to standards of efficiency and service that central Government may lay down.

At least the Liberal Democrats are consistent. The hon. Member for Torbay (Mr. Sanders) expressed the well-rehearsed argument that there was no reason why the amendment should impose an extra requirement, because the only thing needed to ensure that local government is efficient, effective and incorrupt is the ability of local electors to throw out offending councils at election time. That argument has been used consistently throughout our deliberations on this Bill and others, but if we accept it—*[Interruption.]*

The hon. Member for Witney (Mr. Woodward) says that that argument has the merit of democracy, but I shall not embarrass him and bore the House by detailing the many occasions on which Conservative Governments interfered in, and attacked, local government. Suffice it to say that, now that they are in opposition, the Conservatives continue to attack local government. However, they cannot have it both ways. At least the Liberal Democrats are consistent—wrong, but consistent, and there is merit in consistency. I put it to the hon. Member for Witney that there is nothing but hypocrisy in his arguments—he cannot have it both ways.

The hon. Member for Bromsgrove (Miss Kirkbride) appears to have confused the Bill before the House today, which deals with best value, with a Bill that is to be introduced in the next parliamentary Session, which will deal with ethics in government. In any case, the case that she describes is one that would come before a court. It is not a matter for discussion in the context of the Bill.

The hon. Member for Witney asked why the word "any" was used instead of "such" in amendment No. 4. The word "such" would be used in a clause with more than one provision, but if it stands alone, "any" is better drafting. It is simply a drafting point, and there is no other significance.

In amendment No. 5, new subsection 5A provides the Secretary of State with a regulation-making power to make consequential arrangements that include disapplying or modifying existing legislation, and specifies the circumstances in which the power would apply. Hon. Members will note that the scope of the provision is very narrow and will apply only in cases where the Secretary of State has a function in respect of a best value authority and where he has issued a direction under subsection 14(5). We expect that to be a rare combination of circumstances.

7 pm

Subsection 5B specifies the nature of the regulations. Again, it is very narrow in scope. The regulations can modify existing legislation, but they will operate only in circumstances in which the Secretary of State wishes to exercise an existing function concurrently with a best value function of the authority.

I shall clarify further why those provisions are needed, by providing an example of the circumstances in which they might be used. The example that the Government provided in another place concerned the Secretary of State's role when exercising a planning function on behalf of an authority. Were he to intervene to take over a planning function, decisions on planning applications would thereafter be made in his name. In the event of planning permission being refused, the applicant would have his usual right of appeal, but that is a right of appeal to the Secretary of State.

I am sure that the House would agree that it would be undesirable for the Secretary of State to determine appeals against his own refusals of planning permission. The new subsection that we are introducing would allow for regulations to be made to make alternative arrangements to deal with the fact that the Secretary of State had taken a decision that was now subject to appeal, and the regulations would be written to ensure that they were consistent with the Secretary of State's role as the planning authority. Similar provisions would need to be made to allow the Secretary of State, for example, to continue to call in controversial planning applications.

Where the regulations proposed are in force, the Secretary of State will still be able to use his call-in power. Those planning applications that he would want to

[Mr. Jones]

call in, had the regulations not been in force, would still be subject to a process that is likely to involve a public local inquiry. For cases dealt with in that way, there would not be a right of appeal to the Secretary of State; this is the position now for all cases that are called in. The right to seek judicial review in the courts is still available, of course, and would not be fettered by the proposed regulations.

Amendment No. 6 does not reduce the Assembly's powers, as was rather unbelievably claimed. It never did have the power to act in respect of police and fire authorities. The amendment simply ensures that police and fire authorities in Wales can be treated in the same way as in England.

Lords amendment agreed to.

Lords amendments Nos. 4 to 9 agreed to.

Clause 30

MAJOR PRECEPTING AUTHORITIES: FURTHER REGULATION

Lords amendment: No. 10, in page 18, line 31, leave out ("60(8)") and insert ("70(8)")

Mr. Meale: I beg to move, That this House agrees with the Lords in the said amendment.

As we heard earlier, this is a minor drafting amendment. The hon. Member for Taunton (Jackie Ballard) pointed out in Committee that the reference to section 60 of the Greater London Authority Bill was incorrect. We undertook to change the reference, but to do so at a later stage, in case there were further numbering changes to that Bill. We are now inserting the correct reference to section 70.

Mr. Woodward: We have little to say about the amendment, except to commiserate with Ministers that, after the Department has been so singularly unlucky and won so few Bills, it still manages to be incompetent and get the numbering wrong. None the less, we are pleased that it has finally put its house in order as it prepares for the summer, and we shall not oppose the amendment.

Lords amendment agreed to.

Schedule 1

LIMITATION OF COUNCIL TAX AND PRECEPTS

Lords amendment: No. 11, in page 22, line 51, leave out ("section 70") and insert ("sections 70 and 71")

Ms Armstrong: I beg to move, That this House agrees with the Lords in the said amendment.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: With this, it will be convenient to consider Lords amendments Nos. 12 to 20.

Ms Armstrong: The Greater London Authority Bill is currently being discussed in the other place. In its Committee stage in the House and in the other place, there were amendments to the provisions for substitute calculations. Most of the amendments to schedule 1 to the Local Government Bill reflect those changes to the Greater London Authority Bill. The amendments also make a few changes to ensure that references to the GLA Bill in the Local Government Bill are accurate and take account of the special arrangements for the budget requirement and tax-setting calculations set out in the GLA Bill. That has necessitated one small consequential amendment.

I apologise for the number of amendments, but I assure hon. Members that they are not substantive. They simply ensure that this Bill and the GLA Bill are consistent in their provisions for the GLA.

Mr. Woodward: I have a small number of questions to the Minister about the amendments. We recognise that, in another place, the noble Lord said that these were all technical amendments—we know what "technical" usually means to the Government—and that they related mainly to the Greater London Authority Bill. He also said that they were not substantive.

Can the Minister confirm to the House that the amendments relate only to the Greater London Authority Bill? If they do not, will she tell the House to which other areas they refer?

Ms Armstrong: With the leave of the House. I said that the amendments related to the changes in the Greater London Authority Bill. Some of them affect the Metropolitan police, but relate to the GLA Bill.

Lords amendment agreed to.

Lords amendments Nos. 12 to 20 agreed to.

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): With permission, I shall put together the motions relating to delegated legislation.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 118(6) (Standing Committees on Delegated Legislation),

NORTHERN IRELAND

That the draft Northern Ireland Act Tribunal (Procedure) Rules 1999, which were laid before this House on 5th July, be approved.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT FINANCE

That the Local Government Finance (England) Special Grant Report (No. 50) on Children's Services (Quality Protects) Special Grants for 1998–99 and 1999–2000 (HC 617), which was laid before this House on 8th July, be approved.—*[Mr. Jamieson.]*

Question agreed to.

HOME AFFAIRS COMMITTEE

Ordered,

That Mr. Nick Hawkins be discharged from the Home Affairs Committee, and Mr. Michael Fabricant be added to the Committee.—*[Mr. Keith Bradley, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.]*

SOCIAL SECURITY COMMITTEE

Ordered,

That Mr. Howard Flight be discharged from the Social Security Committee, and Mr. Desmond Swayne be added to the Committee.—*[Mr. Keith Bradley, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.]*

EUROPEAN SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Ordered,

That Mr. Shaun Woodward and Mr. Robert Walter be discharged from the European Scrutiny Committee and Mr. Owen Paterson and Mr. Laurence Robertson be added to the Committee.—*[Mr. Keith Bradley.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Since no message has yet been received from the Lords in relation to the Employment Relations Bill, I am now required to suspend the sitting. The Division bells will be rung five minutes before the sitting resumes.

7.10 pm

Sitting suspended.

EMPLOYMENT RELATIONS BILL

Lords amendments again considered.

8.25 pm

On resuming—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): I have to acquaint the House that a message has been brought from the Lords as follows. The Lords do not insist on their amendment to the Employment Relations Bill to which the Commons have disagreed, but propose an amendment in lieu of that amendment, to which they desire the agreement of the Commons. They agree without amendment to the amendment proposed by the Commons to the remaining Lords amendment.

The Minister of State, Department of Trade and Industry (Mr. Ian McCartney): I beg to move, That this House agrees with the Lords amendment in lieu, in page 8, line 20, at the end to insert the words—

("(4) The payment of higher wages or higher rates of pay or overtime or the payment of any signing on or other bonuses or the provision of other benefits having a monetary value to other workers employed by the same employer shall not constitute a detriment to any worker not receiving the same or similar payments or benefits within the meaning of subsection (1)(a) of this section so long as—

(a) there is no inhibition in the contract of employment of the worker receiving the same from being the member of any trade union, and

(b) the said payments of higher wages or rates of pay or overtime or bonuses or the provision of other benefits are in accordance with the terms of a contract of employment and reasonably relate to services provided by the worker under that contract.")

As my noble Friend Lord McIntosh of Haringey has explained in another place, the Government are prepared to accept the amendment in the spirit of partnership—*[Interruption.]* I knew that that would wake them up and get them going.

It was our intention to replace the power in clause 17 with a substantive provision. Unfortunately, that proved not to be possible in the time available. We had informal consultations with interested parties that revealed complications. Ultimately, we judged that it would be better to give ourselves more time to address the issue. Nevertheless, I shall take this last opportunity briefly to restate the Government's position.

We made it clear, in the "Fairness at Work" White Paper and subsequently, that current law allows the employer and worker, if they wish, to conclude a contract in terms that differ from those in a collective agreement that would otherwise apply to the worker. That is the position now, and it will continue to be the position once the scheme for statutory trade union recognition is in place.

Collective agreements are, of course, increasingly sophisticated, and many already provide flexibility—in the form of performance-related pay and benefits, for example—so that employers who have negotiated such agreements may feel no need to negotiate different terms for individual workers. However, other employers may wish to do so. They are free to do so, and they shall continue to be free to do so. The only proviso is that, in doing so, they must not discriminate unlawfully—for example, on grounds of race, sex, disability, or trade union membership or non-membership.

We believe that employees should be protected against dismissal or detriment if they refuse to give up the terms of a collective agreement. It should not be permissible, for example, for an employer to say, "Unless you agree to an individual contract and give up the collective agreement, I'll see you're never promoted again." We shall continue working to draw up regulations to protect workers from such pressure.

We agree with the Opposition, however, that the mere fact that one worker has received benefits under an individual contract cannot constitute a detriment for those who do not receive such terms. Obviously it will remain unlawful to link the granting or withholding of benefits to a worker's membership or non-membership of a trade union.

The Government should have preferred to deal with those matters somewhat differently in regulations, but we accept that the point was particularly important to the Opposition. We have been willing, therefore, in partnership, to compromise on an amendment that will allow the Bill to complete its passage today, so that the wider benefits that the Bill will confer may commence without delay.

I should also like to take this opportunity to say that the Bill has now involved—in constructive work—two years of my life. I give my thanks to the social partners—particularly the Trades Union Congress and the Confederation of British Industry, but also others—with whom I have worked, over the past two years, in preparing the White Paper and subsequently the Bill.

God willing, the House will today pass the Bill, making it the Employment Relations Act—which will help to modernise workplace relations; help people to combine work and family responsibilities; underpin a flexible and efficient labour market; and help business to attract and retain the skilled work force necessary if they are to compete and succeed. The Act will also ensure that workers receive the proper rights at work that they should have had and maintained in the 18 years of the previous, Tory Government.

The Government are ensuring that, from day 1 of their employment, every British worker—full-time, part-time, temporary, casual or agency worker—is treated with compassion and as employers' most important asset. If an employee wishes to join a trade union, to be represented

[Mr. Ian McCartney]

by that union and to work for others to be represented by that union, they will not suffer a sacking or other detriment for that important task.

I am proud of the Government's achievements in this area. I hope that the House will pass the proposal from the Lords so that we can get on with rolling out the rights in the Bill for millions of workers in Britain.

8.30 pm

Mrs. Angela Browning (Tiverton and Honiton): In the spirit of partnership, we are glad to have been of assistance to the Government in enabling them to incorporate this amendment in the Bill before it becomes an Act tomorrow. We are pleased to have been able to modify what we believe to be, in principle, a damaging Bill.

When the Conservatives tabled this amendment in Committee in another place, assurances were given by Ministers. Interestingly, many of the changes to the Bill in another place were due to the fact that Ministers there appeared to have some experience of running businesses, and were therefore much more receptive to many of the Conservative amendments.

In Committee, the Government seemed to support my noble Friend Baroness Miller who tabled the amendment and took it through the other place. Ministers in another place promised that they would bring back a modified amendment on Report. On that basis, the Conservatives were asked to withdraw the amendment. I am pleased that my noble Friend did not do so because it was subsequently put to a vote, which the Conservatives won.

Therefore, the amendment came back here, and only last Wednesday the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry tabled an amendment not to modify the Bill—as promised by Ministers in the Lords—but to overturn the amendment that the Conservatives had won in another place. I accept the contrite tone of the Minister's contribution tonight, but this was a matter of ministerial honour, as has been made clear in another place and here last Wednesday.

Ministers who give their word that they will bring an amendment back on Report or at Third Reading and then fail to do so are duty-bound, as members of the Government, to try to keep their word. I am grateful, now the amendment has come to the Commons, that Ministers have sought to rectify the matter tonight.

Much valuable time could have been saved last Wednesday if Ministers had tabled such an amendment then because, as we know, the Bill was guillotined and yet—quite properly—we had spent some time discussing clause 15 last Wednesday, which is a matter of some concern both here and outside this place.

I am not sure that we would wish to be regarded as partners in this matter, but we are pleased to have been able to advise the Government, and that they have accepted the amendment. We are particularly pleased that honour has been seen to be upheld within the ministerial team.

Mr. David Chidgey (Eastleigh): I can understand the Minister's feeling of elation tonight, as it has taken some two years to get to this stage. The Liberal Democrats welcome much in the Bill, and we have long argued for many of the issues in it.

If I have a criticism, it is that, in spite of the Bill taking two years, many of the amendments for which we called in Committee have appeared only in the last week or so. Nevertheless, we are grateful to the Minister and his team, who have heard some of the pleas that we have made and incorporated our views in the Bill. For that reason, I am pleased to say that I wish the Bill to go forward. It is a first step—but not the last step—towards fairness at work.

Lords amendment in lieu agreed to.

PETITIONS

Hunting with Dogs

8.35 pm

Angela Smith (Basildon): I am pleased to present a petition from my constituents in Basildon and East Thurrock. I agree with the petitioners, who ask for the hunting of wild mammals with dogs to be banned because it is cruel and unnecessary and has no place in modern Britain. The petition states:

> The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons call on the Government to act to end hunting by making a clear commitment by the year 2000 to legislate for its abolition.

To lie upon the Table.

Ring and Ride

Mr. Ian Stewart (Eccles): It is my pleasure to present a petition signed my constituent Sandra Dutton and more than 10,000 other users and supporters of Greater Manchester Accessible Transport Ltd., otherwise known as Ring and Ride. The petition states:

> The present system of rebates of fuel duty paid to commercial passenger transport companies who operate scheduled public transport services is not paid to ring and ride or dial-a-ride services. We consider that this system unfairly discriminates against persons with mobility difficulties, to whom these services are the equivalent of normal bus services, which they are physically unable to use.

To lie upon the Table.

State Pensions

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Betts.]*

8.36 pm

Mr. Steve Webb (Northavon): It has been my happy privilege to conduct several Adjournment debates recently. After the past two, members of the public have sent me copies of letters to the Minister who responded, complaining that the response was inadequate. One was a Trade and Industry Minister and the other, I regret to say, was the Minister who is to respond tonight. The public felt that he had not dealt fully with the complexities of annuities.

Were I a Minister, in normal circumstances I would bring along 12 minutes of material and extemporise for three minutes in response to the speech. Given that we have the best part of two hours in which to explore this issue fully, and that the Minister will have cleared his diary until 10.30 pm, I will flag up for him at the outset the questions to which I seek answers.

The move to the new national insurance recording system, NIRS2, has caused delays in the payment of the state retirement pension. Given the time available, I thought of multiplying my questions, but I have decided to restrain myself to only five. I hope, however, for a full and comprehensive response.

Basic state pensions are paid more or less in full, but there are serious problems with the state earnings-related pension, SERPS, and possibly more than 100,000 pensioners are receiving something based on a clerical calculation. As I understand it, someone at the Contributions Agency has sat down with a pocket calculator, dug out the files and worked out how much the SERPS figure should be. When will those estimates be adjusted so that people receive the correct amount?

My second question is about the interest on the money that people have not yet received. When will it be paid? Some of the delays have been for months and for hundreds of pounds, so there is a problem with the interest that has been foregone. I hope that the Minister will say when it will be paid.

My third question has to do with the future and people eligible for state pension when they reach 60 or 65. By what date will newly retired pensioners get the correct pension amount from day one of their eligibility?

Fourthly, who pays the compensation bills which, if one includes age-related rebates, run into tens of millions of pounds? I hope that the Minister will give us some assurance about the private sector's contribution to the compensation bills.

Finally, what lessons have the Government learned from the pension payments fiasco? I hope that the Minister will tell us about the inquiry that has been launched, who is leading it and what its terms of reference are. When will the inquiry report, and whose head is on the block?

I hope that the Minister will respond point by point to those five headline questions. The matter has been tackled twice by the Public Accounts Committee. The Committee's 22nd report, entitled "Delays to the New National Insurance Recording System", was published earlier this month. Rather alarmingly, given that the Committee's first investigation was published in June 1998, the July 1999 report found that matters were "much worse".

The Minister may take some comfort from the fact that the contracts were signed by the previous Administration. He may consider the problem to be a Tory bungle, which of course it was. However, the Minister has been in his post for nearly a year, with responsibility for pensions for a significant part of that time. The Public Accounts Committee states that matters have got worse rather than better in the past 12 months, so I am sure that the Minister will say, "Mea culpa", lay his hand on his heart and admit his share of the blame for this worrying matter.

Today, the Government produced their annual report. I understand that people can get two Tesco club card points for buying it, and that is all that it is worth. I looked for an apology to pensioners for the delays in payment of their state retirement pension but, curiously, apology found I none. The Minister is welcome to intervene to tell where in the annual report that apology occurs, or where the report mentions that more than 250,000 pensioners have not received the pension to which they are entitled. Any review of the past 12 months should at least mention that, but I cannot find one. I cannot decide whether the report is shameless or shameful—it is both, I think—but, on pensions, it is misleading in the extreme.

The first of the five questions that I put to the Minister relates to the clerical estimates of SERPS pensions that are currently in payment. A constituent of mine—whom I shall call Mr. N, for the purposes of anonymity—was 65 in Christmas week last year. The Government gave him a Christmas present, which took the form of not paying his proper pension. When he received his pension book, he discovered that, instead of getting about £100 a week of basic state pension and SERPS, he received only the basic state pension.

Mr. Bob Russell (Colchester): Scrooge.

Mr. Webb: Scrooge indeed. Many pensioners would not have been aware that there was anything wrong. The complexities of SERPS are beyond many of us. A less alert pensioner than Mr. N would not have noticed a problem. However, Mr. N had done something astute a couple of years previously. I suspect that not voting Labour might also be considered astute, but I have in mind the request that he sent to the Contributions Agency for a pensions forecast. The agency told him that he would be entitled to about £35 a week of SERPS.

Strangely, although the Contributions Agency knew two years ago that Mr. N was entitled to SERPS of at least £35 a week, and I cannot envisage any circumstances in which that figure would have decreased in the two years—unless I am much mistaken, it could only increase—the Government were none the less unable to pay him the money that he was told he was entitled to then. They paid him only the basic pension.

Mr. New is an astute gentleman, as I mentioned, so he contacted me. I took up his case with the Minister and, a matter of weeks ago, Mr. New received a letter from the Department. Having received it, he rang my office because it contained words to the effect of, "We are prepared to have a guess. We'll have a stab at what we think you're entitled to. If it is too little, we'll pay you the balance. If it is too much, we'd like it back."

[Mr. Webb]

Mr. New was understandably rather concerned—genuinely concerned. The Public Accounts Committee raised this issue in the abstract, but here is a real person asking whether he should take the money. This gentleman was sufficiently unsure as to what the letter meant and how certain or otherwise the money was that it created genuine uncertainty for him. He did not know whether to say yes to an extra £35 a week, plus back-pay of nearly £800. We advised him that he should take the money, but that there was a risk that the Government would want some of it back. Fortunately, he had his pension forecast, so it was pretty clear that there would not be a problem.

What is bizarre is that the Government were able to send out letters two years ago to tell people what they were entitled to—presumably the letters are still on file somewhere—with what was presumably rather prehistoric technology and yet, knowing that the new system was not working, they could not even make a guess at their SERPS pension.

Mr. New got round the problem. He was given £10 in compensation, as 160,000-plus retirement pensioners have been. Mr. New said that he rang up and asked whether it was a joke. The person at the other end of the line said, "Well, yes. It is rather a joke." Mr. New was offended by the £10, but that is all that he has had so far.

Mr. New now has some money—he has back-pay to his birthday, just before Christmas, and he is getting what the Government thought that he should be entitled to in SERPS when they wrote to him two years ago. However, Mr. New, as far as I am aware, went on working and accruing SERPS entitlements. Therefore, even now and despite all the fanfare, he is still not getting his full SERPS pension. Every week, another pound or two is being added to the arrears that the Government owe him, to say nothing of the £800 back-payment, which he has just received and on which he has had no interest.

The key question for the Minister is, when will Mr. New and other constituents who have had clerical estimates of their SERPS entitlements get the correct amount? When will they know that they do not have to pay anything back? When will the problem be resolved for those people?

Secondly, when will the interest be paid? The case of Mr. H from Yate in my constituency illustrates that problem. He had the misfortune to be 65 in September 1998. He had a rather larger SERPS entitlement—I think, of the order of £45 a week—and he had also sent off for a pension forecast a couple of years earlier. He knew that the figure was too low. He told me that he could not manage on the basic state pension alone, so he deferred his retirement. He took a part-time job to make ends meet. Essentially, a year of his life, when he would perhaps have wanted to spend time with his family, was spent trying to make ends meet because of a Government bungle.

Let us remember that we are talking about someone who was told a couple of years ago that he was entitled to that £40 to £50. The Government knew about it then and yet they were incapable of delivering it to him last September. Mr. H delayed until late spring or early summer before seeing me. I initiated contact with the Minister and Mr. H has received a lump sum of a little under £2,000. When one is talking of those sorts of figures, one starts to ask about interest forgone. Mr. H, too, was getting only a clerical estimate of SERPS entitlement—he is still not getting his full pension.

When will the interest be paid and how much? What interest rate will the Government use? Pensioners often get a reasonable rate of return on their savings in specified investments. What is more to the point, they may have had to run down savings that were in illiquid forms, which they had perhaps planned to use later in their retirement. How confident is the Minister that my constituent will be properly compensated for interest forgone? What additional compensation will he receive for having to defer his retirement? Doing so changed the course of his life—how will the Government compensate him?

Having asked when clerical assessments will be sorted out and when interest will be paid, my third question is when will newly retired pensioners have their pensions handled right on day one, on their 65th or 60th birthday? As the Minister knows, I tabled several written questions in the week before this debate to ensure that I was as well informed as possible. I asked for an update of the April written answer on progress in rectifying the problems with NIRS2, the national insurance recording system. Much to my regret, he adopted increasingly obfuscatory tactics by referring me back to the answer given in April. That raises some interesting questions. Have there been no developments worthy of report since April?

Mr. David Rendel (Newbury): It has got worse.

Mr. Webb: It is difficult to say; I hope that the Minister will tell us. As he suggested, I looked back at the April answer. In response to the hon. Member for North Thanet (Mr. Gale), no less a person than the Secretary of State said:

> "It is planned that the Benefits Agency's review of cases will be completed in six months."—[*Official Report*, 21 April 1999; Vol. 329, c. *591*.]

That suggests that all the pensions payments problems will have been sorted by 21 October. I do not think that that promise refers to the age-related rebates for personal pensions. I think that that is a different matter but I may be wrong. My reading of the written answer is that six months from that date, everyone currently receiving a pension will be getting the right amount and that newly retired people will get the right amount from day one. The Minister is welcome to vary or clarify that pledge. I am worried that he felt that referring back to that written answer was an adequate response, given that the Public Accounts Committee thought that things had not stayed the same but got worse. Its report criticised the Contributions Agency for not owning up to the fact things were getting worse. I am alarmed by the Minister's reticence, although I understand it.

My fourth question is who foots the bill for compensation and how much will it be? I have asked several questions about that but the reply has been that the Government will not know until they have finished. They do not yet know how much it will be. Some 167,000 pensioners have had £10 each, so the Government have already spent £1.7 million, to say nothing of compensation of more than £30 million paid to personal pension providers. That is £20 million less than the Treasury thinks that it has gained by holding on to the cash. There is a £20 million black hole there. Who will pay for it?

I thought that the whole point of the private finance initiative was to transfer risk from the public to the private sector. There is no point in having the public sector underwrite PFI projects because that is the only incentive that the private sector has to perform. I do not know the nitty-gritty of the contracts between Andersen Consulting and the Contributions Agency but the whole thing seems to have been handled appallingly. I hope that the Minister will assure us that Andersen Consulting will foot the bill to the extent that the problems are of its making. The public sector deserves no less. The House would be worried about any further PFI projects if a precedent is set whereby the private sector partner can perform appallingly—it seems to have been a shambles on both sides—without footing the bill. I hope that the Government can assure us that, apart from their little windfall in respect of age-related rebates, the compensation and the interest forgone will be paid by the private sector.

I want to pass on to the Minister something that one of my constituents told me. Mr. H rang the Benefits Agency in Bristol to ask if it could help him with his problem. It was at a loss and did not know what to say. He heard one of the people there say, "help" on the phone. I am alarmed that in 1999, when the problem was well known to Ministers, officials of the Department concerned could not brief members of the public.

I have heard something more alarming. When Mr. H recently phoned the Contributions Agency to say that he had been told that the new system was in place, someone told him that it had been running for three months but that half of what it was getting was still rubbish and had to be sent back. I find that deeply depressing. Is the Minister aware that those receiving the output from that computer hold that view? I understand that the slogan is "garbage in, garbage out". I fear that that is still the case for far too many people.

Finally, what lessons have been learned from this fiasco? I understand that supervision of the Contributions Agency is now being transferred to the Inland Revenue and the Treasury. However, I hope that the buck will not be passed in that process. I am glad to see that the Minister of State, Department of Social Security is responding to the debate—presumably because he is responsible for paying out the money, even if he is not responsible for working out how much should be paid. I assume that that is the distinction.

What lessons have been learned? Who is leading the internal inquiry? What are the terms of reference? What is the time scale for the inquiry? Whose head is on the block? I sense that an inquiry might not be taking place; there has been no mention of one in the written answers. However, 250,000 pensioners have been short-changed by the Government. The Government's glossy annual report contains plenty about what they have done for pensioners, but one would have thought that many pensioners would been happier to have had their pension paid in full and on time—instead of all the gimmicks.

It is vital that lessons are learned from this fiasco. I am pleased that the Minister has plenty of time both to answer my questions and to tell us how he will prevent such a fiasco from ever happening again. I look forward to his response.

8.56 pm

The Minister of State, Department of Social Security (Mr. Stephen Timms): I congratulate the hon. Member for Northavon (Mr. Webb) on his success in securing the debate; I shall endeavour to respond fully to all the points that he made.

The Government recognise that this is a most important issue, which causes concern and uncertainty for thousands of pensioners throughout the country; we very much regret the inconvenience, the disruption and, in some cases, the financial difficulty that has been caused to them. I welcome this opportunity to update the House on the matter, and to inform hon. Members of the progress that we have made.

I am pleased to be able to tell the House that the difficulties are now significantly behind us. However, it will take some months to complete checks on all the benefit claims awarded when the problems were at their height last year. Only then will we be able to state for sure that people have received all the benefit that is due to them. However, we are determined that that will be the result of the process.

I acknowledge the concerns that have been raised by the hon. Gentleman and by scores of other hon. Members who, like him, have written to me about these difficulties on behalf of their constituents. I will respond to the points that have been raised in a moment. However, first, I remind the House of the background.

The delays that we have heard about in this debate resulted from problems with the replacement of the national insurance recording computer system—the replacement is known as NIRS2. The contract to deliver NIRS2 was awarded, and the project delivery structure was set up by the previous Conservative Government in 1995—as the hon. Gentleman acknowledged. The system was initially supposed to be fully operational by 10 February 1997. However, it was not and, at the general election in May 1997, we inherited a project that was already facing substantial difficulties.

Our strategy for dealing with it has been twofold: first, to minimise the problems for those who depend on contributory benefits; secondly, at the same time, to secure the substantial long-term gains offered by NIRS2 for the effective operation of the benefit system. We wanted to achieve both those objectives, so we implemented robust contingency arrangements to minimise disruption for people, including making emergency payments and carrying out clerical calculations of benefit entitlement. By Friday, clerical calculations had been carried out in more than 13,600 cases.

I want to clarify one point made by the hon. Gentleman. When a clerical calculation has been carried out, we can be pretty confident that the result is correct. Clerical calculations offer a quicker way of getting to the answer than waiting for the current process of reviewing all claims to end. In cases where a clerical calculation has been carried out, the correct benefit is already in payment—in other words, it is not an estimate.

We were particularly anxious to minimise the serious financial difficulties that could have arisen for some—the hon. Gentleman has quoted a couple of cases. We have taken steps to compensate those who have been adversely affected, despite our contingency arrangements. As the hon. Gentleman has pointed out, more than 160,000—in

[Mr. Stephen Timms]

fact, 167,000—pensioners were compensated for delayed payments between April and June this year, with further payments under the Department's special payment scheme automatically being considered as cases are reviewed. When the review process has been completed, everyone will have received all the pension and other contributory benefits due to them, together with any compensation due.

The hon. Gentleman has asked what interest rate is payable in those circumstances. The normal building society rate is applied; however, no compensation is payable unless certain conditions are met. First, the delay must have been at least eight months; that is the normal rule applied by the Department in respect of delays in retirement pensions. Secondly, the amount that has not been paid must be at least £100. Thirdly, the amount of compensation payable based on building society interest rates must be at least £10. Those are the standard rules applied by the Department in respect of compensation for delayed payment of retirement pensions.

Mr. Rendel: What would happen in a case of a pensioner being able to prove that, for one reason or another, he had to withdraw savings from a fund that paid a higher interest than the normal building society interest rate; or he had to borrow money and so had to pay interest at a considerably higher rate, which he would not have had to do had his pension been paid on time? Would not such circumstances make a case for compensation paid at a rate rather greater than the building society rate?

Mr. Timms: No one has given me any such example, but it is not our intention to vary the long-established rules for compensation in such cases. The procedure is well established and we anticipate that we shall continue to operate it.

It has also been important to ensure that NIRS2 is delivered successfully, so that its potential for supporting welfare reform in future is fully realised. We worked in partnership with Andersen Consulting on a major review of the system and its problems, so as to get the project back on track. I am pleased to be able to tell the House that those efforts have borne fruit: NIRS2 is a powerful system which will enable important improvements to the benefit system to be made quickly and efficiently in future. I have visited the NIRS2 installation and spoken to those responsible for its development. I am satisfied that it will, in due course, serve us well.

The problems surrounding the system's introduction have rightly been the subject of considerable interest. As the hon. Member for Northavon said, the Public Accounts Committee took evidence from those involved and rightly expressed its concern about the impact of the delays in finalising the correct rate of benefit in payment. However, the Committee recognised that, without the Government's contingency arrangements, the impact would have been much worse. By and large, the contingency arrangements worked well, which is a tribute to those who operated them.

Let me set out in greater detail how the problems arose; in doing so, I shall answer one or two of the hon. Gentleman's points. In spring and early summer last year, we hoped that it would be possible to introduce the new system during the summer. However, when the system was implemented it became apparent that there were a number of matters to be ironed out before it could be relied on to produce what the Benefits Agency needed. It took some weeks before we were confident about what was being produced.

NIRS2's live facilities for jobseeker's allowance were rolled out on 9 November last year, followed by the other short-term benefit, incapacity benefit, on 18 November. Facilities for the long-term benefits—retirement pension and widows benefit—became available on 6 January this year. NIRS2 has thus been capable of processing new claims to all the contributory benefits since 6 January of this year. The hon. Member for Northavon asked when I expected the system to be able to do that. The answer is that it has been able to do so since 6 January this year.

However, from the beginning of January, we faced a new problem. The hon. Gentleman, who is an expert in these matters, knows that at the beginning of each year, we start to require the national insurance contributions data from the previous tax year in order to establish benefit entitlement. Because of the delays and difficulties since the summer, it had not been possible to load up the data for all those contributions on time.

On 6 January, the system capability was in place, but a large chunk of the data needed was not. About a third of the data had not at that stage been loaded—16 million of the 47 million items for the year. Although the system was capable of processing the claims, the data that it needed to do so were missing in about a third of cases.

The priority at that point was clearly to load up the remaining data as quickly as possible. By the beginning of February, I was becoming concerned about the rate of progress, as there were still 13 million records to go. I commissioned daily reports on the numbers, and during February the number fell sharply, I am pleased to say, to less than 7 million.

Currently, there are just 160,000 records outstanding, the rest having been successfully loaded. In some ways, we are now in a better position than we normally would be at this time of year. The reason is that NIRS2 is a better system than NIRS1 was. Allowing for records that are rejected, as some records always are, and with outstanding queries, NIRS2 has posted about 900,000 more records than NIRS1 had done by a comparable time a year previously. Indeed, the previous year had been a good one for NIRS1. We are now in quite good shape in terms of the data loaded to the system, and we are starting to see improvements in performance from NIRS2, vindicating our commitment to making it work well.

For the 1998-99 tax year, there are 46 million items to be posted. The target is for 98 per cent. of them to be posted by 31 December this year. The national insurance contributions office of the Inland Revenue, which is now responsible for NIRS2, is two weeks ahead of schedule for hitting that target, boosting our confidence that we have a good system for the future.

I and the Government apologise unreservedly to those who have been inconvenienced and, in some cases, distressed by the problems that have occurred. I have no hesitation in putting that apology on the record.

The hon. Member for Northavon referred to a couple of his constituents who had been particularly inconvenienced. I am not aware of the case of the person

whom he introduced as Mr. N but went on to refer to as Mr. New. The hon. Gentleman may want to tell me more about that, and I shall be happy to investigate.

The other constituent whom the hon. Gentleman mentioned was Mr. H, who I think has appeared on HTV West to speak about his problems, so I do not think that there is much reason for anonymity in that case, but I shall respect the fact that the hon. Gentleman referred to him as Mr. H. I know that that case has been resolved. The arrears due to Mr. H were paid within a couple of weeks of the hon. Gentleman writing to me about the difficulties that his constituent faced.

I pay tribute to staff in the Benefits Agency and the Contributions Agency, which is now the national insurance contributions office of the Inland Revenue, and to staff in Andersen Consulting, who have worked extraordinarily hard to resolve the difficulties and have put us in a relatively happy position.

The hon. Gentleman asked about the review process. We have completed about 30 per cent. of the process so far, and I am hopeful that it will be completed by the end of the year. By that stage, we will ensure that everybody has received all of the benefits, plus any compensation, due to them.

Mr. Webb: The Minister has announced a further slippage in the completion date. He said previously that the review would be completed six months from 21 April, which is 21 October. Last week, when I asked him for a report on progress to date, he referred me to the April date. When did he learn about the slippage to the end of December and why did he not have the grace to respond accordingly to my question last week?

Mr. Timms: I am bringing to the House the best current information: the whole process will be completed by the end of the year. Of course, if it is possible to conclude sooner, we shall do so. However, I am advised that we can anticipate the completion of the process by the end of the year.

The hon. Gentleman suggested that more than a quarter of a million pensioners had received incorrect pension payments. That is not the case. Some 285,000 pensioners are having their payments reviewed through this process, but all of those payments were not wrong. Of the 30 per cent. of cases that we have reviewed so far, we have found errors in about 10,000. Thirty per cent. of 285,000 cases is about 90,000 cases, but errors were found in 10,000 of them. Of those, the great majority of pensioners were underpaid, so we shall increase their payments in order to put things right.

However, a small number of pensioners were overpaid and, as the hon. Gentleman said correctly, in those circumstances people have been asked to indicate an understanding that they will need to pay back the overpayment. Matters are in hand to put that into effect. Anybody who has difficulties in the meantime may contact the national insurance benefit task force.

Mr. Michael Trend (Windsor): I seek clarification about what will occur in the case of overpayment. The Minister said, in a rather sinister manner, that he was putting matters in hand. What will happen to people who have been overpaid a relatively modest amount, who have spent the money in good faith because they did not understand the original advice that they should hold back, and who did not know their genuine position? Will the Government pursue such people in law in order to recover the money overpaid?

Mr. Timms: Any such case will, of course, be handled with sensitivity by the agency. However, as I have said—and this was a feature of the speech by the hon. Member for Northavon—people were asked to indicate that they understood that that was a possibility. It was absolutely right that that should have occurred, and payments were made on that understanding.

The national insurance benefit task force was set up to help resolve some of those difficulties. It may be helpful if I read into the record both the address and the telephone number of that task force, which has been established to assist people who are experiencing difficulties or who have queries about the problems that we have discussed this evening. The postal address of the task force is: PO Box 6, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE98 1XB. The telephone number is: 0845 6010586, which is a local-call-rate number. Anyone who has a query about these matters is welcome to call that number at any time between 8.30 am and 4.30 pm, Monday to Friday.

People also have the option of contacting their Member of Parliament, as hundreds of them have done. If their MP then writes to me, I can give an assurance that problems such as those that have been highlighted by the hon. Gentleman will be dealt with promptly, as they were in the case of Mr. H. The hon. Gentleman wrote on 16 April, and full payment was made on 30 April. The hon. Gentleman will therefore accept that the issue was swiftly resolved once it had been drawn to our attention. It is our firm intention that such hardship cases should be resolved speedily.

Mr. Webb: The Minister is being very generous in giving way. I want to be absolutely clear about the situation for people who will retire in future. Is he saying categorically that anyone reaching 60 or 65 will now get the correct, full pension from day one, and that we shall not have to write to him henceforth about new cases?

Mr. Timms: I certainly hope so. In the old days with dear, old NIRS1, there was the occasional error, and I cannot give an absolute commitment that there will never be an error in future. I certainly hope that there will be none. I can tell the hon. Gentleman that the NIRS2 functionality is now fully in place and there is no problem in calculating the benefits, as there certainly was until 6 January, and then, because of lack of data, for several months earlier this year. I can give the hon. Gentleman the reassurance that he seeks.

I was asked how much compensation we expect to pay in total. I said that £1.67 million has been paid in the £10 payment category. We estimate that ultimately about £7 million of compensation will be payable. About £3 million of that will be paid through the £10 special scheme, and £4 million under the Department's normal compensation arrangements, which I outlined earlier in my remarks. To date, we have paid a total of £1.853 million in compensation of both kinds.

[Mr. Timms]

The hon. Gentleman asked what we were doing about the Public Accounts Committee's recommendations. We are considering them carefully and they will be taken forward by the Inland Revenue, which is now responsible for managing the NIRS2 system in discussion with Ministers. The hon. Gentleman referred to an inquiry. Clearly, that will be a matter for Ministers to consider in their response to the recommendations in the report.

The final point that I want to make relates to the hon. Gentleman's important question about what lessons have been learned from the experience. The most important lesson relates to how such projects should be developed in the future. There was a fundamental flaw in the way in which this project was set up because it was thought that somebody needed to write a detailed specification and hand it over to a firm of consultants. They would then be sent away for a couple of years to build the system according to the specification. On 10 February 1997, the consultants would be brought back to plug in their machine and everything would work.

Of course, that is not a sensible way to try to build an information technology system of this complexity. It might make sense if one is building a bridge or developing a project of the kind that is frequently associated with the private finance initiative. We need a much more partnership-based approach to projects so that throughout the project's development, there will be a close relationship between, in this case, the Department of Social Security or the Inland Revenue and the people doing the work. Changes that are needed over the life of the project and issues that are raised during the work can then be quickly and sensibly tackled. We can then have confidence that the resulting system will meet the Department's requirements.

That is the biggest lesson to be learned from the problems that we have had with NIRS2, and we are building it into our future planning for modernisation. There is a great need to modernise the systems on which our benefits system depends. We inherited systems that were pretty antiquated in a number of respects, but we have to modernise them in a way that does not lead to a repeat of the difficulties that we have experienced with NIRS2.

Mr. Webb: Will the Minister clarify his response to two of the issues that I raised specifically? First, who will pay the compensation? I am not sure that he told us whether Andersen Consulting will face a big bill and I should be grateful to an answer on that. Secondly, although he said that an inquiry would be the Inland Revenue's business, can he confirm that no inquiry has yet started?

Mr. Timms: On the latter point, we have not yet responded to the recommendations of the Public Accounts Committee, but we shall do so. A great deal of work has gone into learning the lessons of what happened with NIRS2. Andersen Consulting has already paid some compensation because of the delays in the project and the matter of whether further compensation will be payable has not yet been determined, but the public purse will be the source of funding for compensation.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at twenty-one minutes past Nine o'clock.

House of Commons

Tuesday 27 July 1999

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

PRIVATE BUSINESS

CITY OF LONDON (WARD ELECTIONS) BILL *(By Order)*

Order for further consideration, as amended, read.

To be considered on Tuesday 19 October.

Oral Answers to Questions

SCOTLAND

The Secretary of State was asked—

Liaison Arrangements

1. **Mr. Michael Fabricant** (Lichfield): If he will make a statement on the operation of the substantive liaison arrangements between the Government and the Scottish Executive. [91598]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (Dr. John Reid): Liaison arrangements will be set out in concordats which will guide working relations between the United Kingdom Government and the Scottish Executive on a range of matters.

Mr. Fabricant: I wonder whether, when the Secretary of State says that the arrangements "will be" set out in concordats, he means that the concordats do not exist. Is that why there is so much confusion between his powers and those of the First Minister? Is that why, in the past two weeks, there have been so many turf wars between him and the Scottish First Minister?

Dr. Reid: The concordats will be published once they have been agreed by the Scottish Executive and the Government. I can tell the hon. Gentleman that the concordats do exist. They are there to promote concord between the two Parliaments in their working relationships.

I am very sorry that the Opposition, including the Scottish National party and the Tories, have failed in their 20-year struggle to stop devolution, but the Scottish Parliament has been established; there is now a partnership of Parliaments; and it will succeed to the benefit of the Scottish people.

Mr. Ernie Ross (Dundee, West): Does my right hon. Friend agree that if changes are to be made to the way in which Parliament operates they should be made on a considered basis, not on the basis of a narrow, populist appeal to English nationalism?

Dr. Reid: Yes. As my hon. Friend knows, those of us who have promoted the devolution settlement have spent most of our political life arguing for the unity of the United Kingdom and against the separatists and their narrow brand of nationalism. Unfortunately, the mirror image of that narrow brand of Scottish nationalism seems to be creeping into the leadership of the Conservative party, which is fanning the flames of English nationalism.

Of course, in the wake of the devolution settlement, we shall have to change the superstructure. We are considering how we deal with matters in this House. Of course we shall reduce the number of Scottish Members of Parliament. Of course we shall consider, once the Parliament and devolved legislatures have settled in, the role of the Secretary of State.

However, the one area that we should be very careful about tampering with is the essence of the unity of the United Kingdom, and that is ensuring that every Member of Parliament in this House is equal and stays equal.

Mr. Michael Moore (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale): In the annual report published by the Government yesterday there is a reference to unease at devolution. Does the Secretary of State accept that some of that unease is occurring because of an apparent turf war between his new Scotland Office and the Scottish Executive? Does he maintain, as he did at last week's Scottish Affairs Committee, that this is an entirely media-inspired turf war, or does he think that it is about time that politicians at all levels reversed the tanks off one other's lawns?

Dr. Reid: The unease that was referred to in the report—I take it that the hon. Gentleman has read the report, not just the media reports of it—was the potential unease among those people who might see the most radical constitutional steps for three centuries taking place and wonder whether Scotland might fall under the hands of the incompetent narrow nationalists who sit on the Benches behind him. I can assure him that he can be well at ease on that basis. We have no intention—nor have the Scottish people—of allowing Scotland to be divorced from the United Kingdom.

As regards the relationships between this Parliament and the Scottish Parliament, I can assure the hon. Gentleman that there will be a partnership of Parliaments. They are united by the Labour Government leading here at Westminster and the Labour-led Administration in partnership in Holyrood.

Mr. John Home Robertson (East Lothian): When my right hon. Friend next meets a member of the Scottish Executive, will he express his support for the stated intention of our right hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow, Anniesland (Mr. Dewar) to go on fighting against all forms of small-minded nationalism for as long as it takes? When he meets the First Minister, will he pass on some advice—that there is nothing like the prospect of a reshuffle to concentrate the loyalty of all and sundry?

Dr. Reid: I can assure my hon. Friend that nothing is further from my mind than a reshuffle. As regards the

recent speculation, I think that we would all be wise to remember exactly what is happening. For nearly two decades, there has been an alliance of forces against the devolution settlement. That settlement is the partnership of Parliaments. When we hear the names of Forsyth, Tebbit, Hague and the SNP, we recall that they have spent most of the last 20 years arguing against the establishment of one part of that settlement: the Scottish Parliament. They have utterly failed to stop that, and they are now directing their attack towards the other half of the settlement: Scottish partnership in the United Kingdom at the UK parliamentary level. We will not allow them to succeed in that attack, nor will the Scottish people. The partnership of Parliaments will succeed.

Mr. Alasdair Morgan (Galloway and Upper Nithsdale): In his liaison role with the Scottish Executive, will the Secretary of State discuss the remarks made yesterday by the First Minister's official spokesman to the effect that the other Ministers in the Scottish Executive are unproven and unqualified? Does he agree that Scotland would be better served by less spin of that kind and a little more action?

Dr. Reid: Matters concerning Scottish Ministers are for the Scottish Parliament. Let me tell the hon. Gentleman how the Scottish people would be better served. Instead of the leader and parliamentary leader of his party putting in no appearance in this House, voting on nothing in this House, and asking no questions in this House, even during the period when the Scottish Parliament has not been sitting, SNP Members should stop taking money from a Parliament in which they do not believe, for what they are not doing.

Mr. Andrew Mackinlay (Thurrock): Although it is recognised that some issues relating to the economy and infrastructure are the legitimate business both of Members of this Parliament and of Members of the Scottish Parliament, what guidance has been given to my right hon. Friend's colleagues in government regarding representations that might be made by SMPs in relation to such matters as the Child Support Agency and immigration, which should be jealously guarded as the locus and jurisdiction of Members of the Parliament here at Westminster, and should not be the business of SMPs—[HON. MEMBERS: "SMPs?"]—Members of the Scottish Parliament? Can my right hon. Friend clarify the line of responsibility and tell us what advice has been given to his colleagues in government concerning their response to such representations?

Dr. Reid: As I said earlier, there is genuinely a partnership of Parliaments. It is the most radical constitutional settlement for 300 years. There is no route map for it, and no textbook that we can consult. However, I assure my hon. Friend that the First Minister and I are already involved in discussions to see that there is a symmetry of conventions. [HON. MEMBERS: "What does that mean?"] It means that both sides have equal rights and responsibilities. I am sorry that we have to explain such things in words of one syllable to those on the Opposition Front Bench. The rights and responsibilities of each Parliament will be respected. I am sure that we will work for the ultimate benefit of the Scottish people, because I believe that the partnership not only gives them more control over their own affairs in Scotland, but solidifies their partnership in the United Kingdom in a way that has never been done before.

Mr. Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield): May I assure the Secretary of State that when it comes to concord, we certainly desire it? Is it not the case, however, that the concord between him and the First Minister over the past few weeks has been somewhat subsonic? Has not the only means of communication between the Secretary of State and the First Minister been through the parliamentary Labour party—not a source of brotherly love and affection? Why are no concordats in place now, when the relationship should be up and running? Is the Secretary of State privy, for instance, to the internal paper round of the Scottish Executive? If not, is he not effectively cut out of all contact with decision making, save that which the First Minister wishes to give him? Is it not time to get away from the turf wars and lay some proper and open foundations for the relationship?

Dr. Reid: Last week, apparently, Mr. McLetchie—who purports to lead the rump of the Conservative party in Scotland and is doing his best to disrupt the link between Scotland and the Union, which may be of interest to the hon. Gentleman—claimed that I was too powerful. The claim from the Opposition today is that I am not powerful enough. Once they have sorted out their line on my status, I shall respond to the hon. Gentleman's question.

On the concordats, the reason for the delay, as I explained in great detail to the Select Committee, is that they are inextricably linked to the memorandum of understanding. The memorandum of understanding is not between one Administration—the Scottish Executive—and the Government. It is between all devolved Administrations and all Departments of Government—including the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland and the proposed devolved Assembly there. It may have escaped the hon. Gentleman's notice that there has been some difficulty in recent weeks in reaching the final decision on the Irish situation. That is the main reason for the delay. There is no conspiracy.

I would merely make one further point. The hon. Gentleman and the SNP like to dwell on personalities, which is a sure sign that they have nothing whatever to say on policy, and the longer they deal in soap-opera politics, the more obvious to the Scottish people that fact will become.

Reserved Powers

2. **Mr. Tom Clarke** (Coatbridge and Chryston): If he will publish a guide for the public on the reserved powers relevant to Scottish matters and how they are dealt with in the House. [91599]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (Dr. John Reid): A range of important issues are reserved to the UK Government. Many of those are of crucial importance to ordinary people's day-to-day lives in Scotland—for instance, employment and taxation policies, social security benefits, occupational and personal pensions and the new deal. That is why, before the devolution referendum, each household in Scotland received a leaflet

summarising the reserved and devolved matters. Further information was issued ahead of the 6 May 1999 elections.

Mr. Clarke: Despite the confusion that the chattering classes have sown in the Scottish media, I welcome what my right hon. Friend says about issues such as taxation, social security and other matters which remain the clear responsibility of this House. Given that Government policy and the reserved powers that we have retained and their impact on the daily lives of all the Scottish people are of supreme importance, will he continue to reassure the Scottish people that this Parliament will protect their interests, working in partnership, but very much a part of the United Kingdom?

Dr. Reid: Yes, I can assure my right hon. Friend of that, and I can also assure the Scottish people that Labour Members of Parliament from Scotland will be here to involve themselves in ensuring that their interests are protected. When the people of Scotland listen to the criticisms that have been levelled by the leader of the Scottish National party and its parliamentary leader—[HON. MEMBERS: "Where are they?"] I see that the leader of the SNP is not here today again. As that hon. Gentleman is so interested in my role, I checked how many times since 2 July he had asked a question in the House—remember, this is when the Scottish Parliament is not sitting—and the answer was none at all. I checked how many times he had taken part in a debate, and the answer was none at all. And I checked how many times he had voted, and up until yesterday morning the answer was none at all—and I suspect that after the past 24 hours, it is none at all again. As I have said, people will want to ask what, exactly, moneys, allowances and Short money from this Parliament are being paid to the SNP for, since SNP Members are taking money from a Parliament in which they do not believe for something that they are not doing.

Mr. Michael Fallon (Sevenoaks): Will the Secretary of State confirm that he has reserved for himself 200 civil servants and a new official residence in Edinburgh, and that he has creamed £5 million off the Scottish block to be spent at his personal discretion? Why should the English taxpayer have to featherbed all that empire building in Edinburgh and overlapping extravagance between two of the Queen's rival Ministers?

Dr. Reid: The hon. Gentleman lives up to the Tory slogan, "Never get one thing wrong when you can get three wrong." First, I have not reserved to myself 200 civil servants. At the moment I have 50 and I may have more than 100 at the end of the day, compared with 4,200 for the Scottish Parliament. I have heard that called empire building, but it will surely be the first empire where the leader will know each member by his or her first name. Secondly, I have rejected the idea of a separate residence, and that is precisely why I have authorised negotiations on offices in Edinburgh where 20 of the 26 rooms will be allocated to civil servants. I did not want a separate residence. Ill-tutored though the hon. Gentleman may be from his reading of the English papers, he does not improve himself by reading some of the Scottish papers.

Dr. Norman A. Godman (Greenock and Inverclyde): My right hon. Friend the Member for Coatbridge and Chryston (Mr. Clarke) raises an important issue concerning the education of the public not only in relation to our powers and his powers but in relation to the powers of other elected representatives and the matters best dealt with by them. Are not constituents occasionally a little confused about the respective responsibilities of elected representatives? Do we not therefore owe it to them to provide them with information about who is the best representative to approach with a problem concerning the CSA, the social security system or whatever?

Dr. Reid: My hon. Friend is right. I have never said that there is a simple solution to all those problems. We have to consider the fact that more guidance might be necessary, but, if we are in the world of grown-up politics, we should realise that we cannot carry out constitutional change of such magnitude without having to work through problems. The First Minister and I are attempting to do that—in a businesslike fashion and in partnership. I believe that that partnership is immensely beneficial to the Scottish people and it is certainly their preference. The one thing they want is people working together in partnership; the one thing they oppose is divorcing Scotland from the United Kingdom.

Mr. Andrew Welsh (Angus): The Secretary of State's Department has fewer responsibilities than at any time in its history, so why is he amassing an army of up to 130 civil servants with an annual budget of £5 million taken from the Scottish Parliament, which could be better spent by it in providing services for the Scottish people? Why is he undermining his own Government's devolution settlement while Scottish Executive Ministers are openly and publicly squabbling among themselves?

Dr. Reid: With great respect, may I list the military hierarchy for the hon. Gentleman? An army consists of several thousand people, which is what the Scottish Parliament has. Beneath that is the brigade, which I do not have. Beneath that is the battalion, which I do not have. Beneath that is the regiment, which I do not have. Beneath that is the company, which is what I have. My company consists of about 100 people. The hon. Gentleman seems to be concerned about expense and the £5 million, but he obviously did not notice that all the details were issued by the Treasury on 31 March. They were available to him but, like his colleagues, he was probably not here. If the SNP spent a little bit of time working for its money, it would have been able to find out about these matters. The £5 million to which he refers is 0.03 per cent. of the Scottish Office budget.

Let us consider what the SNP is receiving. I do not mind the hon. Gentleman taking two salaries and two parliamentary allowances, if he does so, but I know—*[Interruption.]* He may not, but I know that the SNP takes two lots of Short money: £134,000 here and £170,000 in the Scottish Parliament. In addition, it voted itself another £1 million in allowances at Scottish parliamentary level. If SNP Members are taking that sort of money, they should do some work here occasionally to represent the interests of the Scottish people.

Sir Patrick Cormack (South Staffordshire): The right hon. Gentleman, who was such a marvellous Minister for the Armed Forces, should not allow himself to become so tetchy merely because he is now a member of a

partnership more improbable than any since Fox and North. For the benefit of everyone concerned, will he devote a little time during the forthcoming recess to compiling a list of those matters for which he is responsible as Secretary of State? He read out a great litany from the Dispatch Box during the last Scottish Question Time, but he was responsible for not one of those matters. We want to know what he is doing for his money.

Dr. Reid: The reference to North and Fox reminds me that we should keep off the subject of foxes in the present context because other people will get tetchy. I was not at all tetchy. If the hon. Gentleman wants me to go through the whole list again I shall do so, but I suspect that he does not. My main role in the House is to represent the interests of the Scottish people in all the reserved matters, which he well knows. My other role is to promote the devolution settlement. I have to play a part in negotiations on payment of the block grant and I also have some residual functions. As the hon. Gentleman well knows, the nature of collective government means that it is important for Scotland to have its interests represented in Cabinet discussions on such matters, and for the position of the Scottish people to be made clear. If the hon. Gentleman tells me that, logically, no one who does not have to make the ultimate departmental decision for anything can play an important role, I would remind him that the total departmental role of the Prime Minister is national security and honours. I hope that he would not suggest that the Prime Minister has no authority or power.

Regional Air Services

3. **Mr. David Stewart** (Inverness, East, Nairn and Lochaber): What discussions he has had on the role of regional air services between Scotland and London in encouraging economic development. [91600]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Scotland (Mr. Calum Macdonald): I have had no such discussions recently, but I am well aware of my hon. Friend's concern, and my right hon. Friend keeps closely in touch with developments in this area.

Mr. Stewart: The Minister will be aware that, today, the Government announced that British Airways can acquire the City Flyer Aviation Company, with the proviso that it gives up slots at Gatwick. He will also be aware of the great problem, at both Gatwick and Heathrow, in providing slots for vital regional services, which are essential for business and tourism. Will he agree to make representations to the Minister for Transport to fight for those slots at Gatwick and Heathrow for vital regional services, such as the Inverness-London route?

Mr. Macdonald: My hon. Friend is well aware of the difficulty surrounding this issue, which is that we have to work within the context of European regulations. We fully recognise the need for the good links that he describes, which is why the Government have commissioned a special study on Scottish airports and aviation, and another study specifically on the links between Inverness and London. I shall pass on my hon. Friend's representations to my right hon. Friend the Minister for Transport.

Miss Anne McIntosh (Vale of York): Does the Minister share my concern that the chairman of Highlands and Islands airport has said that services can be secured from Scottish airports only for people living in Glasgow and Edinburgh? If so, what does he intend to do about it?

Mr. Macdonald: The hon. Lady might be quoting that gentleman slightly out of context. The key point that Mr. Grant was trying to make was that there is concern that the good service between Inverness and Gatwick will be upgraded so that it goes directly to Heathrow, but that that should not be seen as a reflection on the good service that already exists between Inverness and London.

Miss Anne Begg (Aberdeen, South): The air links between Aberdeen and Heathrow are vital to the oil industry. Will my hon. Friend ensure that there is no diminution in the frequency of flights from Aberdeen into Heathrow, or in the volume of the service?

Mr. Macdonald: These are commercial matters for the airlines involved. However, we fully recognise the importance of the links between Aberdeen and elsewhere in the United Kingdom, not just for industry and business connections but for ordinary passengers and tourism to that part of Scotland.

Mr. Menzies Campbell (North–East Fife): Does the Minister recognise that the growth of regional services of that kind depends on economic confidence but also on the confidence of operators and passengers in air safety? In any discussions that he has, will he do his best to resist the Government's half-baked proposals on National Air Traffic Services?

Mr. Macdonald: The Government's proposals are designed to attract new investment to the air traffic control system and, therefore, to improve services and air safety. I hope that the right hon. and learned Gentleman will welcome the fact that, as a result of the Government's approach in tackling these issues on a United Kingdom basis, we shall have two centres, one of which will be in Scotland. Were we in the situation that the nationalists would want, with separate states in the UK, we would not have the benefit of a centre in Scotland providing jobs in Scotland.

Economy

4. **Mr. Russell Brown** (Dumfries): What discussions he had with the Chancellor of the Exchequer on the impact of the Budget on the Scottish economy. [91601]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (Dr. John Reid): I shall discuss that matter with the Chancellor as necessary to ensure that his outstanding management of the United Kingdom economy continues to benefit Scotland, as it has done over the past two years.

Mr. Brown: I thank the Secretary of State for his reply. He will be fully aware that the working families tax credit will be introduced in October. How many Scottish

families will benefit from that measure? Will he make representations to the Chancellor to ensure that families in Scotland are aware of this valuable means of tackling poverty?

Dr. Reid: I commend to the House and to people in Scotland the working families tax credit which the Chancellor intends to introduce. This is another major step forward in ensuring that our economic competence is matched by social justice. More than 140,000 families in Scotland will benefit, with a minimum wage of £200 per week for families with one worker. That is part of our fight for social justice in Scotland, and is in addition to the 200,000 people who benefit from the minimum wage, the £1.8 billion extra on the health service, the £1.3 billion extra going into education, the lowest rate of inflation, mortgages and interest rates that we have had for a long time, and the lowest rate of unemployment in Scotland for 20 years. That is testimony to the competence of the Chancellor and the Government, and is the necessary platform to ensure that the lives of people in Scotland will improve year by year under the Labour Government in partnership with the Labour-led Administration in Edinburgh.

Mr. David Prior (North Norfolk): If the economy in Scotland is being managed so successfully, why are class sizes and waiting lists increasing?

Dr. Reid: The hon. Gentleman is trying to surpass his hon. Friend the Member for Sevenoaks (Mr. Fallon) in getting facts wrong. He may have misread yesterday's press. The Labour Government's first target for Scotland was to deliver the Parliament, which we have done; the second was economic stability, and he will be aware that we have achieved that; and the third was to reduce waiting lists to below 75,000 by 2002. I am pleased that the hon. Gentleman has given me the opportunity to tell the House that we met that target two and a half years ahead of schedule when, one month ago, we reduced waiting lists in Scotland to below 75,000.

Ms Rachel Squire (Dunfermline, West): Does my right hon. Friend agree that tackling low pay and family poverty has been a priority for the Government, unlike the previous Government, who believed that no income level was too low for a family to live on as long as it did not affect them or their supporters? Does he also agree that the minimum wage and the working families tax credit—both introduced this year—will lift thousands of Scottish families out of poverty? Those measures will start to end the national disgrace that we inherited from the previous Government which is that, at the end of the 20th century, one in four children are still living in poverty.

Dr. Reid: I agree with my hon. Friend. There is no greater blight on a civilised society than poverty in families and among children and our senior citizens. That is why I am proud that the Chancellor's custodianship of our economy has allowed people in Scotland the biggest-ever increase in child benefit. I am also proud that we were able to increase the Christmas bonus for pensioners to £100, and that, in addition to the minimum wage, which has lifted hundreds of thousands in Scotland above their previous position, the working families tax credit will benefit 140,000 more families in Scotland, including a considerable number of children. For old folks, families and young people in Scotland, the Labour Government are beginning to make life better than it ever was before.

Regional Aid

5. **Mr. Archy Kirkwood** (Roxburgh and Berwickshire): When he expects to announce the areas in Scotland to be included in the next programme of *(a)* regional development area aid and *(b)* European structural funds; and if he will make a statement. [91602]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (Dr. John Reid): The proposals for a new assisted areas map, including parts of the borders, were announced on 15 July. The safety net for the United Kingdom's coverage secured by the Prime Minister at the Berlin summit enabled the UK Government to propose that 49 per cent. of Scotland's population should be covered by the new map.

As regards objective 2 of the European structural funds, it is important to target the areas to be nominated. Finalising these areas is taking slightly longer than anticipated, but every effort is being made to do so as soon as possible.

Mr. Kirkwood: The reintroduction of regional selective assistance in parts of the Scottish borders region on 15 July was warmly welcomed. However, as I am sure the Secretary of State will acknowledge, not every community in the region can be included in the eligible area map. That puts extra pressure on communities such as Jedburgh in my constituency which have been left out. The local people are perplexed about that, and feel that no one is responding to their needs.

When the European structural funds announcement on objective 2 is made, will the Secretary of State bear that in mind? Will he ensure that the whole Scottish borders region receives some coverage, so that compensating measures can be applied to communities that have not been given assisted area status? Will he also use all his powers to ensure that Members of Parliament are given adequate notice of the announcement, which will probably be made during the recess, and that we do not have to read about it in the newspapers?

Dr. Reid: I will try to ensure that the hon. Gentleman's last request is met to the benefit of hon. Members.

I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments about the assisted areas map. I think that the solution for Scotland was a fair one, which met Scotland's needs and resulted from the very partnership that I mentioned earlier. Not only did the Prime Minister negotiate a safety net for the United Kingdom, but I assure the hon. Gentleman that the First Minister and I worked closely together. I think that the resulting 49 per cent. coverage was very fair. We should bear in mind that the United Kingdom is now much more prosperous than it was in Europe when the last map was drawn up, and that, owing to the present Government's policies, Scotland is now much more prosperous in the United Kingdom than it was. As I say, I think that the settlement was fair.

As for objective 2, I cannot give the hon. Gentleman guarantees in regard to areas. We must ensure that the method of targeting is as efficient as possible. Because

we are now more prosperous, we can expect a diminution in the number of people who will be covered in Scotland. I will, however, attempt to ensure that the hon. Gentleman's comments are brought to the attention of all who are involved in the planning.

Mr. Douglas Alexander (Paisley, South): I welcome the world-based approach to regional selective assistance, but would the Secretary of State be willing to meet me to discuss the impact of the new approach on my constituency?

Dr. Reid: My hon. Friend has already raised the matter with me informally, and had the courtesy to tell me that he would ask me about it today. I know how keen he is to ensure that the interests of the people of Paisley are protected. I will certainly meet him but, as I think he will accept, the settlement regarding the assisted areas map was very fair from our point of view. We worked it out in partnership with our colleagues in the United Kingdom Parliament.

When a final announcement is made, it will be possible to make some technical adjustments to the map, but I do not hold out the probability of major adjustments.

Websites

6. **Mr. Paul Flynn** (Newport, West): If he will set up new websites for Government information on constitutional changes affecting Scotland. [91603]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Scotland (Mr. Calum Macdonald): We are in the process of establishing a new website designed to illustrate the work of the Department. In addition, information on devolved matters is available on the Scottish Executive website.

Mr. Flynn: I am delighted that my question resulted in such swift action.

Will my hon. Friend assure us that the new website will be more engaging and more journalistic than many of the other Government websites? I do not know whether he had a chance to meet members of a group which is devoted to the cause of increasing use of the internet by the elderly, and which operates under the intriguing name Hairnet. They rightly argue that the elderly have most to gain from the increased use of the world wide web, along with those who are housebound, disabled or infirm. If those people can be introduced to the world wide web, they will have opportunities to roam the wonderful prairies of information and find out about things as exciting as the progress of the Scottish constitution.

Mr. Macdonald: I should be delighted to receive further information about Hairnet, or Airnet. The website that we are developing was intended to come into operation during the next couple of weeks, but we want to have another look at it with the aim of making it a wee bit more "jazzy"—more interactive, and more useful to those who we hope will use it. It will be particularly useful to the groups mentioned by my hon. Friend, but it will also be useful to those—not just in Scotland but throughout the United Kingdom—who are interested in both the operation of the constitutional settlement and the specific work of the Scotland Office.

Mr. Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield): I am delighted to hear that the Scotland Office website will come back into operation after the disappearance of the Scottish Office one. Can the Minister help the House a little?

In answer to an earlier question, the Secretary of State described some of his roles—a much more modest list than the one that he gave a month ago. Will the website tell us how he carries out his job? For example, is he privy to the paper round of the Scottish Executive? Is that how he obtains his information on the day-to-day running of Scotland? Will that be on the website?

In addition, will the website identify what all his staff—that small company—are actually doing, what their remit is, what Departments they are covering, and whether they are duplicating the roles of civil servants in London, or of civil servants within the Scottish Executive? Will all that go on the website so that we can all know exactly what is happening?

Mr. Macdonald: The hon. Gentleman seems to be making great play of the fact that we do not see every paper that passes round the Scottish Executive. He knows that that is the convention even within Whitehall: we do not have access to all the different papers that float around different Departments, either. Departments share papers with each other for specific purposes. The Scotland Executive shares information with us for a specific purpose as well—so that we can represent effectively the interests of the Scottish people within the United Kingdom Government, as my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State said.

Ministerial Responsibilities

7. **Mr. Tam Dalyell** (Linlithgow): If he will list the matters in respect of which he has a shared role with the First Minister and the Scottish Executive. [91604]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (Dr. John Reid): My role is quite distinct from that of the First Minister and the Scottish Executive. My main responsibilities are to represent Scottish interests in reserved areas within the Government and to promote the devolution settlement to Scotland. In doing so, I am responsible to this Parliament. What I share with the First Minister is a common interest in promoting the well-being of Scotland within the UK.

Mr. Dalyell: In respect of the fire service—a part of the shared role—what response is there to the concerns of the Edinburgh fire master, Colin Cranston, about the future of progression core training at the fire service college at Moreton-in-Marsh?

Dr. Reid: As my hon. Friend will know, the future of the fire service college is a matter for my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for the Home Department. However, he will take full account of the views expressed in the context of the prior options review of the college at Moreton-in-Marsh. I shall ensure that my hon. Friend's views and those of the fire master are passed on to the Home Secretary. I would not want the West

Moreton-in-Marsh question to become a running sore in this Parliament; I will therefore act on my hon. Friend's representations.

Mrs. Margaret Ewing (Moray): Given that responsibility for elements of transport are shared between here and the Scottish Parliament, when will the Government report on air links be published? When it is published, who will take the decision about regional air links: the Scottish Executive, the Scotland Office, as it is now known, the Department of Trade and Industry, or the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions?

Dr. Reid: I think that it will be the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, but, of course, there will be input from me and the Department of Trade and Industry. As the hon. Lady will know, a full study of regional airports throughout the United Kingdom has been somewhat impeded by difficulties connected with the legal procedures at one particular event in one particular airport. Everyone has been very careful not to transgress in any way the situation as regards terminal 5, lest others could reopen the whole inquiry and stop the terminal, but progress has been made on the regional airport studies. I am sure that the my right hon. Friend Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions will be as keen as anyone to get a final paper on the matter as soon as he possibly can.

Mr. Michael Connarty (Falkirk, East): On the issue of shared responsibility between the First Minister and the Secretary of State for Scotland, may I commend the Secretary of State on the way in which he has very firmly laid down a marker in asserting that Scottish constituencies will be vigorously represented—at least by Labour Members—in the United Kingdom Parliament? Will he also confirm that he will work with the First Minister in making it clear to all hon. Members that Scottish Members will continue to play a vital and vibrant part in the United Kingdom Parliament?

Dr. Reid: I can certainly reassure my hon. Friend on both points. First, I have no doubt at all about the vigour and energy that Members of this Parliament—particularly Labour Members from Scotland—will continue to bring to their task. Secondly, I assure him that, as I have been doing, I shall continue working closely and in a businesslike fashion with the First Minister for the benefit of the Scottish people. It goes without saying—but bears repeating—that the Scottish people are extremely well served in their First Minister. He is a man of outstanding integrity and commitment, and ranks with those who have done most to deliver the Scottish Parliament to the Scottish people.

Mr. Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield): I am delighted to hear that the Secretary of State will be working closely with the First Minister. Will the Secretary of State explain whether it is he who will have the unhappy responsibility of putting a veto on inward investment into Scotland, were the Government to decide that such investment was undesirable, or will that responsibility fall to some other Minister at Westminster?

Dr. Reid: The matters to which the hon. Gentleman refers will be dealt with in the concordats that will be agreed between the United Kingdom Government and the Scottish Parliament. The people of Scotland want no great advantages over any other part of the United Kingdom, but fairness in the distribution of resources. I share that aim not only with the First Minister, but, I hope, with the hon. Gentleman himself.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

The Parliamentary Secretary was asked—

Leading Counsel

30. **Mr. Andrew Dismore** (Hendon): If he will introduce measures to regulate the use and costs of leading counsel by litigants. [91628]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department (Mr. Keith Vaz): The Government believe that litigants should be free to choose their advocate—whether barrister, solicitor or other authorised advocate. However, the new civil procedure rules specifically require the court awarding costs to have regard to what is proportionate to the issues at stake and the complexity of the particular case.

Mr. Dismore: Is my hon. Friend aware of the public disquiet over the high fees and restrictive practices endemic in the Queen's counsel system? Does he agree that the time has finally come to get rid of unnecessary double-manning; to pay QCs the rate for the job and not for their title; and to apply the new civil justice principle of equality of arms to advocacy, so that rich companies cannot buy themselves justice by hiring fat-cat QCs, whose services are out of reach of the pockets of their legally aided or conditional-fee funded opponents?

Mr. Vaz: I am aware of the concerns expressed by my hon. Friend and assure him that the new rules, which we know will be followed, are clear. I also assure him that the rank of QC is not only established but is a recognition of distinction that is conferred on senior barristers. If he believes that there is any scope for improvement in the system, the Government will, as always, be happy to listen to him. However, I am satisfied, and the Lord Chancellor is satisfied, that our procedures are proper and appropriate.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): What was the cost to public funds of the use of leading counsel in financial year 1998-99? How does that figure compare with that of the immediately preceding year? What is the hon. Gentleman's best guesstimate of the likely outturn at the end of this financial year?

Mr. Vaz: I am afraid that I do not know the answer to those questions—if I am allowed to say that—but I shall write to the hon. Gentleman and give him all those figures in the detail that he requires.

Court Interpreters

31. **Ms Gisela Stuart** (Birmingham, Edgbaston): What steps his Department has taken to monitor the quality of court interpreters. [91629]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department (Mr. Keith Vaz): With effect from 1 April 1998, the Lord Chancellor's Department, with the magistrates courts, agreed to use interpreters from the national register of public service interpreters whenever possible. The register is administered by the Institute of Linguists, which is responsible for monitoring the quality of the interpreters on the register. In Crown and magistrates courts, the aim is to use only interpreters from the register by the end of 2001.

Tribunals also have an agreement with the Institute of Linguists for the provision of interpreters. With effect from September 1999, in-court assessments will be performed to ensure that interpreters maintain their standards.

In civil cases, it is the responsibility of the individual claimant or defendant to arrange and pay for an appropriately qualified interpreter for his or her own claim or defence.

Ms Stuart: I am grateful for that answer. I am sure that the Minister is aware of correspondence that I have had recently with the Birmingham legal interpreters' steering committee, which expressed its concerns about unqualified court interpreters being used in Crown court cases. That particular situation has been remedied. However, I am concerned that we should address the matter with some seriousness as the Youth Justice and Criminal Evidence Bill, which is making its way through the House, provides for the use of interpreters for witnesses and defendants who have hearing difficulties or a speech impairment. I should be grateful for some reassurance that the measures that apply to court interpreters will be extended to that group of people.

Mr. Vaz: Perhaps my hon. Friend, who speaks at least three other languages, should herself be on the national register. I am aware of the case that she has raised, as was the Department. We do not accept that it is right for interpreters to subcontract their work, which is what happened in that case. Of course it is important that we keep all these services under review, and the feedback from the judiciary and others in the court system will help us to maintain a proper register with all the relevant information. I can also assure my hon. Friend that the other points that she raised concerning the youth justice courts will be taken on board.

Scottish Parliament (Opening)

32. **Mr. Tam Dalyell** (Linlithgow): If he will make a statement on the Lord Chancellor's visit to Edinburgh for the opening of the Scottish Parliament. [91630]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department (Mr. Keith Vaz): The Lord Chancellor attended the opening of the Scottish Parliament in his capacity as Speaker of the House of Lords.

Mr. Dalyell: How does the Lord Chancellor define the phrase elegantly used by Madam Speaker, who referred to a "shared role" between Holyrood and Westminster?

Mr. Vaz: The Lord Chancellor and the Government welcome Madam Speaker's statement as providing helpful clarification for the House.

Mrs. Jacqui Lait (Beckenham): I wish that I could be so eloquent.

When the Lord Chancellor was in Scotland, did he examine the system of Scottish land tenure, and did he return to England determined to introduce at greater speed the system of commonhold—one of the two promises that the Prime Minister made on which no action has yet been taken?

Mr. Vaz: Unfortunately, the Lord Chancellor was extremely busy. He was unable to inspect the hon. Lady's estate and had to come straight back to London to deal with other business. The hon. Lady referred to commonhold, which of course is a manifesto commitment on which she will be hearing from the Government shortly.

Judiciary (Communication)

33. **Mr. Nick St. Aubyn** (Guildford): If he will make a statement on the role of the Lord Chancellor in maintaining communication between the Government and the judiciary. [91631]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department (Mr. Keith Vaz): It has long been recognised that the office of the Lord Chancellor is both a link between the Government and the judges, and a bulwark of judicial independence. The Lord Chancellor, as the responsible Minister, is accountable to Parliament, as the judges could not be, for the overall efficiency of the administration of justice. My noble and learned Friend the Lord Chancellor recently restated this in a speech to the third worldwide common law judiciary conference at Edinburgh on 5 July. I have put a copy of his speech in the Library.

Mr. St. Aubyn: In the first Session of this Parliament, the Lord Chancellor described himself as the Prime Minister's Cardinal Wolsey. He now says that he is the buffer between the Executive and the judiciary. Evidently he cannot perform both roles. If he cannot decide which role he is supposed to be performing, perhaps he should abolish his own position along with that of the other buffers in another place whose role he is abolishing on the grounds that they have no suitable function in the modern democratic age.

Mr. Vaz: I think that the phrase ascribed to the Lord Chancellor came not from him but from Miss Frances Gibb, a journalist with *The Times*. The office of Lord Chancellor carries great authority within the Government. It upholds judicial independence and can mediate between the Executive and the judiciary when necessary. The Lord Chancellor can perform that function because of his seniority in the Cabinet, because he is head of the judiciary and because he is so widely respected in the profession.

Mr. John Burnett (Torridge and West Devon): Will the Minister say whether, in the Lord Chancellor's communications with the judiciary, the subject of a

judicial appointments commission has been raised? What was the reaction of the judiciary to such a commission and how did it feel it should be constituted?

Mr. Vaz: I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will appreciate that I cannot disclose the conversations or correspondence between the Lord Chancellor and the judiciary, as these are matters of confidence. The Lord Chancellor, as he told the Select Committee on Home Affairs last year, has not ruled out a judicial appointments commission. It is not a priority at present, and he will make his mind up in due course.

Mr. Nick Hawkins (Surrey Heath): The Minister, in referring in his initial answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Guildford (Mr. St. Aubyn) to the Lord Chancellor's role as that of a bulwark, showed some sensitivity about the phrase which he ascribed to the distinguished legal correspondent of *The Times*. Whether bulwark or buffer, does not the Lord Chancellor recognise that perhaps his description of himself in his speech to that conference might be greeted by hollow laughter by many members of the legal profession who remember that the Lord Chancellor is perhaps the Prime Minister's oldest crony? Perhaps many members of the legal profession who traditionally have supported the Government party might nevertheless be concerned that this Lord Chancellor does not regard himself as the defender of the legal profession, but is very much in the Prime Minister's pocket.

Mr. Vaz: That is utter nonsense. The Lord Chancellor conducts the various duties of his high office with enormous dignity and integrity. The hon. Gentleman ought to know better.

Judiciary (Independence)

34. **Sir Sydney Chapman** (Chipping Barnet): What steps the Lord Chancellor takes to ensure the political independence of the judiciary. [91632]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department (Mr. Keith Vaz): The Lord Chancellor takes every measure to protect the independence of the judiciary, including by ensuring that our judicial appointments system is based solely on merit. For example, as I shall be announcing later to the House, he has asked Sir Leonard Peach, until recently the Commissioner for Public Appointments, to provide a report to him on the operation of the appointments procedures in relation to Queen's counsel and judicial appointments.

As I said earlier, my noble and learned Friend the Lord Chancellor recently restated the role of his office in a speech to the third worldwide judiciary conference at Edinburgh on 5 July.

Sir Sydney Chapman: I am grateful for that assurance. As planning inspectors are involved in a judicial capacity—albeit on matters relating to town and country planning—does the Minister share my outrage that a recent advertisement asking people to apply to become planning inspectors included the phrase, "Freemasons need not apply"? The Minister may say that this is a matter for the Deputy Prime Minister. However, as it is such an outrageous unfairness, may I ask him to ask the Lord Chancellor to consult the Deputy Prime Minister on the incident?

Mr. Vaz: I have not seen the advertisement so it is extremely difficult to comment on it. As the hon. Gentleman correctly realises, this is a matter for the planning inspectorate and for my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister. However, if the hon. Gentleman sends me the advertisement, I will have a look at it.

Dr. Norman A. Godman (Greenock and Inverclyde): Is not the independence of the judiciary from political sniping particularly important when a judge is conducting an independent tribunal? My question is prompted by the sniping by some at Lord Saville, who is conducting the Bloody Sunday inquiry.

Mr. Vaz: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Of course the judiciary is above party politics. As I have said on numerous occasions in this House, our judiciary is the best in the world. We have people of the highest quality who are full of integrity. It is quite wrong for people to attack judges in that way, knowing that they do not have the means to reply.

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome): Is not it right that independence is best guaranteed by the appointments procedure? Would not it be better if in the appointment of judges there were more transparency; if in the appointment of magistrates we adhered to the system of equity that is in place; and if appointments to the shrievalty were not done at all, as they are a waste of time?

Mr. Vaz: Our system is a good one, and I can see no flaws in it. It produces people of merit on the High Court Bench and in the magistracies. I am happy, as is the Lord Chancellor, for the procedures to continue in this way.

Welsh Language (Courts)

35. **Mr. Gareth Thomas** (Clwyd, West): If he will make a statement on the use of the Welsh language in the courts of England and Wales. [91633]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department (Mr. Keith Vaz): We are making every effort to ensure that a bilingual service is available in Wales, including providing for court hearings to be conducted in Welsh.

Mr. Thomas: I am grateful for that answer. Does my hon. Friend appreciate that there is concern in Wales that his Department has been slow in producing Welsh language schemes as required under the Welsh Language Act 1993? Will the Department recognise the equal validity of the Welsh and English languages in the courts of Wales and, for that matter, England, through practice directions by the courts themselves and in face-to-face contact with the public through the court service?

Mr. Vaz: I hope that my Department is not slow. I have no evidence to suggest that it is not working swiftly on the matter. A draft copy of the scheme is with the Welsh Language Board. We intend to consult on it widely. We are pleased to note that there are several

bilingual judges and that there is a practice direction about the use of the Welsh language. If my hon. Friend has any evidence to suggest that we are not acting as swiftly as we should, will he please let me know? We regard the matter as serious and believe that the practice direction has rightly highlighted the concerns. We want to ensure that the Welsh language is used in court proceedings when people want it to be used.

National Air Traffic Services

3.31 pm

Mr. Bernard Jenkin (North Essex)(*by private notice*): To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the proposed sale of shares in National Air Traffic Services.

The Minister for Transport (Mrs. Helen Liddell): In response to a written question from my hon. Friend the Member for Great Yarmouth (Mr. Wright), the Government have announced today their intention to proceed with a public-private partnership for National Air Traffic Services. A copy of the answer and the response to the consultation document are in the Vote Office and the Library.

This is a new and innovative enterprise, providing a genuine partnership between the public and private sectors and creating a new partnership company that will deliver a safe, modern and efficient air traffic control system for the future. For some time, considerable—*[Interruption.]*

Madam Speaker: Order. I want no running commentary from the Opposition Front Bench while the Minister is making a statement at my request.

Mrs. Liddell: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

For some time, considerable concern has been expressed by many official bodies and individuals about the problems arising from the growth in air traffic. Those concerns have centred on safety, on long-term investment and on management control. In response, the Government have produced radical plans for dealing with air traffic control. We have consulted widely and we are now in a position to announce our proposals.

The public-private partnership for NATS will create a proper separation between the operation of air traffic control and its safety regulation, so as to enhance safety. The operational strength and the safety record of NATS are among the best in the world, but it needs a wider range of management skills and access to capital to meet the challenges of the future, and in particular to cope with the ever increasing rise in traffic.

We want to build on the strengths of NATS, bringing in new management skills, in particular project management expertise; to improve aviation safety; to secure long-term investment of £1 billion over 10 years; and to retain public accountability in a strategic industry. Safety is paramount and always will be.

Last week's report from the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs (Transport Sub-Committee) summed up the matter. The United Kingdom has an excellent safety record and we have to work very hard to maintain it. We must always guard against complacency, but we should also avoid scaremongering. The Civil Aviation Authority's safety regulation group will continue to regulate aviation safety to the highest standards. There will be no profits before safety in the NATS public-private partnership or anywhere else in United Kingdom aviation.

The aviation community, the Select Committee, the former Monopolies and Mergers Commission, the trade unions and others have been calling for years for safety regulation to be separated from service provision. This public-private partnership will create a proper separation between the operation of air traffic control services in the new partnership company and their safety regulation in the separate independent Civil Aviation Authority. It will provide NATS with more flexibility in investment and management decisions, give NATS the commercial opportunities that it lacks in the public sector, provide the right structure to maximise efficiency, and introduce the commercial, financial and project management expertise that NATS needs.

Our new partnership company can do all those things relatively quickly, and only it can provide all those benefits. It will be a real partnership. The Government are retaining a 49 per cent. stake in NATS, while NATS staff will have a 5 per cent. share. There will be an equal element of gifted shares to all employees, with an opportunity to buy more. A private-sector strategic partner will take the remaining 46 per cent. of the company.

The strategic partner will give NATS access to private capital, enable that capital to be utilised to best effect, and supplement NATS' operational strengths with investment and project management skills, and with commercial experience. That will enable the company better to meet the key investment needs that we face in the United Kingdom. Around £1 billion will have to be invested over the next decade. In time, that will provide the ability to grow the company internationally, extending NATS operational excellence worldwide.

The Government's involvement with the new partnership company will continue. We will appoint some of the company's non-executive directors, and there will be a specific requirement for board unanimity on the specific matters necessary for protecting the taxpayer's financial interests, such as the policy for dividends or reinvestment.

The Government will hold a golden share and will have statutory powers to direct NATS to act in a certain way in the event of crisis, war or national emergency, or to enable the Government to protect national security and the United Kingdom's bilateral and international obligations. The joint and integrated civil and military use of air traffic control systems can and will continue under the public-private partnership.

However, the Government and the strategic partner are not the only interested parties. A key innovative feature of the new partnership company will be a new stakeholder council. That will bring together Government representatives, the strategic partner, NATS management, customers and staff representatives in a forum for full and open consultation about the company's plans and strategies for tackling the challenges that we all face.

Operationally, NATS is one of the best air traffic services in the world. We will build on that, and the public-private partnership will guarantee the future of both Prestwick and Swanwick as part of a two-centre strategy. We want to maintain and enhance NATS' operational excellence. We want to build on its strengths by adding new access to private capital so as to ensure more robust investment. We want to access better management to ensure the completion of both the Swanwick and Prestwick air traffic control centres. We want to give the company an edge in the changing international world of air traffic management.

[Mrs. Liddell]

This is a whole new approach to the management of our air traffic control. It embodies a new safety framework, a new public-private partnership, a new form of management structure, a new form of public accountability and regulation, a new commercial freedom giving access to long-term investment, a new stakeholder council representing all the industry, and a new range of employee rights and security.

The Government are committed to establishing United Kingdom air traffic control as a world leader, securing enhanced safety not just in the skies above Britain, but throughout the world.

Mr. Jenkin: Let us be clear that the Minister for Transport did not volunteer her statement. Why must the Government be dragged kicking and screaming to the Dispatch Box to explain the detail of one of their most controversial policies? Why did the right hon. Lady deliberately withhold until this morning the answer to the written parliamentary question due yesterday? Why was it given only after she had briefed the press and after she had been given a free ride on the "Today" programme? What respect does that show for Parliament? When will the Government show some respect for their own Back-Bench Members and the rest of the House?

I have looked forward to today's statement, and I am grateful to you, Madam Speaker, for its occurrence. We would naturally welcome a straightforward privatisation of national air traffic control that gave clear ownership to the private sector and that was properly regulated for safety by the Civil Aviation Authority. We shall examine the small print of the new privatisation very carefully. It has all the hallmarks of another convoluted compromise, like the public-private partnership on the tube, when the Deputy Prime Minister was forced to accept a Treasury-driven deal in which he did not believe.

I have four key questions: what is the nature of the privatisation; who will be in control; what are the implications of possible foreign ownership; and what have been the costs of more than two years of Labour dither and delay?

First, what is the difference between this public-private partnership and privatisation? Does the Minister agree that if something walks like a duck and quacks like a duck, it is a duck? If the Government are transferring 51 per cent. of shares and day-to-day control to the private sector, why is that not privatisation? The trades unions think it is privatisation—so do we; so does the City; and even most of the right hon. Lady's party thinks that this is privatisation.

Is the Minister haunted by Labour's anti-privatisation scare stories from before the election? The Prime Minister then attacked the Conservatives, saying that

"the Government cast around for any hapless part of the public sector to privatise. Air traffic control is floated as a possibility".—[*Official Report*, 16 November 1994; Vol. 250, c. 15.]

That notion was described as crazy by the then Labour transport spokesman, the right hon. Member for Oxford, East (Mr. Smith), who went on to declaim to an ecstatic Labour conference:

"Labour will do everything to block this sell-off. Our air is not for sale."

Where is he today? Why has the Minister for Transport not had the courage to tell her own Back-Bench Members that this proposal is a privatisation?

Secondly, who will be in control? If the Government own 49 per cent., employees 5 per cent. and the private sector 46 per cent., who will actually control the business? Will the right hon. Lady confirm that she intends, as stated in the conclusions to her consultation which were published today, to allow the private sector clear operational control?

Thirdly, why have the Government spun the names of potential bidders in the media, but not—even now—come clean with the House? Will the Minister confirm that the Government are contemplating the sale of the controlling stake in Britain's air traffic control system to a foreign bidder? Will she confirm that the name in the frame is Thompson CSF of France? Has she discussed with the Secretary of State for Defence the crucial questions that that may raise about foreign intervention in matters of United Kingdom national security?

What is the relevant expertise and experience of a French-owned company—40 per cent. of which is, incidentally, French Government-owned? What can that company bring to the deal when France has one of the worst, most heavily unionised and chaotic air traffic control systems in Europe? Is it the third way to privatise over here so that a foreign Government can have a stake over there? Or is this another example of what Scots call the auld alliance?

Finally, why have the Government been dithering for more than two years? Does the Minister not realise that while the Government were searching for a way to spin this privatisation in the media and her Department was missing its slots in the legislative timetable, Britain's air traffic system has been starved of capital investment and has had its investment plans shelved, as is pointed out in today's devastating report from the Select Committee chaired by the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody)? That means that congestion and delays are being stored up for the future so that business men and holidaymakers will be kept waiting in airport lounges or sitting around on aircraft runways waiting longer for take-off because of Labour's years of indecision. Is this not another example of Labour's contribution to a standstill Britain?

Mrs. Liddell: The hon. Gentleman talked about me getting a free ride, but the only free ride I get is when he is at the Dispatch Box. He cannot make up his mind. First, he says that this is privatisation, then he asks who has control. One reason why we did not go down the route taken by the previous Government is the mess of privatisation that they introduced. We saw the mess that they made of Railtrack, which was recently exposed by the National Audit Office. The previous Government left us with a mess that had to be sorted out.

The hon. Gentleman asked why it has taken two years to get this far. It is because we first had to untangle the mess that we inherited and ensure that the Swanwick centre was put back on stream. My right hon. Friend the Member for Hamilton, North and Bellshill (Dr. Reid) had to sort out the mess over the centre at Prestwick because of the botched private finance initiative attempts of the previous Government. The decisions that we have announced today will underpin and safeguard Swanwick and Prestwick.

In his confused response to the statement, the hon. Gentleman raised several scare stories about the future of the national air traffic system. It is precisely because we will not put profit before safety that we have not gone for full-scale privatisation. The Government will retain strategic responsibility for NATS through the golden share. That will be entrenched in any legislation in a way that ensures that our stake cannot be changed in order to go to full-scale privatisation. We are determined to ensure that the safety of air travellers is protected.

The hon. Gentleman asked about foreign control. He seems more prepared to believe what he hears on the radio and reads in newspapers than to read the documentation before him. The Government have not approached any bidders—but yes, several people are interested in our proposals because they see their attractions. There will be not a flotation of NATS, but a trade sale to a strategic partner chosen through a rigorous competitive process that will take into account any questions of national security or of not being suited to the security and safety aspects. There will be stringent suitability tests and we will be able to filter out unsuitable investors of whatever nationality. The Government will maintain the right to veto the transfer of substantial shareholdings.

In addition, by ensuring that the employees of NATS have access to a shareholding, we are recognising their expertise and concern about the future of the service to which they contribute. In doing that, we are also ensuring that their pensions are protected and that they can look forward to the expansion of NATS rather than the haphazard, ill-thought-out proposals of the previous Government, announced by the right hon. Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir G. Young) and reaffirmed in the Conservative party manifesto.

The hon. Gentleman also made a point about why the announcement is being made today. We wanted to make the announcement earlier, but we required a response from EUROCONTROL on the European charging system. That became available last week and a parliamentary question was tabled on Friday. That question was quite clear on the Order Paper, and we answered it this morning. We also ensured that no information about the proposal was made public prior to the answering of that question, tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Great Yarmouth. If the hon. Member for North Essex (Mr. Jenkin) had been awake at 7.10 am—he is plainly not awake at the moment—he would have heard me say to Mr. Naughtie that I could not provide details about the announcement that we would be making later today.

We have secured the future of National Air Traffic Services in a way that protects the safety of the travelling public and allows the expertise of NATS to be available internationally, which it could not be previously. We have witnessed the previous Government's mistakes and we have learned from them. We have been prepared to listen and we have acted.

Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody (Crewe and Nantwich): My right hon. Friend will be aware that it is precisely because safety and the control of our airspace has political and, above all, defence implications that many of us believe that this is a wholly unsuitable organisation to be offered up to the profit motive. If the arrangement goes ahead, what will happen to the independence of airspace planning? As Swanwick is not working and will not, apparently, work for some time, will the taxpayer be left with a heavy contingent responsibility? That would not be acceptable.

Will it be possible to maintain the independence of vested interests for airspace planning, which is tremendously important? Finally, why was the Government's response to my Committee sent to us in the form of a memorandum that cannot be placed in the public domain until it has gone through the Main Committee when, frankly, a Command Paper would have been suitable?

Mrs. Liddell: On my hon. Friend's last point, the Government chose a memorandum as a way of responding quickly and fully to the Select Committee. I make it absolutely clear to the Committee and the House that the Government have no objection to that memorandum being published, should the hon. Lady choose to do so. We chose that method as a means of speedily sending a response to the Committee because we were anxious that these very important issues should be placed fully in the public domain as quickly as possible. No disrespect to the Committee was intended, and we are more than happy for those details to be published.

My hon. Friend asked about the independence of airspace planning. That is preserved. She asked also about the danger of the taxpayer having to make contingency payments for Swanwick. One of the attractive reasons for adopting these proposals is our desire to ensure that the taxpayer will in future be relieved of the costs created by the absolute mess that the previous Government made of the contract for Swanwick. That is not dissimilar to the mess that they made of the channel tunnel rail link, when my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister had to intervene to ensure that there was a proper contract to protect the interests of the British taxpayer.

Mr. Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington): Before the election, Labour said:

"Our air is not for sale."

It is very obvious now that at least half of it is up for grabs.

I have a few simple questions that I hope the Minister will be able to answer. What guarantees can she give that a future Government will not sell the Government's share? What estimates have the Government made of the impact of their proposals on the implementation date for Swanwick? What re-evaluation of the public-private partnership proposals have the Government undertaken, as recommended by the Transport Sub-Committee to—as it said in its report:

"ensure that they are entirely compatible with the safe and expeditious movement of air traffic"?

What ceiling have the Government placed on any bonuses or options that senior NATS management might derive from this sale, so as to reduce the chances of creating any NATS fat cats? Finally, will the Minister comment on the relevant expertise in air traffic services of National Grid, which I understand may be the frontrunner for providing the service, or of any other possible bidders?

Mrs. Liddell: The hon. Gentleman asked several questions. He asked whether any guarantees could be given that no future Government would seek to privatise

[Mrs. Liddell]

air traffic control. As he knows, no Government can bind their successor, but written into the Bill will be a provision to ensure that, should a future Government decide to take that route, further primary legislation would be needed. That is as much of a guarantee as any Government can give about their successor.

Swanwick is now on stream to come into full operation in about 2001-02. The technical handover has taken place and training and testing of the systems is under way. Those arrangements will lead to much better project management, which will help the second centre at Prestwick. A project manager has already been appointed for Prestwick and we are expecting a full analysis of the business case in the next couple of months. Therefore, this proposal will speed up the process of getting a proper two-centre policy under way as quickly as possible.

The hon. Gentleman asked about safety guarantees. As I pointed out in the statement, we intend to secure a separation of the safety responsibilities of the Civil Aviation Authority from the operational responsibilities of the new partnership company. That has been in demand for some time. The Government see the logic of that, which is why we have proceeded in this way.

The hon. Gentleman referred to fat cats. That is an extremely valid point, because the previous Government's privatisations showed that they were prepared to create fat cats at the taxpayer's expense. We shall protect the taxpayer through the Government's shareholding and through the Government's appointment to the new partnership company of directors whose concerns will include the remuneration of personnel of that company.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned the previous Government's privatisation proposals, which, when in opposition, we opposed. We did so because, under the previous Government's proposals, our air would have been for sale. By separating the safety requirements of the CAA from the operational responsibilities of the new partnership company; by ensuring the existence of the golden share and the establishment of the shareholder company; by requiring that the Government appoint non-executive directors to the board of the new partnership company; and by our involvement with EUROCONTROL and the announcement that it made last week on the European charging system, we are in a position to put in place safeguards that would not have been put in place by the previous Government. That is why we have gone for a unique approach in a new partnership company. We have learned the lessons of the mess made of privatisation by the previous Government.

Dr. Gavin Strang (Edinburgh, East and Musselburgh): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the most important requirement facing air traffic control is to ensure that the new centres at Swanwick and Prestwick are successfully brought into operation without further delays? Would it not be better to allow the top management of air traffic control to concentrate on those major technical and managerial issues without being diverted by a major and complex privatisation? As air traffic control in this country runs at an operating profit, if it is the Government's main objective to allow air traffic control to raise money privately for investment, why do they not allow a public sector National Air Traffic Services to borrow in the market in the same way as is envisaged for the Post Office?

Mrs. Liddell: My right hon. Friend has raised a number of issues. He asked about the development of Swanwick and Prestwick—an issue in which he takes a special interest. Through the public-private partnership, we shall be able to ensure that there are no further delays in getting Swanwick and Prestwick on stream. As a result of the previous Government's incompetence, the delays at both Swanwick and Prestwick have been unacceptable. Faced with an increase in traffic of 6 per cent. per annum—8 per cent. last year—we need those two new centres on stream very quickly indeed.

My right hon. Friend asked about the pressures on top management. One reason why we have gone for a public-private partnership is that we want to be able to enhance and enlarge the management expertise within NATS. One considerable difficulty that we experienced when we came into government was the lack of project management at Swanwick. As a consequence of the lessons learned from that, an external project manager was appointed to allow the Prestwick development to go ahead. Rather than hampering top management, introducing a public-private partnership will assist top management to deal with the complex issues that will require £1 billion of investment over a 10-year period—an extremely complex matter.

The right hon. Gentleman—[HON. MEMBERS: "Friend."] Indeed, he is a right hon. Friend. When I was struggling for a way to emphasise how good the Government's proposal was, I looked to the words of my right hon. Friend, who stated on 11 June 1998:

> "This package, taken together, will guarantee the highest safety standards as air transport increases in the future. It will retain a large public stake and golden share in NATS. And it will ensure that NATS can finance its future investment effectively within a secure framework of safety and economic regulation."—[*Official Report*, 11 June 1998; Vol. 313, c. *637*.]

I could not have expressed it better myself.

However, our proposal is not solely a revenue-raising exercise, although the previous Government put a price of £500 million on NATS. Our proposal will allow an opportunity to raise capital much more freely on the international markets, and it will allow it to be done without Treasury constraints. It will allow a degree of flexibility that could not be guaranteed within the public sector. It will also ensure that prudent use of the public finances will enable us to continue with the economic growth that has been secured by the Government through a sensible economic policy, which the Opposition seem now to have adopted.

Mr. John Wilkinson (Ruislip–Northwood): May I tell the right hon. Lady that my constituents, a number of whom work at the West Drayton centre, will be profoundly unimpressed by her attempts to shuffle the announcement through in a written answer the day before the summer recess? On my constituents' behalf, I express my warm thanks to my hon. Friend the Member for North Essex (Mr. Jenkin) for ensuring that the matter is being properly and publicly debated.

The right hon. Lady has no comprehension of air transport safety matters. Is it not the case that countless airlines across the world are owned wholly by the private

sector, are regulated by the appropriate regulatory authorities and perform entirely competently and safely to standards equivalent to those in the public sector? Is it not also a fact that air traffic delays are now running at 10 per cent. of civil air transport movements in United Kingdom airspace? In view of that and the inordinate delays both with the Prestwick centre, which is still in project definition, and with Swanwick, why has not the right hon. Lady come to the House much sooner to put that shambles to rights? Will she bear in mind that there are a number of private sector airports with private sector air traffic controllers that do a perfectly good job with regard to air safety?

Mrs. Liddell: That is the longest intervention that the hon. Gentleman has made without mentioning Europe. He will know, if he has contact with air traffic controllers at West Drayton, that there has long been uncertainty about the future of NATS, largely because of the mess that we inherited from the Government whom he supported. I judge it a matter of some importance to end that uncertainty, so that those who work in NATS can be taken fully into account as our proposal moves forward. Had we received a response from EUROCONTROL earlier than last week, we would have been able to publish the proposals earlier than last week.

The hon. Gentleman spoke about privatised airlines. NATS is not an airline. We seek to take the best of the public sector and the best of the private sector and work together in partnership, with safeguards and controls that guarantee the national interest, security and safety.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned air traffic delays. As he will know if he has visited West Drayton, over the past year NATS has gone to considerable lengths to try to limit the number of air traffic delays over United Kingdom airspace, and has made some improvement. However, the hon. Gentleman makes a valid point about the international impact of air traffic delays.

One of the great benefits of the proposal before the House this afternoon is that it will enable the considerable expertise of NATS to be marketed internationally, so that we can take our experience to other countries which seek to learn from Britain's experience and, in that way, seek to improve air traffic not just nationally but internationally in a way that benefits all passengers.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Madam Speaker: Order. As a number of hon. Members seek to ask a question on the statement, may we have brisk questions and answers so that I can call as many hon. Members as possible?

Ms Sandra Osborne (Ayr): My right hon. Friend said that the speculation over the years about NATS has caused constant insecurity, and I agree—but does she agree that we are now faced with another two years of turmoil while the PPP is introduced? When will phase 2 of the new Scottish centre begin, and how will that be funded? Is my right hon. Friend aware of the early-day motion in my name, signed by 140 hon. Members, calling on the Government to consider in detail a public sector alternative with greater commercial freedom? What action have the Government taken on that? Can she confirm whether the receipts will be used for investment in NATS or for other transport matters? Finally, does she agree that, when hon. Members jet off for their summer holidays, they should ponder seriously the future safety of national air traffic control?

Mrs. Liddell: I have discussed these matters with my hon. Friend, who takes a considerable interest in matters at Prestwick. She mentions the uncertainty that has existed over Prestwick, but she will be well aware of the considerable difficulties in moving ahead with the Prestwick project because of the private finance initiative proposals that we inherited from the previous Government. Now that we have resolved those difficulties with today's announcement, we should be able to press ahead with the Prestwick proposal. It will also allow the management strengthening that is required to process that as quickly as possible.

My hon. Friend also referred to the independent publicly owned company proposal from the trade unions. We considered that in some detail—it contains some excellent ideas—but it would still have meant that NATS would not have had the commercial flexibility to raise internationally the capital required to secure its future in the long term.

With regard to the receipts from the public-private partnership, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has already pointed out that the arrangements mean that the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions has been able to secure an even better settlement in the comprehensive spending review so that we can ensure an integrated transport system that operates in the United Kingdom's interests. Phase 2 of the new centre at Prestwick will be funded under the partnership, and the Government will fund it until then.

Mr. Christopher Chope (Christchurch): Many of my constituents who work for NATS will be confused and bewildered by this muddled statement. Can the Minister come clean with the House about what will happen to the £500 million that will be raised from the sale? Is not the reality that that money is needed to pay for the massive overspend on the Jubilee line, and that that is what is driving this weird Government announcement?

Mrs. Liddell: The massive overspend on the Jubilee line is much more than £1 billion, because of the ineffective contracts that we inherited which could have been designed only by someone who had no experience of drawing up contracts. The hon. Gentleman was a Transport Minister, so he should be hanging his head in shame. Were it not for the overspend on the Jubilee line, we would have been able to release even more expenditure for public transport in London and elsewhere, so we will take no lessons from the previous Government on how to draw up contracts.

Mr. Tony Benn (Chesterfield): Is the Minister aware that her statement owes much more to Mrs. Thatcher than to Labour's manifesto, and that the way in which it was put confirms our fears that the Government distrust the public sector and want to see it mixed up with the third way? Is she also aware that today, Great Western Trains was fined £1.5 million for the accident at Southall two years ago, and that nothing that she says will remove people's doubts about safety when profit runs a service as important as this?

[Mr. Tony Benn]

Is the Minister also aware that it is no comfort to know that the proposal was dictated by the Maastricht criteria, which require restrictions in public expenditure? The money will go towards paying for the Balkan war or keeping income tax down for the richest people, which is the one pledge that has been kept.

Mrs. Liddell: Mrs. Thatcher would never have taken into account the requirements of the employees of NATS. She would never have enshrined the golden share; ensured that there were Government-appointed directors and a requirement for unanimity among the board; put a stakeholders council and a stakeholders agreement in place; or retained statutory powers of direction for key Government interests. Similarly, she would never have ensured that safeguards were put in place to ensure that the taxpayer, as well as the travelling public, is protected. We have learned from the mistakes of Mrs. Thatcher and her supporters, which is why we are putting in place a public-private partnership that will add to the air traffic service, not detract from it.

Mr. David Wilshire (Spelthorne): As one of Heathrow's Members of Parliament, may I congratulate the right hon. Lady on her party's U-turn? May I also congratulate her on adopting sound Conservative and capitalist approaches to providing public services? Will she keep in mind the fact that my constituents who live near Heathrow are far more concerned about aircraft safety than about who owns air traffic control? Will she assure the House that, as a born-again capitalist, she will ignore the socialist dinosaurs on the Benches behind her?

Mrs. Liddell: I do not respond to soundbites. The hon. Gentleman's constituents who live near Heathrow will be able to testify to the safety approach taken by NATS. We seek to build on that and scaremongering from either side of the House will not be appreciated.

Mr. John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington): Hon. Members will be aware that Heathrow is in my constituency. My constituents have more aircraft above their heads than anyone else in this country—and if the proposal is seen to contribute in any way to a reduction in safety, they and the people of this country will never forgive this Government. What has happened to change Government policy in the two years and eight months since a Labour spokesman said, "We will not sell the air traffic control service."? We demand an explanation. In my view, the proposal, which will raise £500 million, is Treasury driven, but we should not be selling the safety of our skies.

Mrs. Liddell: If this Government thought that the proposal would do other than enhance the safety of the travelling public and those who live around airports, we would not have proceeded with it. We see a need for enhanced and strengthened management and more finance in NATS, which will ensure that it has the investment to allow it to deal with the growth in traffic that is taking place. That is precisely why we have proceeded with this private-public partnership. We inherited a situation in which the previous Government had been determined to proceed with a wholesale privatisation that would not have taken safety into account. We have learned the lessons of Railtrack, which they sold for a knock-down price with no concern for safety. We are determined to enshrine partnership in the proposal, taking the best of the public and private sectors so that we can enhance not only safety, but future opportunities for air traffic controllers.

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): I congratulate the Minister on taking this significant first step towards an exciting new future for the air traffic control system. I hope that the Government will continue to move towards an objective that we would support. Will she explain her rationale for the trade sale? Is it a result of her unique experience in the private sector and the lessons that she learned there? As a result of the thrust of her policy, will she consider naming this new service the Ronald Reagan memorial air traffic control service?

Mrs. Liddell: One of the lessons that this Government have learned is never to look to the previous Government when it comes to contracts. The contracts that we inherited—on the Jubilee line, the channel tunnel rail link, Swanwick and Prestwick—were bizarre. The right hon. Gentleman does himself no service in trying to undermine what this Government seek to do in relation to air traffic control. Private sector advisers warned previous Governments about the folly of their privatisation proposals, and his Government were not prepared to listen to them.

Laura Moffatt (Crawley): Does my right hon. Friend accept that, given the rise in traffic around Gatwick airport from 27 million to 40 million, there is understandable nervousness about today's decision? Does she agree that, as the air industry is one of our premier industries, it is important to maintain public confidence? Are the air traffic control systems of any other country under private sector control?

Mrs. Liddell: Countries such as Canada and Switzerland have equity involvement in their air traffic services. We have looked closely at international examples. My hon. Friend says that people are anxious about air safety. I do not underestimate that, particularly given that people saw the mess that the previous Government made of privatisation. That is precisely why we have put, and will continue to put, safety at the centre of our proposals, and why we have put in place strong Government safeguards to ensure that the national interest is given priority.

Mrs. Jacqui Lait (Beckenham): Is the right hon. Lady content that the present air traffic control systems are safe from computer attack? What safeguards does she expect to put in the Bill to ensure that the new owners will retain the integrity of the computer systems?

Mrs. Liddell: The air traffic control systems currently in operation are well tested and tried. The new systems that are being put in place at Swanwick are being subjected to a rigorous process of testing. Technical handover has already taken place, and testing and training are being carried out. The Government will retain a veto over any measures planned by a prospective stakeholder partner in this enterprise which we feel might jeopardise the integrity of the systems. We believe that the safety of

the travelling public is paramount, which is why we pay tribute to those who work in NATS and to the systems that they operate with enormous safety. That should be recognised on both sides of the House.

Mr. Martin Salter (Reading, West): May I put on record my thanks to the Minister for meeting Members of Parliament who represent constituencies under the major flight paths, or who have serious reservations about the proposed public-private partnership?

I have three specific questions for my right hon. Friend. First, given the failure of the Rail Regulator to improve safety standards on our railways following the disastrous decision by the previous Government to privatise our railways, what confidence does she have that the new regulatory framework will be any better? Secondly, why are the air traffic controllers implacably opposed to the public-private partnership? Who knows best about aircraft safety: the people who have given us the safest and most reliable system in the world, or some politicians and a bunch of City investors? Thirdly, what should I tell my constituents who are concerned about overcrowding in the skies above the Thames valley and who were greatly encouraged by the statements by my right hon. Friend the Member for Oxford, East (Mr. Smith) just seven months before the general election?

Mrs. Liddell: I thank my hon. Friend for taking the opportunity to bring a delegation of Members of Parliament, from constituencies that surround airports, to meet me last week. A number of important points were raised at that meeting. Since last October, there has been a lengthy consultation process on these proposals and we have listened closely to the responses, which have been published and are available in the Vote Office and the Library.

My hon. Friend referred to the Rail Regulator's previous record. I remind him that we introduced the Railways Bill precisely so that we could strengthen the Rail Regulator's powers. The Civil Aviation Authority will now have sole responsibility for the safety aspects of air traffic control operations. That is what all the industry experts, including the Transport Sub-Committee, have asked for.

My hon. Friend mentioned the concerns of air traffic controllers about the Government's proposals, but they became aware of them only this morning. Our proposals take into account a number of points that they made in their own proposals. He should bear in mind the fact that they, too, advocated an equity-based solution. We are determined to ensure that the partnership that we are putting in place includes the best from the public sector and the best from the private sector.

My hon. Friend also talked about overcrowding in our skies. That is precisely why we need a public-private partnership that can proceed quickly and get on stream the two new centres at Swanwick and Prestwick, so that as air traffic increases the structures and facilities available for managing our skies is up-to-date and forward looking.

Madam Speaker: Order. We must now move to the statement.

Hon. Members: More, more!

Madam Speaker: Order. I call Mr. Secretary Straw.

Political Parties (Funding)

4.21 pm

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Jack Straw): With permission, Madam Speaker, I wish to make a statement about the funding of political parties.

We came to office committed to reform. Our three commitments were, first, to require large donations to political parties to be disclosed; secondly, to outlaw foreign funding of political parties; and thirdly, to invite the Committee on Standards in Public Life to look into the wider question of the funding of political parties in the United Kingdom.

The committee, under the chairmanship of Lord Neill of Bladen, was given that remit in November 1997 and reported in October 1998. The committee's review was comprehensive and authoritative. Because of the range of matters covered, it was not practicable to legislate in the current Session of Parliament, but I promised to publish a draft Bill before the summer recess, and I am doing that today.

The draft Bill is contained in a White Paper which provides the Government's overall response to the Neill committee's report. We intend to introduce the necessary legislation as soon as possible, taking full account of comments received from right hon. and hon. Members and from outside organisations by 15 October.

I shall summarise the main points of the White Paper and draft Bill. The Bill takes forward the two specific manifesto commitments to which I referred earlier, and which were endorsed by the Neill committee. Donations to political parties of £5,000 or more at the national level and of £1,000 or more at the local level will have to be made public. Furthermore, it will be unlawful for a political party to receive donations from an individual who is not registered to vote in the United Kingdom, or from companies that are not incorporated in the European Union and also carrying on business in the United Kingdom. Provision is also made for shareholder approval for donations.

There has also long been concern over the amounts that political parties are able, without restriction, to spend nationally at election times. The existing law, developed in the last century, already regulates very closely what can be spent by or on behalf of candidates at elections at constituency or local ward level. However, in the present day a large part of the effort and money devoted to winning elections is spent by parties not at a local or constituency level, but nationally and not on behalf of specific candidates.

The Bill therefore provides for new national spending limits on election expenditure, and agrees with the Neill committee that the limits should be set at a level substantially below the amounts spent by the two main parties in 1997, to avoid what Neill described as an arms race in spending between the parties.

On that basis, Neill recommended and the Bill provides a limit of £20 million for the main parties involved in a United Kingdom general election, with lower limits for parties that do not field full slates of candidates, and for other elections. When the Bill is introduced it will also contain provisions for regulating third-party spending at the national level, as recommended by the Neill committee.

[Mr. Jack Straw]

To enforce the restrictions on donations and expenditure, the draft Bill places obligations on the parties at both local and national level to keep and submit accounts. That will apply particularly to the recording of donations. The scheme in the draft Bill, which sets a de minimis level of £50 for internal reporting, follows the Neill committee's recommendations.

All political parties will wish to study these detailed provisions carefully over the forthcoming months, but if the object in view can be served with some simplification or easement, the Government will be open to suggestions.

Annexe 1 of the White Paper contains a detailed chart setting out each of the Neill committee's recommendations, and the Government's proposed response. The one recommendation that we have not pursued is the recommendation that income tax relief should be allowed on donations to political parties. The Government take the view that that would amount to state aid by another route, and would divert expenditure from other priorities.

Some political donations are made not to a party as such, but to groups within a party or to individuals, including Members of Parliament. We agree with the Neill committee that comparable requirements should be imposed in respect of such donations, and the Bill, as introduced, will cover that. We would welcome views on whether the obligation to report such donations should fall on the party in question or on the person who receives them, and on whether donations that are currently recorded in the Register of Members' Interests should be put on a statutory basis.

The Neill committee made a number of suggestions for change relating to referendums. The Government accept them all, as I made clear when the Neill report was published last October. It is important to ensure that the two sides in any referendum campaign have a fair opportunity to put their case. We therefore propose to include state cash support on an equal basis for the two umbrella campaign organisations, with free mailing and access to referendum broadcasts, as the Neill committee suggested.

The committee also made recommendations about the position of the Government of the day in any referendum campaign. As it suggested, a Government are almost bound to be closely engaged in the subject matter of a referendum; but there is a point at which the Government should step back, and leave it to political parties and other campaign groups to make their case to the electorate. The draft Bill therefore provides for a 28-day period running up to the referendum poll in which the Government of the day should not issue material to the public on the subject matter of the referendum. Other rules, similar to those providing for election purdah periods, will also apply.

In one respect, however, the Government have gone further than the Neill committee's recommendations. In our judgment, it would be unfair and inconsistent with everything else that is proposed if referendum campaigns could be skewed by the injection of disproportionately large funds that happen to be at the disposal of a particular party or campaign group. We therefore propose to set limits on all organisations involved in referendum campaigns. In the draft Bill, the limits are £5 million for the two designated umbrella organisations and for political parties with two or more Members in the House of Commons, and £500,000 for other political parties and campaign organisations. Those restrictions on spending would run from shortly after the date when a Bill providing for a referendum is introduced in Parliament. As Neill recommended, referendum organisations will also be subject to the same requirements as political parties in regard to foreign donations and other related matters.

I have left until last one of the most important provisions of the draft Bill. The Neill committee recommended, as have many others, the establishment of an electoral commission, and the Government agree with that recommendation. The commission's first function will be to oversee observance by political parties and others of the new regulatory regime; but I believe that we ought to go further. The commission will therefore be charged with making recommendations on changes to electoral law. We also envisage its having, in a wider sense, an important role to play in voter education. I want it to encourage people to vote in elections and referendums, and to help to explain the democratic system in a wholly non-partisan way. The draft Bill also provides for the electoral commission to take over, at a later date, the functions of the parliamentary boundary commissions and of the Local Government Commission for England.

It is paramount that the electoral commission should be wholly independent of the Government of the day. The draft Bill therefore provides the strongest safeguards of that kind which our constitution can lay down. The commissioners would be appointed by Her Majesty on an address from the House of Commons. A Speaker's committee would be established to oversee the commission's budget.

The Neill committee's report rightly emphasises the vital contribution, which we should celebrate, that political parties make to this country's democratic life, but for too long, public confidence in the political system has been undermined by the absence of clear, fair and open statutory controls on how political parties are funded. All of us here want to encourage citizens to play a full part in this country's political system, and that must include encouragement of voluntary donations to political parties.

The Neill committee report gives us all the chance to make significant improvements in this vital area of our national life. Today's publication of the draft Bill and White Paper provides the detail of the Government's intentions. By providing greater honesty and openness to our political system, we hope to restore public trust and to promote greater confidence in our democracy.

Miss Ann Widdecombe (Maidstone and The Weald): I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his statement and for his customary courtesy in giving me early sight of the statement—a novelty that I am still getting used to.

I add my congratulations to the Neill committee on a thorough and detailed work that contains much that will improve our democratic way of life. Having started on that friendly note, may I ask the right hon. Gentleman to comment on some glaring omissions in the draft legislation?

Why, for example, despite yet more assurances and promises today, is there nothing in the draft legislation—which is, after all, all that right hon. and hon. Members and the public have to comment on in the consultation

period—on banning blind trusts, let alone any proposals for the detailed working of such a ban? Is that because five senior members of the Government used such funds: the Prime Minister, the Deputy Prime Minister, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, the Foreign Secretary and the Leader of the House?

Why does the proposed legislation do nothing to end the scandal of cash for policies, or to stop a repeat of the Bernie Ecclestone and Formula One affair? Will the legislation stop organisations such as, say, the International Fund for Animal Welfare, to which this small donor will make no further donations, and the Political Animal Lobby from buying policies at election time? Given that large donors to Labour have been given positions both in and by the Government, why is no effort made to ensure that all donations are not only without strings, but seen to be without strings?

How does the draft legislation propose to ensure that donations do not buy positions in government? *[Interruption.]* That was an important question, which the House perhaps did not hear. I asked the right hon. Gentleman how he intends to ensure, given that there is nothing in the draft legislation, that donations do not buy positions in government.

Why are trade unions given a privileged position in the legislation? Why does it require a disregard of the fact that they might be affiliated to a political party, a disregard that will not apply to any other organisation?

The right hon. Gentleman has said that he does not agree with the Neill proposal for tax relief on political donations of up to £500—but surely he will concede that the cost of such a measure would be barely more than the Government are spending on their own special advisers?

Will the right hon. Gentleman explain why, although the Government will be subject to restrictions for only 28 days before a referendum is held, other organisations will have such restrictions for up to six months?

Will the right hon. Gentleman tell the House why, according to his draft legislation, no candidate will be allowed to stand as, for example, an independent socialist or a pro-London candidate without first setting himself up as a political party?

How are national limits on spending to be enforced for a period of one year before a general election when we do not have fixed-term Parliaments?

Finally—it is a sensitive and delicate question, but nevertheless an important one—given the legislation's proposals on Northern Ireland, will the right hon. Gentleman tell us whether Sinn Fein will be able to receive foreign donations—for example, by channelling them through the Republic?

Mr. Straw: I am grateful for the right hon. Lady's comments at the beginning of her statement, and particularly for her thanks—I gave mine in my statement, but am very happy to repeat them—to the Neill committee for the excellence of its work and recommendations.

The right hon. Lady is obviously very sorry that I have shot her fox by accepting all of the Neill committee's recommendations. Consequently, she has been left thrashing around in a state of amnesia about the Conservative party's record on political funding. The simple truth—an apology from a Conservative spokesman would be in order on the matter—is that we would have needed neither the Neill report nor the draft Bill had the Conservative party not sunk the funding of political parties—its party—to such depths.

Moreover, neither the report nor the draft Bill would have been necessary had not the previous Government—of whom the right hon. Lady was a member—repeatedly refused to refer the funding of political parties to the Nolan committee. Time and time again did my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister demand that the previous Government do so, but they point-blank refused.

The right hon. Lady mentioned the interesting issue of blind trusts. The body of the report—not only the Bill, but the whole of the White Paper is subject to consultation—makes it clear that, for the simple, straightforward and very prosaic reason that parliamentary counsel ran out of time in drafting—[*Laughter.*]The right hon. Lady may laugh at that, but she knows two things very well. First, this Government have a heavier legislative programme than previous Governments. Secondly, parliamentary counsel's time is limited. She asked me what we were doing about blind trusts. The answer to her question is given in full on pages 23 and 24 of the White Paper, which she has had for hours. If she had read it—if she had used that time sensibly—she would have seen that the Government have accepted every single one of the Neill committee's proposals on blind trusts.

The Government have always been clear on the issue of blind trusts. In our evidence to Neill, we said that blind trusts should be the subject of prohibition. What did the Conservative party—not the previous Government, but the current official Opposition, led by the current Leader of the Opposition—say about blind trusts? It said:

"We believe that there is an argument in favour of a form of blind trust."

So the right hon. Lady comes to the House not knowing her own party's policy on the issue of blind trusts. The party preceded that reference to blind trusts with the following absolutely stunning statement in respect of political donations:

"We believe that there is a perfectly honourable case to be made for anonymity".

The Tories' pursuit of that case for anonymity was one reason why the reputation of the political process was plunged so low during their time in government.

The right hon. Lady asked me about donations being made only without strings. There is no suggestion that donations should be made with strings, although I know that the Conservative party has great difficulty with that, given its record. Indeed, the whole purpose of a transparent system of reporting and disclosure and strengthening the regulation of the honours system is that we do not want to replicate the process that we witnessed in the 1980s and early 1990s, when there was a strange coincidence—I put it no higher than that—between those who gave large donations to the Conservative party and those who received honours or other favours.

The right hon. Lady asked me about special advisers. I do not think that she should complain about the money that the Opposition receive from the public purse. We sought to gain a reasonable increase in the money that the Opposition received from the public purse and we were systematically knocked back on that. We have been generous to a fault. The Opposition now receive £500,000 for the Leader of the Opposition's office alone; altogether

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the Opposition receive £3.4 million—an increase of 250 per cent.—and it remains an open question as to whether the British taxpayer is getting value for money from the Opposition.

The right hon. Lady asked about the trade unions. Neill recommended no change in the regime for trade unions. They are already properly regulated and have been the subject of much tighter regulation than the shareholder disclosure regime that we plan to put in place. The national limits that we propose should apply for one year before an election takes place. I understand the right hon. Lady's point that people do not have precise notice of when an election will take place. I am happy to discuss that with all right hon. and hon. Members, but if the right hon. Lady thinks about the matter, she will appreciate that it is essential that the limits should apply for longer than the four or five weeks of an election campaign. In practice, most expenditure by a political party is not expended until after the election whistle is blown or, as in early 1997, when it is obvious when the election will take place. However, there is some election spending in the preceding period and it is important that the regulations should cover that.

The draft Bill contains special provisions relating to Northern Ireland to protect the identity of donors, if necessary. They apply to all parties, but of course, as we have made very clear, we are ready to accept comments on them.

Mr. Chris Mullin (Sunderland, South): I welcome the statement, which goes a long way towards the major cleansing of the British political system for which some of us have argued for a number of years. Hopefully, it will also end the slide towards money-driven rather than issue-driven politics, and we shall return to issue-driven politics. I have just one or two queries.

First, I welcome the £20 million cap, but does my right hon. Friend not think that £20 million is too high and that it is a desirable objective to reduce by as much as possible the amount of money that is swilling about in British politics? Secondly, one effect of the proposals will be that anyone who has lived outside the United Kingdom for as long as 20 years will still be able to make donations to British political parties. That is as a result of the changes that the previous Government made to the right to vote. Does my right hon. Friend think that there is a case for limiting the right to vote to people who have been outside this country for up to only five years—and, therefore, for changing the eligibility to make donations?

Finally, does my right hon. Friend recall a little scam, whereby the drinks and tobacco industries have the main advertising hoardings in the country all booked up for most of the year, but at election time, they mysteriously and suddenly become available to one political party? Is there anything in the proposals to address that problem?

Mr. Straw: I am grateful for my hon. Friend's remarks. The figure of £20 million is a matter of argument. It is what Neill proposed, and we have sought assiduously in the draft Bill to follow the Neill recommendations in their detail, as well as in their spirit.

On overseas electors for the British Parliament, it is unarguable that if people are on the electoral register to vote in this country, they should be entitled to make donations to the political party of their choice. There is a separate question about whether the rules laid down in the mid-'80s—which allowed people with a rather distant connection with this country to vote, such as those who have not been resident here for 20 years—should continue. The Select Committee on Home Affairs has proposed that the period be reduced to five years, and we are considering that carefully.

On the drinks and tobacco industries, we are seeking in the draft Bill to control the behaviour of political parties. There are limits to what can or should be done in a democracy, although none of us on this side of the House approves of the way in which the drinks and tobacco industries used to monopolise poster sites on behalf of the Conservative party.

Mr. Richard Allan (Sheffield, Hallam): We warmly welcome the Home Secretary's proposals—especially for an electoral commission, which we believe to be long overdue. Will he consider accepting our proposal to give the commission a formal role on advising on the question in a referendum, as we believe that to be vital in conducting fair referendums in this country?

Will the Home Secretary consider the implications of devolution for this matter? Party responsibilities for matters such as funding are now, quite properly, devolved to national parties in the various parts of the UK. We hope that he will be sensitive to that, rather than requiring powers to be taken back centrally to parties in London.

Is the Home Secretary concerned that the draft Bill might prevent young people under 18 from becoming subscription-paying members of a political party by confining donations to registered electors? Will he consider that issue, so that we do not exclude from taking part in the political process the young people who often seem to be sadly lacking from it?

Finally, will the right hon. Gentleman reconsider the issue of an upper limit on individual donations? In so doing, he might do his bit to try to end the dependency culture, whereby a party leader becomes so dependent on particular large donors—such as those who give £1 million a year, for example—that he finds it impossible to kick the habit, even when that person has been shown to be fundamentally unsuitable to make such donations?

Mr. Straw: I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman's endorsement of Neill's proposals and our response to them. We are not proposing that the commission should advise on questions in a referendum. Once the commission is established, it will be seen whether that is considered an appropriate role for the commission, which may take the view that advising on the wording of a question in a referendum could lead the commission into partisan areas.

In practice, while there has been argument about the questions in the referendums that we have had in this country in the past 25 years, everyone has known what the issue has been. It has been clear: do we stay in the Common Market, or leave? Do we vote for a National Assembly for Wales and a Scottish Parliament? In future, do we vote for a change in the electoral system, or not? Do we vote to join the euro? It is not a huge problem.

On devolution, I accept the gravamen of the hon. Gentleman's comments. We acknowledge in the draft White Paper that many parties—this applies particularly

to the Liberal Democrats, but increasingly to others—have a federated structure, and we must be sensitive to that. He will understand that, with some small exceptions, the question of elections within the UK is a reserved area, however. We have sought to square the circle properly in the draft Bill but we are open to proposals and comments on whether we have got it right.

There is no proposal in the Bill that should for a second have the effect of preventing a United Kingdom resident who happens to be under 18 from making donations to political parties, but if such a gremlin has crept into the drafting, we shall ensure that it is removed. The purpose of that part of the Bill is to restrict foreign, not under-age donations. We are happy to have donations from people of any age.

The Neill committee considered upper limits on individual donations in some detail. I do not believe that they are practical. It is far more effective to cap spending and have full disclosure of donations than to try to cap what individuals may give. With the best will in the world, if we go down that route we end up with all the complications that have been found in the United States, where, in practice, a level playing field is not secured for the political parties and a great deal of evasion is encouraged, to small purpose.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. A lot of hon. Members want to ask questions and I have to think of protecting the later business, in which many hon. Members have said that they would like to speak. Let us have short questions and short answers, please.

Mr. Robert Sheldon (Ashton-under-Lyne): My right hon. Friend has announced a major change in the way in which the financial operations of elections are conducted, and I expected no less. He rightly started with the Neill recommendations. I am not altogether happy with the upper figure of £20 million, which may be open to discussion, but the most important aspects are the electoral commission and the electoral commissioner. The initiative that the commissioner can show will be available for the first time to keep a close control on the financial operations of elections.

How much time does my right hon. Friend envisage the commissioner being able to devote to the job? Will it be a full-time or a part-time post?

Mr. Straw: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for his endorsement. He speaks with great experience, not only as Chairman of the Standards and Privileges Committee but as a long-serving former Chairman of the Public Accounts Committee. We will want to draw on his experience, as we want to base the independence of the new electoral commission on the model of the National Audit Office and the Comptroller and Auditor General.

The first part of the Bill gives the commission wide powers and restricts the powers of the Secretary of State, because some changes in electoral law will be able to be proposed in the House only if they have been endorsed by the commission. I would anticipate that the commissioner's would be a full-time post, and there would certainly need to be a substantial number of full-time staff as well as other part-time commissioners. We intend to ensure that the commission can do a proper and effective job.

Mr. John MacGregor (South Norfolk): As a member of the Neill committee, I warmly welcome the Government's acceptance of the vast majority of our recommendations, and in particular those on referendums, both because there was some doubt whether the Government would accept them and more especially because it was very clear to us in the hearings that we held around the country that the funding arrangements for the earlier referendums under the present Government left a great deal to be desired.

The Home Secretary referred with approval to the Neill principle that strong and healthy parties are essential to the functioning of a strong democracy. The second part of the sentence to which he was referring goes on:

"as a means of engaging very large numbers of people . . . in the whole democratic process."

In that respect, the recommendation for tax relief on small donations from large numbers of people was, we thought, crucial. One of the effects of our recommendations and the Government's acceptance of them will be some diminution in donations from other quarters, hence the importance of encouraging such donations to fill the gap. Will the Home Secretary think again about tax relief?

Mr. Straw: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman, and especially for his welcome for what I said about accepting the regime for referendums. I am aware that a canard was flying that there was some doubt about the Government's position, but I made it clear, in an interview on the day that it was issued, that we welcomed the whole of the report. The right hon. Gentleman will remember that, in the debate in early November, I again made clear our acceptance of the referendum proposals.

I understand that the right hon. Member for South Norfolk (Mr. MacGregor) has strong views about the proposals to make small donations to political parties tax-deductible. The Government take a different view. We are of course open to representations, although they would have to be very strong to make us change our mind. I do not accept that the degree of people's involvement in a democracy would depend on whether they could get tax relief on their donations.

We have a pretty vibrant, working democracy in this country. Not enough people are involved in the system, and all political parties would like more people to get actively involved in politics. They would also like politics, through civics courses, to become more central to the education of the nation's children. There are other ways of achieving that, and I believe that if there is a case for giving state aid to political parties—including state aid for political education—that aid should be given explicitly, rather than through the happenstance of individuals' donations on which tax could be deducted.

Mr. Harry Barnes (North–East Derbyshire): Will we have to wait until the electoral commission has finished its work before further reforms to the electoral system, beyond those in the White Paper, are introduced? I am thinking especially of a rolling register to cover the millions of people missing from existing registers, and of the registration of homeless people. If those reforms are

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to be blocked because the electoral commission will be required to finish its work first, some of us would consider that the cart had been put before the horse.

Mr. Straw: I can give my hon. Friend the assurance that he seeks. We will not have to wait for the electoral commission to complete its work. Indeed, as the Under-Secretary of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Knowsley, North and Sefton, East (Mr. Howarth), has already announced, we have separate proposals from the all-party electoral working party for other changes to improve the process, and they include the introduction of a rolling register.

Mr. Dafydd Wigley (Caernarfon): I generally welcome the Home Secretary's statement, but I seek clarification on two matters. First, will funds from outside Wales be allowed to be given to political parties fighting elections to the National Assembly for Wales? Secondly, will the electoral commission be relevant to the Assembly, and to local government in Wales?

Mr. Straw: I know of no way in which we could prevent motor vehicles travelling across the Severn bridge from carrying donations to the Welsh Assembly. The idea that we could recreate Offa's dyke, fill in all the gaps and thereby put a wall around Wales is not a proposition that even the right hon. Gentleman would want to pursue. The proposals that I have set out are for the whole of the United Kingdom.

The right hon. Gentleman asked about local government in Wales. That is a reserved matter, but the organisation of local government boundaries in Wales is a devolved matter for the National Assembly for Wales. The White Paper makes it clear that, if the National Assembly wished the review of those boundaries to be taken over by the electoral commission, we would be open to making provision for that.

Mr. Dennis Skinner (Bolsover): I have to say that this statement is a darn sight better than the one before it. [*Laughter.*] Does my right hon. Friend agree that trade unionists in particular will be very pleased at the announcement that shareholders will be able to subject donations to a vote of approval?

Does my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary recall that a few years ago I proposed to the Labour party's national executive committee that a sum equivalent to the amount that a political party spends on all its candidates in an election would be sufficient as an upper limit? That amount is roughly £6 million now. Will he have another look at that proposal?

Finally, will my right hon. Friend accept from me that this is a most opportune statement? It could not have come at a better time, especially given that the Tories are run and financed, year on year, by Mr. Ashcroft. Will he also understand that, in the run-up to a general election—more than at any other time—the Labour party must set the agenda? That is what this proposal does.

Mr. Straw: I thank my hon. Friend for the tenor of his remarks. His point about trade unions is important. We submitted party funding to an independent committee comprised of people of all political persuasions and none. We asked it to consider the matter independently and impartially, and to implement proposals. The committee said that no change was required in the regime for trade unions, but that huge changes were necessary in respect of company donations.

I contrast the way in which we have proceeded with the way in which the previous Conservative Government ruthlessly sought to hobble Opposition parties in a wholly partisan way. They hit in particular at the Labour party's sources of funds while protecting their own. Their sources included donations from companies in the UK and abroad, but also from very shady individuals, including Asil Nadir. It remains to be seen whether the Tory party has given back his £400,000.

Mr. Gerald Howarth (Aldershot): There, we have had the true motive behind the Home Secretary's statement. He should accept that this action is, in some respects, an act of reprisal by the Labour party and that aspects of it will effectively hobble the Opposition. The Government are not content simply to have an overwhelming majority in the House, with destroying any opposition in the other place, or with having a supine load of journalists mesmerised by the power of the Prime Minister's press secretary.

Does the Home Secretary accept that some of his proposals—in particular, the decision to require disclosure of donations in excess of £5,000—will hobble the Opposition? Does he agree that many people will be deterred from giving fairly modest sums to political parties—as the Home Secretary says that he wants them to do—because the right hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mr. Mandelson) will set investigative journalists on them to dig up as much dirt as possible? Does he agree that that will not improve the democratic process?

Mr. Straw: If this had been a reprisal, I would have been conducting it under friendly fire. The hon. Gentleman should have seen the face of the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) as he spoke. The proposals are based on an independent report, which the Conservative Front-Bench team has demanded—having done a full pirouette from the previous position—that we should implement in full. That is precisely what we have done, and I am very sorry to have discomfited the Conservative spokesmen.

The hon. Gentleman remains unreconstructed, taking the view held by a former treasurer of the Conservative party, Lord McAlpine, whose solution to party funding was entirely straightforward. Lord McAlpine said:

"I do not think that we ever should have shown how we spent our money. The Conservative Central Office is not a charity dedicated to helping the sick and suffering."—

perhaps an open question these days—

"it is a fighting machine dedicated to winning elections."

He also wrote:

"There was a black hole in the Party's finances . . . The solution was easy: we gave up publishing accounts."

That was the approach then taken by the Tory party. I am glad to see that those views remain represented, red in tooth and claw.

Dr. George Turner (North-West Norfolk): Can my right hon. Friend say more about what will happen with

shareholders? Many shareholders are pension funds that hold their power on behalf of others. Many of us do not want our pension funds to do what many have done in past and fund the Tory party on the false premise that it is good for the economy. This Government have shown that the Labour party is good for the economy. Surely our companies should not be involved in party politics unless their shareholders overwhelmingly say so.

Mr. Straw: The principle that my hon. Friend lays down was accepted by the Neill committee, and we set out our response to that on page 26 of the White Paper. We propose, as Neill did, that there should be a requirement on company directors to seek shareholder approval for donations, including donations that involve non-commercial sponsorship. Neill proposed that the cycle of approval should take place every four years. That is in the draft Bill, but we are open to suggestions as to whether it should occur more often.

Mr. Peter Brooke (Cities of London and Westminster): Pursuant to the question of the hon. Member for Sunderland, South (Mr. Mullin), can the Home Secretary confirm that the 20-year rule was part of a Bill, passed quickly at this time of year in 1989, which also increased the limits on by-election expenditure, that such a Bill cannot in a narrow space of time be passed without bipartisan support and that all aspects of that Bill—before publication and including the 20-year rule—were agreed by Lord Hattersley, the shadow Home Secretary, on the advice of Walworth road?

Mr. Straw: I do not know all the detail, but I can confirm that the Representation of the People Act 1989 was a bipartisan Act, and that my noble Friend Lord Hattersley was shadow Home Secretary at the time. The right hon. Gentleman is therefore correct but, 10 years on, that does not mean that, because something was passed with bipartisan support, it should not be open to review. The proposal should be open to review. We seek on this issue, as we have on electoral processes, to proceed as far as possible on a bipartisan basis.

Mr. Martin Linton (Battersea): Does my right hon. Friend agree that, with this Bill, he has put within our grasp an end to sleaze in the funding of political parties? Does he agree that those who opt out of paying tax in this country should also opt out of funding political parties, at least for five years until they are no longer on the electoral register, in line with the principle in the Neill report that funding of political parties should be limited to those who live, work and carry on business in the United Kingdom?

Mr. Straw: I hope and believe that my hon. Friend is correct to say that the proposals in this Bill will help clean up British politics and put an end to sleaze in the funding of our political process. On the restrictions on overseas donors, we want the political process to be funded by those who have a stake in it. That is why we seek a ban on foreign donations, whether from individuals or companies. We define that by reference to the domicile of the company but also by reference to whether an individual is on the electoral register.

Mr. Martin Bell (Tatton): I wish also to query the proposed £20 million limit for a political party campaign. That seems to me an extraordinary amount of money that will keep parties spending more than they can safely raise and keep them beholden to the big contributors. Surely a cheaper politics is a more trustworthy politics. Perhaps we could, for as little as £2 million or at the most £5 million, take politics out of the hands of the big contributors and give it back to the people.

Mr. Straw: The sum of £20 million was that proposed by Neill. It is important that the limit should be realistic. I apologise to my hon. Friend the Member for Bolsover (Mr. Skinner), who also made that point, for failing to answer it.

The simple truth is that the original regime that we now operate was established at the end of the previous century when almost all election spending took place at a constituency level. There was virtually no national party spending, and the dates on which elections took place varied from one part of the country to another. It is interesting that the total level of spending at a constituency level at the end of the 19th century was, in real terms, very substantial, and ran to much more than is spent today at a constituency level because the constituency was the focus of the campaign. Today, for reasons that everybody understands, there is a greater focus on the national level.

Neill was correct to say that the regime should recognise that arrangement, but the committee has also proposed to reduce for future elections the amount that was spent at the previous election. I recall that the Conservative party is reported to have spent about £27 million at that election, and the Labour party £26 million. I think that £20 million is therefore a reasonable restriction. If the figure were much lower, the restriction would not take account of the realities of modern campaigning.

Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours (Workington): In the case of institutional shareholders, would pension funds and insurance companies be required to consult their policyholders before using their votes at annual general meetings on political funds?

Mr. Straw: No, they would not. That is a separate but very live issue about the degree to which those who exercise shareholder power consult the beneficial interest, which is typically those who have put money into a pension fund, and how they do so through trustees. We are strongly supporting measures to strengthen the role of trustees in the control of pension funds.

Mr. Alasdair Morgan (Galloway and Upper Nithsdale): I welcome the statement in principle. The Home Secretary will know that, in Scotland, the political parties came to an agreement along the same lines before the recent election there. I refer him to the jocular reply that he gave the right hon. Member for Caernarfon (Mr. Wigley) earlier regarding spending by UK parties in devolved elections. Does he agree that the transfer of funds and resources from London to Edinburgh or Cardiff during or before such an election is a serious issue? Given that he has already distinguished in his statement between local and national donations, will he consider that matter further?

Mr. Straw: Unless we were to put walls around different parts of the United Kingdom and abandon the

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single currency that was introduced for England and Scotland in 1707, it would be impossible to work out how, in practice, we could prevent donations being made to Scottish political parties by people in the rest of the United Kingdom. Furthermore, I do not believe that to be desirable within what is a union of this kingdom.

The Bill contains clear regulations regarding the donations that people make to political parties in Scotland and elsewhere, and a clear regime for the spending of those political parties. I appreciate that the hon. Gentleman will not have had time to read the White Paper but, if he looks at page 40, he will see, set out in column D, the proposed spending limits for the Scottish Parliament. Obviously, that figure is pro rata. The limit is £1.5 million for each political party in a general election for the Scottish Parliament, compared to £20 million for parties in a national general election. That is a sensible way to proceed.

Mr. David Winnick (Walsall, North): Is it not downright scandalous that the whole dirty, murky world of party financing was not touched on by the Conservatives for obvious reasons, particularly because they used money that was known to be stolen?

I press my right hon. Friend again on the question of tax exiles. Why should someone who is technically a British citizen and entitled to vote here but who, for obvious tax reasons, ensures that he or she does not spend more than 90 days a year in the UK be in a position to finance a political party? Such a case is, of course, in the news, and demonstrates that the Tory party is almost exclusively dependent on such a tax exile. We need to change that, and I tell my right hon. Friend that, if that is not dealt with in the Bill, some of us will hope to press an amendment, which is likely to be supported by our hon. Friends.

Mr. Straw: My hon. Friend was entirely right to draw attention to the disreputable record of the previous Conservative Administration in refusing to clean up British politics because they knew that the spotlight would turn on the murky record of the Conservative party.

I am glad to welcome converts, wherever they come from, but I remind Conservative Members that, when the mere suggestion was made that the issue of party political funding should be referred to the Nolan committee, the then Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major), said,

"I do not believe that that is the right way to proceed."—[*Official Report*, 21 May 1996; Vol. 278, c. 95.]

The Conservatives did not want an inquiry because they did not want it to reveal what they knew to be the truth. Their view was the view of Lord McAlpine—that the best way to avoid scrutiny was simply to avoid having any accounts.

I understand the concern of my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall, North (Mr. Winnick) about people who are tax exiles, but it seems to me that the position of tax exiles must be dealt with through Finance Bills. It is unarguable that, if someone is lawfully on the register to vote in this country, that individual must be allowed to make donations to a British political party that is registered in this country. I do not understand how we could retreat from that principle, although I appreciate that amendments may be tabled to the Bill from all quarters, and I look forward to the argument on them.

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East): Is not the Government's response to recommendation 89 of the Neill committee grotesquely inadequate? That recommendation established the following principle in these words:

"The government of the day in future referendums should, as a government, remain neutral and should not distribute at public expense literature, even purportedly 'factual' literature, setting out or otherwise promoting its case."

There is no mention there of the 28-day limit that the Government are putting in, in their so-called acceptance of that recommendation. Is it not blindingly obvious that the Government intend to raid the public purse on a massive scale in the months leading up to a referendum, stopping only a meagre four weeks before polling day?

Mr. Straw: The hon. Gentleman never improves his case by the hyperbolic way in which he presents it. He is wrong. We are putting in place, in statute, restrictions on expenditure by Government that his Government would never have dreamed of. We can have an argument about whether 28 days is the precise period—I am happy to do that—but the 28-day period follows the principles that Governments of both parties have followed in respect of what is call the election purdah period for elections that take place within a Parliament, and we intend to stick to the principles in the Bill, not only to their letter but to their spirit.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Madam Speaker: Thank you. We are now going to move on. We shall be coming back to these matters again later.

Personal Statements

5.18 pm

Kali Mountford (Colne Valley): Madam Speaker, with your permission I should like to make a personal statement.

In response to the 10th and 11th reports of the Standards and Privileges Committee published today, I should like to apologise to you and to the House. I regret that I find myself in this position and that my actions have caused difficulties for members of the Social Security Committee and the Standards and Privileges Committee. What started out as a genuine attempt to be helpful to the deliberations of the Social Security Committee unfortunately went very wrong.

Unfortunately, because of personal and family problems coupled with a series of health problems resulting from surgery that was not successful, I have not been able to spend as much time as usual in and around the House. Had I been able to be here, I might have had a fuller grasp and understanding of the implications of these procedures and not done things which, on reflection, were rather silly. I have of course sent my resignation to the Chairman of the Social Security Committee and apologised to the members.

I fully accept the findings of the Standards and Privileges Committee. I deeply regret my actions and apologise both for my original error of judgment and my delay in being totally forthcoming in this matter.

Madam Speaker: Thank you, Ms Mountford.

5.19 pm

Mr. Don Touhig (Islwyn): With your permission, Madam Speaker, I shall make a personal statement.

The Select Committee on Standards and Privileges, in its 10th and 11th reports published today, has made criticisms of my behaviour concerning a draft report of the Select Committee on Social Security. I want the House to know that I accept fully the judgments of the Standards and Privileges Committee, and apologise unreservedly to the House for my part in this matter. The circumstances, which are referred to as "mitigating", are set out fully in my statement to the Standards and Privileges Committee, as are my reasons for declining to name a colleague without that colleague's permission.

I believe that hon. Members should accept reports of the House that are critical of them. It is the duty of each of us to take responsibility for our actions, and I do not shirk that duty today. Finally, I am deeply grateful to you for allowing me to make this unreserved apology to the House at the earliest opportunity.

Madam Speaker: Thank you, Mr. Touhig.

Points of Order

5.21 pm

Mr. Quentin Davies (Grantham and Stamford): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. I am grateful for the opportunity to raise a point of order that goes to the heart of the way in which the Government discharge their obligation to be straight with Parliament and the public.

Last Thursday at Treasury questions, the Chief Secretary to the Treasury said, in relation to the new individual savings accounts, or ISAs:

"In the first two months following their launch, savers invested more than £4 billion in them—more than twice as much as was invested in PEPs and TESSAs during exactly the same period last year."—[*Official Report*, 22 July 1999; Vol. 335, c. 1324.]

This morning there was a raft of press reports on the subject. I quote from page 11 of the *Financial Times*, which states:

"Gross sales of Isas in the three months to the end of June were £1.6 bn compared with £3.9 bn gross sales of Peps in the second quarter of 1998."

[Interruption.] Hon. Members do not like—

Madam Speaker: That is a matter of argument. What is the point of order for me?

Mr. Davies: At first sight, at least, the right hon. Gentleman's statement to the House last Thursday is inconsistent with subsequent reports. Therefore there is great confusion in the press and among the public. I wonder, Madam Speaker, whether the Chief Secretary has given you any indication as to whether he intends to make clear in the House a matter that has been muddled by the Government's unhealthy obsession with spin-doctoring and with—

Madam Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman is raising policy matters with me. He knows very well that I have no responsibility for the comments made by Ministers or hon. Members. Certainly, I refuse to comment on reports in the national press. *[Interruption.]* Order. The hon. Gentleman is a Front-Bench Member, so if he wishes to pursue the matter when we come back, he is free to do so—he has the Order Paper—and if he wishes to pursue it while the House is in recess, he can make written representations to the Minister concerned.

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. Can you confirm that, at no time today, did you receive any request from the Deputy Prime Minister or the Minister for Transport to make a statement on the matter of air traffic control, and that Ministers were forced to come to the House only as a result of you granting a private notice question to my hon. Friend the Member for North Essex (Mr. Jenkin)?

I ask that because I thought that I heard on the radio this morning—as no doubt you did, Madam Speaker; I know that you are an assiduous listener to the radio in the morning—the Minister saying that she could not reveal anything to the public until she had revealed it to Parliament. Can you confirm that you received no such request from the Minister, until she was forced to come to the House by you, following a request from my hon. Friend?

Madam Speaker: I received no request from any Minister to make a statement today. I did receive a request

[Madam Speaker]

from a member of the Opposition for a private notice question. Of course, I used my judgment and the authority given to me by the House to grant that private notice question.

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. In view of your sympathetic reception yesterday to the points of order raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Halifax (Mrs. Mahon) and myself in relation to the possible ethnic cleansing of Serbs in Kosovo and the dire pollution at Pancevo and other places in Serbia, and given that we shall not be back before the beginning of the Serbian winter, have you had any request from the Foreign Office to make a statement on that urgent matter?

Madam Speaker: I have not been informed by the Foreign Office or any other Department of State that it wishes to make a statement on Kosovo.

Mr. Jeremy Corbyn (Islington, North): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. You will be aware of the huge public concern about the growing of genetically modified crops, and you may be aware of a statement in one of the newspapers this morning to the effect that the Government may be placing a cloak of secrecy over the location of GM crops being grown throughout Britain. Have you had any requests from a Minister to make such a statement and, in view of the seriousness of the possibility of secrecy surrounding crop trials, which have overwhelming implications for many people, do you not think that there should be such a statement?

Madam Speaker: I sometimes wish that I could tell the House what I think about it. On a more serious note, no, I have not received any request to make such a statement today.

BILL PRESENTED

WARM HOMES AND ENERGY CONSERVATION (FIFTEEN YEAR PROGRAMME)

Mrs. Linda Gilroy, supported by Mr. David Chaytor, Mr. Alan Simpson, Mr. Peter Temple-Morris, Mr. Matthew Taylor, Angela Smith, Maria Eagle and Ms Linda Perham presented a Bill to require the Secretary of State to draw up and facilitate the carrying out, over a period of fifteen years, of a programme of action to provide at least 500,000 households per year with a comprehensive package of home insulation and other energy efficiency improvements; and for connected purposes: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time on Friday 5 November, and to be printed [Bill 149].

ROYAL ASSENT

Madam Speaker: I have to notify the House, in accordance with the Royal Assent Act 1967, that the Queen has signified Her Royal Assent to the following Acts:

Finance Act 1999

Disability Rights Commission Act 1999

Adoption (Intercountry Aspects) Act 1999

Company and Business Names (Chamber of Commerce, Etc.) Act 1999

Commonwealth Development Corporation Act 1999

Football (Offences and Disorder) Act 1999

Access to Justice Act 1999

Youth Justice and Criminal Evidence Act 1999

Pollution Prevention and Control Act 1999

Criminal Cases Review (Insanity) Act 1999

Employment Relations Act 1999

Local Government Act 1999

Funeral Parlours (Planning) (Amendment)

5.27 pm

Mr. Oliver Letwin (West Dorset): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to amend the law in connection with the change of use of premises intended to be funeral parlours.

I cannot claim that the Bill quite ranks with the awesome list of legislation that has just received Royal Assent, and I do not expect that it will have the same success in passing through the various stages that it would need to in the House. Nor, the House will be relieved to know, do I intend to spend more than a minute or two explaining it.

The Bill is a modest measure, which arises from the very same perplexity that was mentioned in the House in an Adjournment debate on 11 June 1999 when the hon. Member for Ealing, North (Mr. Pound) said:

"I have no objection to funeral parlours and funeral directors operating in the high street."

I utterly share those sentiments. In the long run, as Keynes said, we are all dead and we need such services.

The hon. Gentleman also said:

"The vexed issue of planning and funeral parlours is of great concern to my constituents. For many years, one of my constituents lived next to an excellent local newsagent . . . where sustenance for mind and body was available . . . To her horror, one day she found that a funeral parlour had appeared almost overnight in the small parade of shops."—[*Official Report*, 11 June 1999; Vol. 332, c. 961.]

The strange fact is that, in my constituency of West Dorset in the town of Sherbourne, almost identical events transpired, and one of my constituents woke up one fine morning to discover that an entirely innocuous shop was about to be turned into a funeral parlour. As it happens, my constituent passed her days pleasantly sunning herself in her front garden and did not wish—if I may be forgiven the phrase by the House—to see a procession of stiffs passing her front garden. She thought that she had the usual remedies available to her; that she could go to the district council and ask that her case be put. She expected that the funeral parlour proprietor would then be able to put his case and that the matter would be adjudicated in the ordinary way.

Alas, it so happens that, under the Town and Country Planning (Use Classes) Order 1987, that is not the case. Class A1 of that order allows the transformation of any item in a long list of kinds of business premises to be achieved without planning permission, as long as that transformation is into another of the classes listed in class A1.

Class A1(f) is entitled:

"For the direction of funerals".

I am a profound proponent and supporter of the order in general and there is a desperate need to allow businesses to be flexible and change their premises and for different kinds of businesses to emerge on our high streets, but funeral parlours are not quite like all other forms of shop. They bear rather more resemblance to other things, which are not included in that list and which cause concern to constituents. Hence, they have to go through the planning procedure.

This modest Bill is entirely intended to bring to the attention of the officials and Ministers responsible the urgent need to remove paragraph (f) from class A1. That would hardly make major legislative history, but it would have the beneficial effect that neither my constituents nor those of the hon. Member for Ealing, North would awake on any day to find that such a horrible event had occurred without the slightest redress being available. If there is a purpose for ten-minute Bills and for private Members coming to the House to try to change legislation or to bring such matters to the attention of officials, this is a classic example of that purpose

My constituents in Sherborne feel extremely strongly about this matter, which has probably attracted more attention from the local press than most of the great matters of state. I suspect that they and the constituents of many other Members around the House would be profoundly grateful if the Government took the appropriate steps, even though I foster no illusion that the Bill is likely to be passed.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill ordered to be brought in by Mr. Oliver Letwin, Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown, Mr. Eric Pickles and Mr. David Lidington.

FUNERAL PARLOURS (PLANNNG) (AMENDMENT)

Mr. Oliver Letwin accordingly presented a Bill to amend the law in connection wth the change of use of premises intended to be funeral parlours: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time on Friday 5 November, and to be printed [Bill 150].

Orders of the Day

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 118(6) (Standing Committees on Delegated Legislation) and Order of 15 July,

DATA PROTECTION

Queen's recommendation signified.

That, in respect of service in the period starting with 1st April 1999 and ending with 31st March 2000, the salary of the Data Protection Registrar shall be £66,290 per annum.—*[Mr. Hill.]*

Question agreed to.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 118(6) (Standing Committees on Delegated Legislation),

ROAD TRAFFIC

That the draft Courses for Drink-Drive Offenders (Experimental Period) (Termination of Restrictions) Order 1999, which was laid before this House on 12th July, be approved.—*[Mr. Hill.]*

Question agreed to.

Economic Stability and Public Services

[Relevant documents: Bank of England Annual Report 1999 and the Eighth Report from the Treasury Committee, Session 1998–99, on the Monetary Policy Committee—Two Years On (HC 505).]

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Hill.]*

5.32 pm

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Mr. Alan Milburn): This extremely welcome debate allows the House the opportunity to discuss the Government's approach to modernising our economy and to modernising—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. I apologise to the Chief Secretary; I should have said at the outset that Madam Speaker has decided that there should be a 15-minute limit on Back-Bench speeches in the debate.

Mr. Milburn: I, too, shall bear that in mind, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and I am sure that my hon. Friends and other hon. Members will be immensely relieved to hear it. The Government are pursuing twin objectives: the creation of an enterprise economy and the creation of a fair society. Creating wealth is the way to create jobs, opportunity and prosperity, but an enterprise economy requires a society in which the talents of all our people are deployed to the full. When we came to office, we inherited failures in both the economy and our public services. They in turn reflected outdated means of making economic and public spending policy. Modernisation of both is the key to creating a dynamic economy capable of sustained growth and reliable public services capable of meeting modern needs.

On 1 May 1997, we set ourselves two key objectives to help to build a stronger economic future for Britain: first, the establishment of a new economic framework to secure long-term economic stability and to put an end to the damaging cycle of stop-go and, secondly, to begin to strengthen Britain's productive potential by tackling the long-standing weaknesses of the British economy with policies to increase employment opportunities, to raise Britain's productivity performance and to build a fairer society. We had to do that against a background of mounting uncertainty and instability in the global economy. The economy that we inherited from the previous Government was set to repeat the cycle of boom-bust that has been the British disease for the past three decades or more.

Mr. Andrew Tyrie (Chichester): Does the Chief Secretary think that the economy is in an upswing or a downswing, or have the Government abolished the business cycle?

Mr. Milburn: I shall come to the details of where we are—*[Interruption.]* If the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Mr. Loughton) would calm down for a moment, I shall have a word or two to say to him before too long. I shall come to the detail of where we are in the economic cycle in a moment.

As the hon. Member for Chichester (Mr. Tyrie) is aware, we have been creating a form of economic stability that this country has long longed for: low inflation, low

interest rates and employment growth. Most outside commentators now accept the forecast of between 1 and 1.5 per cent. growth, which the Government made in the pre-Budget report last November. At the time, the Conservatives and many independent commentators pooh-poohed that, but thankfully, independent commentators are coming round to the Government's way of thinking.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham) *rose—*

Mr. Milburn: I spy an hon. Gentleman who is coming round to the Government's way of thinking.

Mr. Bercow: I fear that it is a case of the right hon. Gentleman seeing pigs fly before his very eyes.

While the Chief Secretary mulls over the question of whether the economy is in an upswing or a downswing, may I ask him another question? What assessment has he made of the European Commission's proposal, in February 1999, for the imposition of lower rates of value added tax on labour-intensive industries?

Mr. Milburn: I know that the hon. Gentleman is obsessed with Europe. Indeed, the Conservative party has increasingly become a one-issue party: its sole obsession is Europe. I remind the hon. Gentleman that this debate is about economic stability and public finances, which is precisely what my speech will be about.

Mr. Geraint Davies (Croydon, Central): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the Conservative party's muddled position on Bank of England independence given yesterday—that the issue should be referred to a commission to look at the workings of the Monetary Policy Committee—shows that, had the Tories been in power, we would have had two years of muddle? We would not have had the lowest short-term interest rates for 30 years and the lowest long-term interest rates for 40 years. Inflation would have been out of control and the economy would have been in chaos.

Mr. Milburn: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The shadow Chancellor is not even at first base on those issues. I presume that he aspires one day to be Chancellor of the Exchequer, but he cannot even answer the most basic question about monetary policy: is he in favour or against independence for the Bank of England? We do not need a review; we simply need him to answer yes or no. I am happy to give way to Conservative Members now if they can confirm the Conservative party's position on this. Apparently, they cannot.

The Conservative party's record speaks for itself. When we came to power, consumer spending was growing at an unsustainable rate, inflation was set to rise sharply above target once again, and there was a large structural deficit in public finances. By no stretch of even the most fevered of Conservative Members' imagination could that be described as a "golden economic legacy". Rather, we inherited an economy flawed by serious and fundamental weaknesses.

During the 18 years in which the Conservative party was in government, Britain's growth was substantially below the G7 and European Union average and we suffered two deep and damaging recessions. During those 18 years, Britain had lower investment levels than any of the member states of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. We also had higher average inflation than any other major industrialised country, with one exception—Italy.

When this Government took office, our first priority had to be to secure long-term economic stability. The events of the past two years demonstrate beyond all doubt that, in a world of ever more rapid international financial flows, monetary and fiscal stability is the precondition for economic success. We achieved that by setting clear objectives, establishing proper rules and requiring openness and transparency in the way in which we do business.

On clear objectives, price stability through a pre-announced inflation target—a symmetrical target, I remind the House—and sustainable public finances through tough fiscal rules—

Mr. Robert Sheldon (Ashton-under-Lyne): Obviously, the Government are to be congratulated heartily on controlling inflation. That has been quite splendid and fully successful. However, there is the problem of house prices. Although there is an attempt to include an aspect of that in the retail prices index, it is not very successful and the matter is becoming increasingly serious. Will my right hon. Friend say something about that problem?

Mr. Milburn: I understand my right hon. Friend's concerns about these issues. In pursuing and creating economic stability, we also want to achieve a stable housing market. I have listened carefully to what some of the major lenders have to say about the current state of the market. My right hon. Friend may be interested to know that the Halifax has said:

"The current favourable affordability position will continue to underpin a healthy housing market over the remainder of 1999, we see no evidence to suggest that the market is returning to a 1980s style boom."

We have been pursuing policies for economic stability by setting out clear objectives. The golden rule is that over the cycle we balance the current budget. The sustainable investment rule requires that, as we borrow for investment, debt is held to a prudent and stable level.

There should be well-understood rules. We have a new system of monetary policy making, at the heart of which is the independence of the Bank of England and its open letter system, and an equivalent and equally important set of fiscal procedures that are legally enshrined in the code of fiscal stability.

We must also have transparency in policy making, with an open system of decision making in monetary policy through the publication of minutes, a voting system and full reporting to Parliament. We should have the same openness and disclosure in fiscal policy, with key fiscal assumptions independently ordered.

Those are the new rules of the game. They are especially important for Britain, which, more than most nations, has been subject to boom-bust cycles and changing policies.

Mr. Nick St. Aubyn (Guildford): The Minister says that those are the new rules of the game. Will he confirm that those rules fail to satisfy the Maastricht treaty in the degree of independence given to the Bank of England?

Mr. Milburn: The hon. Gentleman should direct that question to his right hon. Friend the shadow Chancellor—Maastricht man—because he is the man who signed the Maastricht treaty.

Giving operational independence to the Bank of England for setting interest rates is at the heart of the new framework that we have established. Before the House today is the Bank of England's first annual report to be published under the new monetary policy framework. The new style accounts are welcome. They contribute to the greater accountability and transparency that we envisaged when the Bank of England was reformed. For the first time, the Bank's annual report is on a statutory basis. It is particularly welcome to have a clear statement of the Bank's objectives and strategy, to have a director's report reviewing the Bank's performance against its objectives, and much more information on how the Bank uses its own resources.

The aim of the new financial framework established by the Bank of England Act 1998 is to provide proper incentives for the Bank to make efficient use of its resources in pursuit of its functions, and to make it more transparent and more accountable, especially to Parliament, for what it does. It is still early days, but we believe that the Bank is on the right track. Indeed, that view is confirmed by the report of the Select Committee on the Treasury on the work of the Monetary Policy Committee, which was issued yesterday. I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Mr. Radice) and his colleagues on the Committee for their hard work in producing it.

The Committee's report underlines the success of the new framework. The Government will respond to the points raised in the usual manner. The report agrees that the Chancellor's decision to reform the monetary policy framework has been vindicated over the past two years. I particularly welcome the Committee's agreement with the Chancellor on two key points. First, that maintaining the same inflation target for a period of time adds to the credibility of our inflation policy. Secondly, that the symmetrical inflation target adds important flexibility to ensure that deviations of inflation below the target are taken just as seriously as deviations of inflation above the target.

Mr. Crispin Blunt (Reigate): The Chief Secretary says that he welcomes those changes. The Bank of England's report states that one of the objectives is to manage the Bank's resources responsibly. How can he square that with the Government's enforced sale of the Bank's gold reserves?

Mr. Milburn: That is an extremely tired old tune—a tune that, unfortunately, was partially interrupted during our last Treasury questions. Perhaps that is why the hon. Gentleman wants to return to it.

Mr. Bercow: He wants to return to it because it is valid.

Mr. Milburn: We are happy to debate these issues, but the fact is that, like other major industrialised nations—both in Europe and elsewhere—we are determined to give the United Kingdom a balanced portfolio of reserves, and that is precisely what we have done. We held too much stock in gold, and not enough in other currencies. We balanced the portfolio, and I would have expected the hon. Gentleman, and other Conservative Members, to welcome that.

Mr. Blunt *rose—*

Mr. Geraint Davies *rose—*

Mr. Milburn: I give way to my hon. Friend.

Mr. Davies: As my right hon. Friend is no doubt aware, the report of the Select Committee on the Treasury says that the activities of the Monetary Policy Committee staved off recession. Does it not follow that, had we not advocated the independence of the Bank of England under the Conservatives, we would not have staved off recession—a quarter of the world is in recession now—and would have returned to the Tory years of unemployment, spending cuts and higher taxes?

Mr. Milburn: My hon. Friend puts his case—and indeed, the truth—very succinctly.

The Committee's report underlines the success of the new framework. As I have said, the Government will respond to the points raised in the usual manner, but the key point is this. Despite some of the reservations expressed in the report, now, for the first time, interest-rate decisions are made in the long-term interest of the British economy rather than for short-term political reasons.

There were doubts at the outset about the rightness of this approach, many of which were expressed in the House at the time. It is now clear, however, that it is delivering the goods. As my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon, Central (Mr. Davies) just said, inflation is low, and is expected to remain close to target. What is more, for the first time in generations we can look forward to a period of sustained low inflation.

Interest rates peaked at 7.5 per cent., and the Bank of England has been able to cut them seven times in just 10 months. Short-term interest rates are now at their lowest for over 20 years, long-term interest rates are at their lowest for over 30 years, and mortgages have not been cheaper for a generation. We have been steering a course for stability in what are uncertain and troubled times for a global economy.

Of course we cannot build a modern enterprise economy overnight. With a quarter of the world in recession, trading conditions have been difficult for many firms, and we know that that is especially the case for manufacturers. But, as we indicated in last year's pre-Budget report, the economy is set to grow by between 1 and 1.5 per cent. this year, and by between 2.25 and 2.75 per cent. next year. Nor should we lose sight of the fact that, even now, employment continues to grow. It has risen by 400,000 since the general election, and more people are in work than ever before. Long-term unemployment—I hope that Conservative Members in particular will welcome this news—has fallen by more than 50 per cent., and youth unemployment by more than 60 per cent. Conservative Members' constituencies,

among others, have been net beneficiaries of those dramatic improvements in the fortunes of many thousands of people.

Mr. Oliver Letwin (West Dorset): Why, in that case, did the Chief Secretary—along with his colleague the Chancellor of the Exchequer—decide to tighten the fiscal screws by £40 billion, necessitating those low interest rates in an attempt to rescue the economy from the downturn that he thereby created?

Mr. Milburn: As I explained to the hon. Gentleman during the early part of my speech, when we came to power we inherited an economy that was structurally flawed and, moreover, in which inflation was clearly back in the system—not surprisingly, perhaps, given that the previous Government had ignored all the Bank of England's advice about interest rate policy. They made the classic error which, I am afraid, has been repeated time and again over the past 20 or 30 years. Short-term political considerations forced changes to the economy which, in the long and indeed the medium term, did not prove beneficial for the economy or for other people.

Everyone now sees that Bank of England independence is working—everyone, that is, with one exception. Conservative Members have never supported Bank of England independence. *[Interruption.]* Oh, some did. They are about to come out of the closet on the last day of the parliamentary Session. That is very welcome. A last-minute conversion is better than no conversion at all.

Mr. Tyrie: As I made clear in a speech when the Bank of England Bill was going through, I have been sympathetic to Bank of England independence for many years. Indeed, I was involved in the working up of a proposal for a measure of Bank of England independence in the mid-1980s, when the Labour party vigorously opposed any form of Bank of England independence. It did not even have the courage to put it clearly in its manifesto before the people at the last election.

Mr. Milburn: The only small piece of advice that I have for the hon. Gentleman is to keep his head down if he wants promotion in today's Conservative party, because the policies that he advocates will not find favour. The Conservative party's position was to vote against the Bank of England Bill; it voted against Bank of England independence. It has restated its opposition on countless occasions since then. Last October, the shadow Chancellor, the right hon. Member for Horsham (Mr. Maude), said:

"We would not have given up control of interest rates in the first place".

The Leader of the Opposition said:

"They"—

the Government—

"have given up control of interest rates when they should have kept hold of them."

The right hon. Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood), who is always forthright in his views, said:

"We think it was a big mistake, we opposed it at the time, we said no good would come of it".

Now they say that they are having second thoughts about it.

The truth is that the Conservatives are at sixes and sevens on Bank of England independence. They can see Bank of England independence working, delivering the goods and providing the economic stability that our country needs, but they still yearn to scrap it. They hanker for the days when it was politicians who set interest rates—the days of the late 1980s and early 1990s when they decided to put up interest rates to 15 per cent. and when inflation was in double figures.

Today's Conservative party has learned nothing from those past failures. Making the Bank of England independent has helped Britain to steer a course for stability. The Conservatives would put all that at risk by returning us to the era of stop go, which was so damaging to the long-term interests of the British economy.

Mr. Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Milburn: I will give way one more time and then I must make some progress.

Mr. Sheerman: Is my right hon. Friend being a little unfair to the Conservative Opposition because at least there is some fancy footwork going on? Does he not agree that they have realised what a terrible mistake they have made in opposing independence of the Bank of England? They have realised that they must change their mind and have set up some committee, which will report that they should change their mind and let them off the hook. They do not have the guts to say that they made a mistake and were wrong.

Mr. Milburn: My hon. Friend is right.

Mr. Howard Flight (Arundel and South Downs): Under the present arrangements, does fiscal policy, or monetary policy have priority? My understanding is that the brief to the Bank of England is to set monetary policy in the light of the Government's fiscal policy. Therefore, in that sense, the Bank does not operate independent monetary policy.

Mr. Milburn: The hon. Gentleman, who claims to know something about these issues, should make a much more serious point than that. He knows fine well that, unlike in the late 1980s and early 1990s, fiscal policy and monetary policy are working together. That is right for this stage in the economic cycle. I presume from his remarks that he continues to oppose—

Mr. Flight *indicated dissent.*

Mr. Milburn: Oh, the hon. Gentleman does not continue to oppose Bank of England independence. He had better confer with the right hon. Member for Wells (Mr. Heathcoat-Amory) because I suspect that he might have a different view. Certainly, the hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford (Mr. Davies) has a contrary view to the right hon. Gentleman, so those on the Front Bench had better get their position sorted out.

Precisely because we now have a more transparent, more open and more accountable system of running both fiscal and monetary policy, we can get the two working together. It is not the late 1980s and early 1990s, when

[Mr. Milburn]

monetary policy and fiscal policy clashed, with all the damage that that did to the British economy, but a period when fiscal policy and monetary policy are working together. The results are clear: low inflation, low interest rates, unemployment down and employment up.

Mr. St. Aubyn *rose—*

Mr. Milburn: Have I given way to the hon. Gentleman?

Mr. St. Aubyn *indicated assent.*

Mr. Milburn: In that case, I will make some progress.

Mr. Barry Gardiner (Brent, North): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Milburn: I will.

Mr. Gardiner: My right hon. Friend has said that those on the Opposition Front Bench must get their policy right, but does he not agree that they do not have one policy—in fact, they have three policies? As he has pointed out, the hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford (Mr. Davies) is clear. He has gone on record many times. He has a good track record on the issue. He agrees with the Government. Why he is on the Opposition Front Bench, goodness only knows, but that is not my right hon. Friend's responsibility. The hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Mr. Flight) is clearly maintaining the party line on the issue—he says that it should not change—and there are those who want to kick it into touch with the commission, so there are three different party lines on the issue.

Mr. Milburn: If only my hon. Friend were right—I suspect that it is many more than just three. That is just the Front Benchers. As we have heard, there are many different positions among those on the Conservative Back Benches. I hope that that review of the policy on Bank of England independence continues for many months.

Mr. Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton): May I ask the Chief Secretary a hypothetical question? If there were a danger of the Conservative Opposition returning to government, would not their lack of clarity on what is a key issue threaten economic stability in Britain?

Mr. Milburn: I was going to call the hon. Gentleman my hon. Friend because he was so nearly on-message. He is absolutely right. The Conservatives' stated policy is to return us to the bad old days of stop go, boom bust. That is precisely what we have taken out of the equation by giving, rightly, operational independence to the Bank of England. That is not a decision just for today or tomorrow. It should be a decision that all parties can agree on in perpetuity.

Meanwhile, the Government are determined to go on making decisions for the long term. Frankly, we have had too much of short-termism. It has brought instability to companies and uncertainty for taxpayers. In the modern world, creating a platform of economic stability is the essential pre-condition for long-term economic success.

That is what the Government have been doing in the past two years: getting the fundamentals in place for lasting long-term prosperity. However, stability is a necessary, but not a sufficient condition for a successful economy. Our challenge is to raise the trend rate of growth in the UK. To do that, we are taking action to improve productivity, investment and skills.

We have done so by cutting tax rates for businesses, by investing in science and in research and development, by encouraging competition, by investing in and reforming our education system, by creating employment opportunities and by making work pay through the new deal, the minimum wage, the working families tax credit and the 10p starting rate of income tax.

All those are policies that will benefit Britain both now and in the long term. They represent a decisive break from the failures of the past, yet they are all opposed by the Conservative party. It has simply failed to understand that the old ways of economic policy making simply will not do in the new global economy. Similarly, the old ways of public spending policy have passed their sell-by date.

I say that for three reasons. First, in today's global economy, any country that ignores the need for fiscal responsibility will soon be punished. Secondly, the old annual cycle of public spending produced a mirror reflection in the public sector of the short-termism that bedevilled much of the private sector in the British economy for many decades.

Thirdly, the old ways of making public spending decisions did not focus properly on what really counts for the public—not the level of expenditure, but what we get out for what we put in.

Today, after two years of reforms to get the fundamentals right, we have re-organised how public service is conducted, and we are changing the way in which public services are run. We have made three major changes.

First, we have established clear and transparent rules for the conduct of fiscal policy. The golden rule and the sustainable investment rule mean that fiscal policy will operate in a manner that keeps borrowing under firm control and requires current taxpayers to pay for current spending, because they benefit from it.

Mr. Tyrie: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Milburn: No; I shall push on.

A stable and prudent debt ratio will ensure that fiscal policy is run responsibly and does not threaten the stability of the economy or impose an undue burden on future generations.

As I said, we inherited a situation in which the national debt had doubled and public finances were running out of control. However, our prudent and decisive action has cut public borrowing by £32 billion in the past two years and brought public debt down towards 40 per cent. of gross domestic product. The current Budget is in balance, and, in the next five years, total net borrowing will be lower than in any single year in the previous Parliament.

Only today, I have published provisional outturn figures showing that the control total for 1998-99 was more than £2.7 billion below plan. By getting control over the public finances, the Government are now living within our means. Yet, we have also been able to commit

significant extra investment for our key public services: £40 billion extra for health and education; £3.6 billion extra for housing; and £1.7 billion more for transport. Each of those sums is an investment in the future and creating a fair and decent society.

Secondly, we have been able to plan for the long term. Our three-year spending plans give Departments and public services the certainty and stability that they need to plan beyond the one-year time horizon. Departments have been given firm multi-year spending limits within which they are able to prioritise resources and plan ahead, providing a more stable foundation for managing those public services. The new control regime we have established allows underspends to be carried forward and spent on Government priorities, rather than forcing Departments to waste public money on pointless end-of-year spending splurges.

Consistent with the fiscal rules, we have also made a clear distinction between capital and current expenditure, to ensure that worthwhile capital investment is not squeezed out by short-term pressures, as it has been in the past. We are doubling public sector capital investment to modernise Britain's infrastructure.

Since the general election, we have turned the private finance initiative around. We have signed £4 billion-worth of PFI deals, and we have PFI working in sectors, such as health, in which it has not worked before.

Mr. Nick Gibb (Bognor Regis and Littlehampton): If the right hon. Gentleman has, as he says, developed firm three-year spending plans, why was the Chancellor reported, in *The Times* of 7 June 1999, as saying that he would relax the spending plan for year three and allow Departments to submit new bids for spending in 2001-02—which just happens to be the probable year of the next general election?

Mr. Milburn: I have a very small tip for the hon. Gentleman: he should not always believe what he reads in the newspapers, not even *The Times*.

Precisely the same warning applies to the hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford—who, a moment before the debate started, was twittering on about individual savings accounts and the House being misled. The truth—as he would know, if he had bothered to read the report in the *Financial Times*—is that the figures to which he alluded represent only one section of the savings industry and were only an early snapshot. The Association of Unit Trusts and Investment Funds represents only ISA managers who are unit trust firms. The AUTIF figure, therefore, does not paint the whole picture. I therefore advise the hon. Gentleman to believe what he hears from the Government, rather than what he reads in the *Financial Times*.

Mr. Quentin Davies (Grantham and Stamford): I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for responding to my earlier point of order. Does he agree that he could clarify the position—and prevent any misunderstanding at all—simply by providing the comparative figures for ISAs and personal equity plans on the basis of comparing tax-exempt special savings accounts with cash ISAs, and PEPs with equity ISAs? If he would do that, we should be absolutely clear on the real position and on the record of the new vehicle—the ISA—as compared with the PEP, and there would be no basis for misunderstanding.

As I said in my point of order, the trouble with the Government is that they are obsessed with all types of spin-doctoring, but will not present to the House clear facts or clear, comparable statistics.

Mr. Milburn: I am extremely disappointed in the hon. Gentleman—I really am. I am very, very disappointed in him. Before the debate, he rang me, asking me to explain the position. I tried to do so, and even faxed him a copy of the press release issued by my hon. Friend the Economic Secretary to the Treasury. However, he has sought to ignore all that. The figures that I gave to the House last week were exactly those that my hon. Friend issued only a few weeks ago in her press release.

We know that the hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford and other Conservative Members do not like ISAs, but savers do—and they are voting with their wallets.

Mr. Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Milburn: No, I shall not.

In the first two months since ISAs were launched, savers invested £4.2 billion in them, which is more than was invested in PEPs and TESSAs, put together, in the corresponding period last year. That is what I said then, and it is what I say now. I say it because it is the fact.

Mr. Quentin Davies *rose—*

Mr. Milburn: The hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford has made a fool of himself, and I shall not give him an opportunity to do so again—[HON. MEMBERS: "Give way."] No, I will not.

Thirdly, all of that is built on a new approach that emphasises that public spending on our public services is investment in exchange for reform. It is money for modernisation.

Government today are judged on whether their services achieve their core objectives: educating children, treating patients and catching criminals. Therefore, our focus now is quite rightly on outputs, not on inputs—on the products of our spending, not only on the scale of our investment.

The Government's public service agreements are at the heart of the new approach. Published in December 1998, PSAs are a contract with the people—a promise of lasting improvements in their public services. PSAs establish 350 policy targets and 175 efficiency targets that Whitehall Departments will deliver in exchange for the extra investment that we are making. Therefore, although we are making extra—record—investment in our hospitals and schools, £40 billion of extra investment has to result in £40 billion of improvements.

No one is pretending that the Government are able simply to wave a magic wand to transform our public services—transformation will take time, effort and investment. Equally, however, no one should doubt our determination to do so, or the progress that we are already making.

[Mr. Milburn]

Some hon. Members do not believe in providing our public services with the investment that they need. When we announced our public spending plans, the Leader of the Opposition said:

"The Government has been reckless with Government spending".

The shadow Chancellor—who is not in the Chamber today—said:

"These are extremely irresponsible reckless commitments that you shouldn't commit the country to".

He also said that

"It was madness to embark on this public spending programme".

The shadow Chief Secretary, the right hon. Member for Wells, said that our spending plans

"represent a very substantial and dangerous increase in public spending."

There we have it: reckless, madness, dangerous. That is the Tory's verdict on our spending plans. Now, however, Conservative Members say that they want to match our plans. Their position simply does not add up. I say that not only because of what they have said about our public spending plans, but because of what they have done. In debates on the past two Finance Bills alone, they have proposed to take billions of pounds from the self-same services that they now say that they support.

The truth is that Conservative Members are as much at sixes and sevens on public spending policy as they are on policy for Bank of England independence. Try as hard as they might, they simply cannot escape their past.

This debate throws into very sharp relief the key differences between the Labour Government and the Conservative Opposition. The Government have made the Bank of England independent, creating a platform of economic stability. The Conservatives would remove that independence, and take Britain back to the old days of boom and bust.

The Government have introduced the new deal and helped more than 100,000 young people back into the world of work. The Conservatives would scrap the new deal, and turn their backs on a whole generation of unemployed young people. This Government are introducing the minimum wage and the working families tax credit precisely in order to make work pay. The Opposition would scrap both and would land 1.5 million of the poorest families in the land with a £24 a week tax rise. Finally, the Government are investing an extra £40 billion in our schools and hospitals—£40 billion that the Tories would cut if they ever got back into office.

The Labour Government are building a stronger economic future for our country, but the Conservatives would put all that at risk. At the next general election the British people will be faced with a clear choice between today's Conservative party, which is the most extreme in living memory, and this new Labour Government who are working to create an enterprise economy and a fair society that benefits low and middle income Britain alike.

6.10 pm

Mr. David Heathcoat-Amory (Wells): As the House knows, we recently passed the Finance Bill, which received Royal Assent earlier this afternoon and is now an Act of Parliament. Its contents are depressingly familiar; it is a massive tax-raising measure that the country regrets. This afternoon, we have an opportunity to debate public expenditure, the other side of the equation.

Of course there is a direct connection—almost a symmetry—between taxation and expenditure, because Governments raise taxes in order to spend and spend what they raise in taxation. However, in this case there is a particular symmetry that the Government may regret and that certainly breaks the promises that they made before the general election. I refer to the fact that there is a huge cumulative tax increase and burden on the country, which by chance is almost exactly matched by the increase in social security expenditure that the Government have announced and is already under way.

Mr. Geraint Davies: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: No. I shall give way to the hon. Gentleman later, but I want to develop this point.

It is extremely difficult to get to the bottom of the tax figures in the Government's documents, so we turn to the House of Commons Library which uses figures from Government sources, but strips away the camouflage and gives the true unvarnished picture. The Library has produced a useful table which takes each of the Government's three Budgets so far and analyses the tax increases in the year in question and the continuing increases each year. Thus, we have from an authoritative source a cumulative figure for the tax increases already announced by the Government amounting to a staggering £40.7 billion over the lifetime of this Parliament. That is only an interim figure. If the Government keep to their record it may increase in next year's Budget, but it represents a huge cumulative burden. I refer to facts, not speculation.

The very helpful table that has been assembled for us by the House of Commons Library includes the ending of mortgage interest relief, the increase in stamp duty, the abolition of the married couple's allowance, the insurance premium tax increase and the withdrawal of dividend tax credits that are costing pension funds £5 billion a year and rising.

Mr. James Plaskitt (Warwick and Leamington): The right hon. Gentleman expresses a preference for Library source tables. Will he confirm that there is a Library table that shows that when the previous Conservative Government first came to office, the share of taxes paid by United Kingdom residents represented 34 per cent. of gross domestic product, and when they left office the figure was 37 per cent.?

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: No. We had a proud record of reducing the burden of taxation and the Government are putting it into smart reverse. I understand the hon. Gentleman's attempt to avoid the record, but I am afraid that it exists. I notice that he did not even respond to the point I made, so perhaps he agrees with the cumulative figure of £40 billion. Perhaps he supports it.

Mr. Bercow: We all noticed the attempt by the hon. Member for Warwick and Leamington (Mr. Plaskitt) to distract attention from the uncomfortable facts of the Government's stewardship. Does my right hon. Friend

agree that what he has just told us and what the House of Commons Library figures confirm testify to the uncharacteristic prescience of the noble Lord Hattersley, who observed as long ago as 13 March 1995 in *The Guardian*:

"Labour now has a clear choice. It can either be the party of higher taxation and proud of it, or it can be the party of higher taxes which it is afraid to admit, ashamed to describe and incapable of calculating with any accuracy. It cannot be the low taxation party."

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: I have already given the House the evidence that Labour is a high taxation party. Some Labour Members choose to welcome it, some choose to criticise it, some choose to admit it and some choose to disguise it—but nothing can alter the facts.

Mr. Geraint Davies: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: No. I know that the reshuffle is imminent and the hon. Gentleman wants to catch everyone's eye, but I want to fill in a little bit of the other side of the equation.

I mentioned social security expenditure, but again the figures are opaque. Nowhere in the Budget report is a clear description of social security expenditure. For instance, it excludes the large item under the title "Working families tax credit". Initially the Government pretended that that was not a tax measure at all. They called it a tax credit and pretended that it was a tax cut, but even they had to admit that it is actually an item of expenditure. We find on page 178 of the Red Book that income tax credits

"score as public expenditure under national accounting conventions."

So they came clean on that one, but they did not include it in the table that lists social security expenditure. Instead, they put it in under an intriguing item called "Accounting and other adjustments", which amount to almost £13 billion a year.

When we add in, as we must, those accounting adjustments, we find that social security expenditure will rise during this Parliament by £38.2 billion. That is what I mean by neat symmetry. Tax is up by £40 billion and social security expenditure by £38 billion. It contrasts starkly with what the Prime Minister promised before the general election, when he said:

"as we get the welfare bills down . . . we can release more money into education and health and the services where we really want them."

He also said:

"By the end of a 5-year term of a Labour Government, I vow that we will have reduced the proportion we spend on the welfare bills of social failure . . . This is my covenant with the British people. Judge me upon it. The buck stops with me."

It is perhaps unfortunate that the House of Commons Library has provided us with the percentage increase every year. It is quite interesting that in the three years ending in March this year—in other words the last year under the Conservative Government and the two years of expenditure that we left behind—social security expenditure fell by 0.2 per cent. a year in real terms. That has now been converted into an increase of 3.2 per cent. a year. So the Prime Minister is well on his way to breaking his pre-election promise.

It is also odd that there is no reference to that in the very interesting work of fiction entitled, "The Government's Annual Report". One would have thought that, as it was not just a promise by the Prime Minister but a vow—which, presumably, is even stronger—it would have found its way into the Government's report on their own performance. I thought that the Government understood that regulators must be independent. If they wanted someone to write such a report, they should have got someone else. There is not a word in the report about this vow or covenant—despite the fact that the figures show that social security expenditure, instead of being cut, is rising by 3.2 per cent. a year in real terms.

Ms Sally Keeble (Northampton, North): If the right hon. Gentleman is so keen on talking about the cumulative costs of social failure, how does he justify the £158.8 billion extra that the Tories spent on unemployment during their term of office?

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: We had unemployment benefit and, when people came out of work, they received social security expenditure. However, we got unemployment down. Part of the golden economic legacy that we handed to this Government was falling unemployment. All the measures that we undertook to achieve that were opposed by the whole Labour party—all the supply-side measures, privatisations and public sector reforms were resisted by Labour. I am proud that we created an unemployment record in this country which was the envy of the EU. *[Interruption.]* Labour Members do not like the facts about social security.

I remind the Government that they had a solution. The right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Mr. Field) was put in to think the unthinkable about public expenditure. He did so, and he was sacked for it. By the end of this Parliament, every taxpayer in the country will be paying £17.50 to the social security budget every day, a rise of £70 a week for every taxpayer. That is the price of Labour failure.

Mr. Christopher Leslie (Shipley): As well as cutting the working families tax credit, would the right hon. Gentleman cut child benefit or disability benefit if he were back in the Treasury today?

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: Many reforms are necessary to the social security budget. We achieved an annual cut in social security expenditure by the time we left office, so we are not suggesting that the Labour Government do anything that we did not—we delivered, and we put the money into other expenditure items, such as health and education. The Labour Government have promised to bring down the costs of the welfare state and then spend the money on education. They have failed to do that, and the figures that I have quoted show that beyond dispute.

Mr. Sheerman: I know the right hon. Gentleman to be, at heart, an honest man. In his speech, will he address the reality of the Government's fine economic record in terms of inflation, employment and interest rates? Will he say that the Government are doing a pretty good job? The right hon. Gentleman is describing the great success of his Government, who suffered the worst defeat since 1828, whereas we are riding high in the opinion polls because we are delivering economic success day after day. I know that it hurts the right hon. Gentleman and his colleagues

[Mr. Sheerman]

to be in opposition. Every day they must get up and hope that something bad happens to the Government. However, it is all good news, and it is hard being in opposition in those circumstances.

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: Let us get on to some of the other issues. What about expenditure on the Passport Agency? The hon. Gentleman wants us to move away from social security, which clearly embarrasses the Labour party. The Chief Secretary mentioned the importance of efficiency targets and public service agreements. How come, therefore, the Passport Agency—to take one example—is such a shambles?

We read in the Budget report that there is to be an important-sounding, high-level Cabinet Committee—with the codename "PSX"—to be chaired by the Chancellor to ensure that the performance of Departments measures up to their targets. What went wrong with the Passport Agency? What are the Government going to do about it? They have taken away the charter mark, but will they take away the money? Will the Home Office be punished—or will it get more money—for the demonstrable failure of that part of the Government's service?

What about London Underground? It is a fiasco. Under the efficiency targets, and the tutelage of that important-sounding Committee, will transport get more money, or will it be punished by receiving less?

What about waiting lists? People now must join a waiting list to get on a waiting list. That is a failure—another broken promise. Will the Department of Health get more money, or less? Let us hear from the Government about that Cabinet Committee—or does it meet in secret?

I am willing to refer to other items of Government expenditure, but the overall picture is of a tax-and-spend Government. They have erected two huge pillars—extra taxation and extra expenditure on all the wrong things. [HON. MEMBERS: "Ah!"] That was an interesting response from Labour Members, who apparently believe that an extra £38 billion for the welfare state is the way in which money should be spent. Why did the Prime Minister not tell us that before the election? Why did he promise to cut expenditure? There is some explaining to be done by Labour Members—who must hurry if they are to be in time for the reshuffle tomorrow—of whether they believe in what the Prime Minister promised before the election or not.

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden): Would the Opposition scrap the working families tax credit and reverse the tax changes that the right hon. Gentleman has mentioned?

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: I am coming to the working families tax credit, which is a good example of the churning from taxation to expenditure that is so inefficient. In many cases, the same people who will receive the benefit will be paying the taxes to finance it. People will get the benefit if they have an income of up to £38,000 a year. Those people will be paying taxes to the Chancellor, who will give it to the social services system. The money will be churned round the system, and they will receive back some of the money that they have paid in tax. That is inefficiency and waste.

There is also a direct effect from the massive transfer of money from taxation to expenditure by way of the additional burden on businesses. The British Chambers of Commerce has calculated that, over the lifetime of the Parliament, British business will be paying a cumulative extra tax of £30 billion. Last week, we debated the energy tax. We asserted that the tax would not just be no good for the environment, but would be bad news for manufacturing industry. Industry will be paying the taxes and will receive back only a fraction in the offsetting cuts in national insurance contributions.

We did not know during that debate how quickly we would be proved right by an independent report, published by Business Strategies, which stated that, far from creating jobs, the long-term effect of the energy tax will be to lose 156,000 jobs to the British economy. According to the same independent report, it will widen the north-south divide, and productivity in the British economy, as a consequence of the energy tax, will decline by 0.8 per cent. That is a terrifying indictment of what is admittedly a draft tax, but it is a tax that the Government are committed to—they have already written the £1.75 billion of extra revenue into their Budget estimates.

Taxes are not the only problem; there is also the administrative and regulatory burden. Even Lord Haskins, the Labour peer who heads the regulatory task force, has complained that small businesses are being turned into benefit offices for the Government and will not be compensated. The Institute of Directors estimates that the regulatory burden alone will cost British business £5.047 billion a year. That will cost jobs, profit and investment.

The Prime Minister talked about a new partnership between Government, business and industry to improve competitiveness, and called it a new pledge. I do not know whether that is new for the Parliament or for the millennium, but I know that it has coincided with Britain dropping from fourth to eighth in the world league of competitiveness.

The Government's response is a series of gimmicks. To contrast with the £30 billion of extra taxation on business, they announced in the Budget that they were setting up a venture capital fund to give back to industry £20 million through an administratively complex and interventionist measure, whereby civil servants pick the lucky beneficiaries. That is a completely trivial response to a serious problem.

The Government have treated savings in exactly the same way. They say that they want to boost savings as an alternative to spending on welfare, but they put up the taxes on savings. There was a £5 billion a year raid on pension funds and then we had the administrative fiasco of replacing PEPs and TESSAs with ISAs. The Chief Secretary's response to my hon. Friend the Member for Grantham and Stamford (Mr. Davies) was completely inadequate. The industry is recording a drop in the amount going into ISAs, but the Government deny reports from the people who are actually selling the products.

It is not surprising that the savings ratio has fallen. It has fallen all the way through this Parliament and continues to fall. The Government are damaging the wealth-creating process on which all their expenditure plans depend.

Mr. Andrew Love (Edmonton): The hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow), in a typically in-your-face

contribution, told us that the Conservative party was the only low tax party. The other side of that equation is that it is also the low public expenditure party. Will the right hon. Gentleman think the unthinkable and tell us where the cuts in public expenditure should fall? If he is suggesting the social security budget, perhaps he will tell us which social security expenditures he wants to cut.

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: I do not know whether the hon. Gentleman was listening when I described the Government's failure to control welfare expenditure. We did it; they failed. I am asking them to return to the path of expenditure that we laid down. I have also made clear some of my criticisms of the working families tax credit, which is disguised in the Budget report and perversely goes back to many of the people who pay the taxes in the first place.

The Conservative party has always believed in properly funded public services and we supported the Government's expenditure on health and education in so far as it actually went to the classroom and to patient care, but we maintain our opposition to the overall total of Government expenditure, precisely because of the £38 billion extra welfare expenditure, which, interestingly, the Government do not even deny.

The Government's tax-and-spend policy threatens employment. Part of our golden economic legacy was almost the lowest unemployment rate in Europe: the envy of the European Union. It was difficult to achieve, but we did it by understanding that it is a matter not of spending money, but of creating the right conditions for employment to thrive—in other words, lower taxes and fewer regulations.

The Government's new deal is a very expensive way of achieving not very much. The cost per job is more than £11,000. The money is wasted and would get a better return, even in the narrow sense of extra employment, if it were returned to the businesses and the people who create it in the first place.

Mr. Flight: My right hon. Friend spoke of the risk to employment created by the fall in savings. Is not the real risk that investment cannot be sustained to support the type of stable growth to which the Chief Secretary refers if our economy has a lower rate of savings?

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: My hon. Friend underlines my point about the failure of the savings culture. The Government came in with a professed aim of encouraging savings, and have done everything to reduce them, so the consequence that he mentioned will follow as surely as night follows day.

Sometimes the Government's rhetoric shows some understanding of the issues. The Prime Minister is apparently envious of the job creation record of the United States. When he is there, he seems to realise that lower taxes and fewer regulations are at the root of the United States Government's awesome ability to generate prosperity and employment. The Government cannot do the same here, because they are hooked on the wrong economic model. Instead of converging on the United States economy, they are converging on the European Union economy.

Will the Government now, for the first time, give the figures for the national changeover plan, under which public money is being used to prepare for the euro? Unspecified amounts have been allocated to fund unspecified items on an unspecified time scale. The time scale is in the hands of either the Prime Minister or the Chancellor—I cannot remember which—who are in dispute over whether to hold a referendum. Meanwhile, money is being spent without parliamentary or public sanction to create an impression of inevitability.

Earlier today, we had the hilarious spectacle of a Minister privatising the air traffic control network without using the word "privatisation". Where does that fit into the Government's fiscal arithmetic? The Budget report has a figure of £4 billion a year inked in for asset sales. Is some or all of that to come from air traffic control? If not all, what else do the Government intend to privatise, or is the figure simply based on hope? The privatisation has nothing to do with improving the performance of the British economy; it is all about dressing up the revenue figures.

The Government should come clean about where they will get their revenue from and how they will spend it. The picture presented in the Red Book is the opposite of the clarity and openness that was promised. The Government have changed most of the definitions that the public understand. The public sector borrowing requirement was a term familiar to the House for many years, but it is now called the public sector cash requirement. The control total, another term familiar to the House, has been abolished. Privatisations are called public-private partnerships and, as I mentioned earlier, expenditure on social security is now dressed up as accounting and other adjustments.

How will the public come to understand the taxes that are being paid and their application unless the Government bring clarity to their documents? Those documents cannot disguise the fact that the Government's instincts and habits, demonstrated over their three Budgets, are to raise taxes. It is also clear, from this and other debates, that they cannot be trusted with the resulting public expenditure.

6.41 pm

Mr. Giles Radice (North Durham): Giving the Bank of England operational independence as part of the new framework for economic stability was a bold and courageous move by the Government. The report from the Select Committee on the Treasury was published yesterday and is one of the documents relevant to this debate. It shows that the move is paying off already.

The arguments for the Bank of England's operational independence—for an independent monetary policy—were strongly supported by two former Conservative Chancellors, and by the hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford (Mr. Davies), my former colleague on the Select Committee. He will remember that the arguments for the change were that it would bring greater credibility, more transparency and accountability, greater stability and a better inflation record—after all, most countries with independent central banks have a better inflation record than those without.

The report concludes that it is probably too soon to reach a definitive judgment on the record of the Monetary Policy Committee, because it takes 18 months to two years for the full impact of the committee's decisions to work through to inflation outcomes. However, the Committee was able to say with confidence that the MPC

[Mr. Giles Radice]

had made a highly successful start. It has established its credibility, judged by inflation expectations. Long-term interest rates have fallen sharply, and gilt yields have also fallen. According to independent forecasters, public expectations have not kept pace with the new environment, but the MPC has achieved credibility.

In addition, inflation has been on target, or near it, throughout the period, with the worst outcome only 0.7 per cent. above target. The MPC has managed that without tipping the economy into recession. That major success was achieved because the MPC took prompt action when recessionary dangers loomed by cutting rates swiftly and sharply, by 2.5 per cent. We should also praise my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer for setting a symmetrical target. That has given the MPC far greater flexibility to use rates to bring inflation down and to do so in a way that protects employment.

Finally, the MPC's record on transparency is also very good. We know the voting records of its members and, although it is not yet possible to associate individuals with arguments or opinions, that is a matter to which we shall return. The publication of the minutes is now very prompt, thanks to a request from the Select Committee. Also, members of the Monetary Policy Committee have answered questions with openness and frankness when they have come before the Select Committee, and in public as well.

That is totally new. I remember Lord Lawson, when he was Chancellor, coming before the Select Committee in the 1980s. When he was asked about his policy on interest rates, he said that he put up interest rates when he wanted to, and lowered them when he wanted to: further than that he would not go. Nowadays, the arguments behind decisions are exposed to public debate.

The Monetary Policy Committee has responded to other suggestions from the Select Committee. It has reduced the time taken to publish the minutes of its meetings, as I said. The Select Committee asked the MPC to explain the transmission mechanism—the effect on interest rates of changes in interest rates. That is the sort of question that ordinary people ask, and the MPC gave an explanation. We also asked the committee to survey what the public think about inflation, and to determine people's inflation expectations. Such innovations are very useful.

As I have shown, the Select Committee found that the Monetary Policy Committee had made an excellent start in terms of transparency, credibility and adherence to inflation targets, while at the same time avoiding recession. Although it cannot be denied that those achievements have been accomplished against a benign inflationary background, the MPC had to take into account last autumn's major shock to the world economy. It has not been entirely plain sailing for the MPC, but it has responded quickly and well.

The Monetary Policy Committee has also learned by experience. It has been argued that too many small steps have been taken, moving interest rates 12 times in a period during which the US Federal Reserve moved them only three times. There has been some argument to the effect that the increase in rates in June 1998 was not the right move, and that the MPC was working from faulty information. Even so, the committee's record is good.

The Select Committee report contains some suggestions for improvement. To make the process more predictable, the MPC should consider adopting the policy of the US Federal Reserve bank's open market committee of announcing a bias in future policy after each meeting. That might be a useful innovation.

The Select Committee also noted a problem with the status of the inflation forecast—a criticism levelled by the International Monetary Fund. Given that the Monetary Policy Committee is now responsible for monetary policy, it should assess its inflation forecasts regularly. Also, greater emphasis in the MPC's inflation report on external inflation forecasts would allow comparison with the Committee's own forecasts.

The Select Committee report also identifies an important role for the Court of the Bank of England. It is right that the members of the Monetary Policy Committee should be experts, but the Court of the Bank of England represents regional and sectoral interests. As well as overseeing the MPC, it should represent those interests effectively.

I turn now to the question of accountability. Without blowing the Select Committee's own trumpet excessively, I should like to put it on record that the Committee has managed to establish a credible system of accountability. The system used to be pretty poor—there was no golden age of accountability before the Monetary Policy Committee was set up. Leading academic and City experts now give on-the-record briefings. Those experts include Charlie Bean, David Miles, David Walton, Roger Bootle and Bridget Rosewell, to whom I pay tribute. There are regular hearings on the inflation reports, at which members of the MPC are questioned closely about their thinking and decisions.

Reports are made to Parliament, and today I am talking about the sixth such report that has been compiled. Candidates for membership of the MPC are first sent questionnaires and are then subject to confirmation hearings to assess their suitability, competence and independence. I understand that the Opposition are worried about this last requirement, but I can assure the House that it is checked as part of the confirmation process to which all members of the MPC are subject.

Although there has been one reconfirmation hearing, the Select Committee has been commended by the Bank of England and the Treasury for the conduct of the confirmation hearing process. I should like the hearings to be given a statutory basis, but that is an argument for the future. We shall continue to make the MPC accountable by requiring it to explain its decisions and the thinking behind them.

Mr. Sheldon *rose—*

Mr. Radice: I shall give way because I have injury time.

Mr. Sheldon: I should put it on the record that the confirmatory hearings pursued by my right hon. Friend have been a source of considerable gratification to all Select Committees. He introduced the hearings himself,

and they have been extremely valuable. The reconfirmation hearings that he has mentioned today will be of even more value in the years to come.

Mr. Radice: I thank my right hon. Friend for those remarks, although it is not I but the Committee, some of whose members are in the Chamber, who deserves his remarks.

We want to make judgments on the decisions and actions of the MPC where appropriate. We shall put forward constructive suggestions for improvement where necessary, and we shall report to Parliament, the Bank of England and the Government. It is welcome that the Opposition are considering our policy, and I hope that they will use the evidence that we have collected about the process over the past two years.

Mr. Tyrie: May I give the right hon. Gentleman a little more injury time? Does he agree that it would be a good idea to have more outsiders on the MPC, and fewer people from the Bank? Does he think that MPC members should be given longer terms, and that terms should be non-renewable so that members cannot be subject to influence or the concern that they may not be reappointed?

Mr. Radice: The hon. Gentleman's final two points are worth considering and we have made suggestions on them. The balance is about right at present, but those are matters for consideration.

The House of Commons is often criticised—usually by the press, whose members, naturally, are not listening to this debate. Select Committees also come under fire from the press, although journalists—particularly from the specialist press—at least attend them more often. However, the Select Committee on the Treasury has played an important and constructive role in expanding accountability, and will continue to do so.

6.52 pm

Mr. Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton): I congratulate the right hon. Member for North Durham (Mr. Radice) and his Committee on an excellent report, much of which the Liberal Democrats entirely agree with. The right hon. Gentleman rightly touched on the need to put confirmatory hearings on a statutory basis. A former Chief Secretary to the Treasury—he is now the Secretary of State for Social Security, though we do not know whether he will remain so after today—promised that a Minister would discuss with the House confirmatory hearings for all public appointments once there had been a chance to review their role. Some time has passed since then, and the Government should produce a full report on whether hearings have a role to play in our democracy.

I agreed with what the right hon. Member for North Durham said in reply to the hon. Member for Chichester (Mr. Tyrie). There is a need for greater independence for the Bank of England, and I hope that the Select Committee on the Treasury will continue to push for it.

I was disappointed by the speech of the right hon. Member for Wells (Mr. Heathcoat-Amory), who seems to favour recycling, since much of what he said was very familiar. It would have been nice to hear about the Conservatives' alternative economic policy, or at least about whatever policy review the party is setting up now. He failed to address the key issue in today's debate—economic stability. How would the Conservatives promote it?

The Government are right to make economic stability a key objective of macroeconomic policy. Ending boom and bust—to coin a soundbite—is incredibly important if we are to raise the trend rate of economic growth, to ensure a clear framework for investment for the private and public sectors and to increase economic growth and reduce unemployment.

The Government have been vague about their definition of economic stability. Presumably they use some key variables—interest rates, exchange rates, investment and inflation—but they have never been clear about what they mean by economic stability, and we must try to analyse their performance by examining those variables. The right hon. Member for Wells mentioned the Government's annual report, which was published yesterday, and which rightly referred to the Government's success on inflation and interest rates.

By building on the independence that they gave to the Bank of England, the Government have achieved a good record on inflation and interest rates. Risks remain on inflation, such as the possibility—receding and less strong than it was a few months ago—that the pound might collapse, thus importing inflation. House price and asset price inflation are possible worries, but the Government's record is broadly good, and the forecasts are good. The inflation position is certainly better than that achieved by the Tory Government.

The Government are right to say that both long-term and short-term interest rates are low, historically speaking. However, when compared with those of our competitors in Euroland, Japan and the United States, the record is not quite so good. The Government must be aware that both nominal and real interest rates are key factors in business investment and our ability to compete in the world. A question remark remains over the Government's record on interest rates.

The growth record is also not as good; growth has been relatively low. The Government, with the help of the Monetary Policy Committee, have avoided recession, but as much by good fortune as good management, with some helpful developments in the international economy.

Much of the success has been built on the independence of the Bank of England, an idea borrowed from the Liberal Democrat manifesto. However, how can the Bank's independence and accountability be improved? Our view—established for a long time, and without the need for any review in the middle of a Parliament—is that greater independence is needed, along with longer, possibly non-renewable, terms for MPC members. Allowing the Bank to set the inflation target itself would be a strong move towards independence, and it would reassure markets of the Bank's credibility.

As the Government promote convergence and prepare, through the changeover plan, to move towards the single currency, they will be required to change the statutory framework for the independence of the Bank of England, as the hon. Member for Guildford (Mr. St. Aubyn) said in an intervention that was neatly sidestepped by the Chief Secretary to the Treasury. Perhaps we could set up a cross-party committee to consider how to meet our Maastricht obligations—including Conservative Members, now we know of their greater interest in these matters.

[Mr. Edward Davey]

I shall turn to the Conservative position, as the new review is extremely interesting. [HON. MEMBERS: "Which one?"] The one mentioned in *The Independent* yesterday and promoted by the shadow Chancellor. We are halfway through a Parliament, but the official Opposition—astonishingly—do not know what their policy on the key macroeconomic issue is. The players in the game are the former deputy leader of the Conservative party, who toured Britain to hear about Tory policy, and the shadow Chancellor, who signed the Maastricht treaty. They know all the issues. After a long time in the House debating the issues, they should know their minds—but apparently not. They cannot set out a clear position, and that beggars belief.

Perhaps it is all because the Tories have to do such a massive U-turn. The Chief Secretary to the Treasury stole some of my quotes from Conservative Members about their previous position, but fortunately I still have one from the hon. Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton (Mr. Gibb), whom I am pleased to see in his place. In the Bank of England Bill Committee, he said:

"The Treasury should have the power to give direction to monetary policy."—[*Official Report, Standing Committee, D*, 25 November 1997; c. 90.]

He was clearly against the Bank's independence then. I wonder whether he and his colleagues still hold that position.

As I said to the Chief Secretary, this is a crucial issue. As we approach the next general election, the markets, the people and business will need to know the position. If the official Opposition really believe that they have a chance of returning to power, they need to assure the markets that there will be economic stability under Conservative economic management. If they cannot answer such a basic question, the markets will be concerned about the prospect, even though it seems rather dim today.

The Government's record on economic stability is not completely positive and rosy. One indicator gives many people inside and outside the House concern: the exchange rate and its impact on manufacturing industry. The Treasury Committee mentioned in its report the problems that the strength of sterling is causing our exporters. That aspect of stability and economic management was not mentioned in the annual report published yesterday. There was no mention of the Government's support for a stable and competitive pound, which we have heard in many other contexts. There was no indication of progress towards that. It is worrying, because the strength of sterling is creating such imbalances in the economy, with the manufacturing sectors and some regions being severely squeezed by its strength while others are not.

The Governor of the Bank of England's evidence to the Treasury Committee made it clear that the strength of sterling causes him and his colleagues on the Monetary Policy Committee great difficulty in setting monetary policy. The two-speed economy that its strength has created is a problem, but so far we have heard little from the Government about how they intend to tackle it.

This is a major failing in the Government's macro-economic record. They could act by changing the fiscal policy mix and promoting a debate on what they believe to be the sustainable level of sterling. That will be important in the run-up to sterling joining the single currency. As my hon. Friend the Member for Twickenham (Dr. Cable) has said in other debates, unless we ensure that sterling enters monetary union at a competitive rate, we could lock in uncompetitiveness for years. That would be a strategic error. Unless the Government start tackling the issue and at least promote a debate, there is no way that that instability can be addressed.

Mr. Peter L. Pike (Burnley): The hon. Gentleman makes an important point about manufacturing industry. Obviously, the pound is a problem for exports, but is sufficient emphasis put on imports? The value of the pound means that raw material and component prices are relatively low. Industry gains with one hand but is at a disadvantage on the other.

Mr. Davey: I take that point, but manufacturers and exporters are unambiguous about their concern over the high pound. Often business is not at one, as we know too well from the euro debate, but it is at one on its problems with the pound.

I hope that the Minister will give some sign of what the Government are planning and how they will tackle this cause of instability. Will they turn over to the committee dealing with the national changeover plan the task of debating the sustainable rate of sterling? That way forward could have a real impact on the level of pound in the market.

It may be that the Government have not been clear on exchange rate policy because of their difficulty with euro policy. If so, there is a danger that exchange rates will be a source of future instability. The Government need to tackle that. The prospects for sterling are worrying. It is uncompetitive with respect to the euro. It is odd that some hon. Members think that a weak euro shows what a disaster the single currency is. German, French and Italian exporters are delighted that it is weak. It is not that weak historically: it has returned to the level of member currencies on a trade-weighted basis two or three years ago. The level of the euro is helping Euroland and disadvantaging our exporters. Many businesses in this country would give their hind legs to have such a competitive exchange rate and interests rates as low as they are in Euroland.

The prospects for the pound faced with a weak euro are worrying, but in the next few months there may be problems with a weakening dollar. It is not inconceivable that the bubble on Wall street will burst in the summer. Such crashes have often occurred in summer or early autumn. That would probably be accompanied by a fall in the dollar. A depreciating dollar would be super-competitive, and with a super-competitive euro, how much greater would the squeeze on our exporters be?

Mr. Radice: If the dollar weakens, the euro is likely to strengthen. We would benefit from that, as the hon. Gentleman rightly noted. The nightmare scenario is unlikely.

Mr. Davey: The right hon. Gentleman may be right, but as cross-currency variations are difficult to predict, my scenario is all too likely. The current level of sterling means that this country is not in a good position to face that possibility.

There is a paradox in the Government's position on the euro. They say that their economic policy is successful in promoting convergence, but press briefings and the lack of clarity in their position on the timing of referendum on the euro show that they are not prepared to say when it will be. That is odd. If they are saying that they have a successful policy on convergence, they should be able to be clear about the timing of the referendum. When do they expect their policy on conversion to succeed? Will it be in two, three or four years? I hope that they will come clean. Instead of allowing it to gain currency that they may be ready to rule out a referendum in the next Parliament, they should be more forceful and set out a timetable for it.

Mr. Letwin: The hon. Gentleman is making an intelligent, serious speech. Can he explain what he understands by the term "convergence"?

Mr. Davey: There are the Maastricht convergence criteria, but unfortunately the House is not judging the Government's performance on convergence by them; we have the five tests. And the problem with them is that they are very elastic.

Mr. Letwin: They are meaningless.

Mr. Davey: They are potentially meaningless, as the hon. Gentleman says. That does not get the Government off the hook on which I am trying to impale them: the need to be clear on the timing of the referendum. Some Labour Members would like their Front-Bench colleagues to be clearer.

Mr. Bercow: Further to the hon. Gentleman's reply to my hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Mr. Letwin), on what basis would he be satisfied that the five economic tests had been met not temporarily but permanently? What would satisfy him that convergence was anything more than a meeting of ships that pass in the night?

Mr. Davey: The Liberal Democrats do not share the Government's adherence to those five tests. We do not believe that they are the correct five tests, so we reject them as the measures of true convergence. We believe that the Maastricht criteria, which other countries view as the correct measures of convergence, are still correct. I expected that when I started to bring the euro into the debate I would get a few interventions from Conservative Members.

I turn now to public services. If the Government are trying to remove boom and bust from macro-economic management, they are enhancing it in the management of public services. Their adoption, for the first two years of this Parliament, of the Conservatives' spending plans, followed by the introduction of the comprehensive spending review to try to increase expenditure, is not a sensible way to plan investment in public services. We are witnessing the legacy of that error of judgment early in this Parliament.

One of the Government's three key objectives is

"to deliver efficient and modern public services"

and to raise standards and quality. However, if they cannot achieve greater coherence and long-termism in their public expenditure planning, they will fail to meet that objective.

The Government say that they are using two tools to improve public services: public spending itself, and the management and focus of that spending. There have been a few small improvements. In certain areas, there has been a slight increase in spending compared to what we might have expected if the Conservatives had been returned in 1997. However, in general, the Government's record on public services is not very good. There is a lack of sustained high spending on key services such as the police, education and the health service, but the Government are also failing to ensure that the money is spent properly.

On overall levels of spending, the comprehensive spending review's only real achievement is to stop Labour Members whingeing on about levels of public expenditure. They can parrot, like a mantra, the figures of £19 billion and £21 billion. However, they are not focusing sufficiently on how those resources are being spent, and to what effect. In so doing, they are making a serious political mistake.

Education has, according to many criteria, received more money than any other service. There has been a real-terms increase in education spending of 3 per cent. per annum. Historically, that is not bad. However, if one is ambitious for our children and our schools and one wants to highlight the importance of education, one finds that figure tame, rather than impressive. It is only slightly higher than the 2.6 per cent. real-terms increase achieved in the first five years of the Government led by the right hon. Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major).

The annual report published yesterday reveals that in the fourth year of this Parliament, there will be an increase of 0.1 per cent. in the share of national income devoted to education. That follows a fall of 0.1 per cent. in the first two years of this Parliament. It is not a good record.

Mr. David Ruffley (Bury St. Edmunds): By how much would the hon. Gentleman increase education expenditure in real terms, and how would he pay for it?

Mr. Davey: No one can criticise the Liberal Democrats for not being clear about our spending proposals and how we intend to pay for them. We have published alternative Budgets and costed manifestos. If the hon. Gentleman's party would explain its public spending proposals, he would have a leg to stand on.

We need far more money to ensure that the size of primary school classes for all ages falls to 30 or below. We need to ensure that teachers are properly paid so that we can attract more highly qualified graduates into teaching. I visit primary and secondary schools in my constituency, and it is clear that we still have major cash problems. There is a desperate need for urgent investment in modern information technology equipment. Schools where class sizes for five, six and seven-year-olds are falling are losing money from their revenue budget, so the Government are not making good the effect of their reduction in class sizes on schools' annual budgets. That is creating problems and schools are having to lay off staff.

My constituency experience leads me to believe that the Government are not treating different areas fairly. They continue to view areas such as Kingston as uniformly leafy, as if there are no problem areas or pockets of deprivation within the constituency. I can assure the

[Mr. Davey]

House that there are such areas in Kingston, and unfortunately when so little cash is going around, places such as Kingston are the last to receive any.

Other public services are experiencing significant cuts. The police are the most obvious example in my constituency. The Government said that they would improve policing. In many of their pre-election statements, they said that there would be more bobbies on the beat. However, the number of officers in England and Wales has been slashed by more than 1,000 since the general election.

If Labour Members are in any doubt about whether that cut has had an effect, they should come to my constituency, where there is a rash of vandalism and graffiti because there are not enough beat officers. We have lost more than 50 such officers in the past four years, so that was partly under a Conservative Government, but also under this Government. The police are unable to respond as quickly to 999 calls, to walk the beat, to get to know young people and to try to deter crime. In Chessington, Malden Rushett and Hook in the south of my constituency, there is now one beat officer for a population of more than 10,000. Clearly that is wrong.

It is not only the amount of spending that is important, but how that money is managed. The Chief Secretary to the Treasury made much of the public service agreements that the Government published last December, but it is odd that even though those agreements are an important part of the way in which the Government want to manage public services, we have had no statement about them. There has been no debate about that so-called revolution in the management of public services. Are we expected to take those agreements seriously? Were they just an afterthought in the comprehensive spending review—they were introduced six months later—or a fundamental part of it? If the Government and Parliament are not taking those agreements seriously, we cannot expect civil servants to take them seriously.

We were promised an annual report on public service agreements. When will that happen? We want to know whether those agreements were negotiated between spending Ministers and Treasury Ministers or whether they were a diktat from the Treasury. Were they signed? What status do they have? If they are to be the crux of future public expenditure decisions, we need to know what role they will play in budget setting. Will budgets be determined by those targets for outputs and outcomes, or will they be determined after the budget-setting process? If the agreements are not completely integrated with that process, they will have no effect on the way in which money is spent.

The only analysis of public service agreements that the House has seen has come from the Select Committee on the Treasury, which published a useful report last month. The Chief Secretary gave evidence to the Committee, and when we read what he said about public service agreements, we begin to realise how crucial Ministers perceive them to be:

"Public Service Agreements have different definitions. If you like, they set out agreements within Government, first of all, about the level of improvements that we want to see in our public services, in exchange for the extra investment we are making in those services".

Those agreements are therefore central to the Government's policy of improving public services. However, it is evident from the Treasury Committee's report that those agreements were almost written on the back of an envelope, as an afterthought.

The Committee said that

"insufficient attention was paid to building quality of service into targets".

It recommended that

"targets should be published in draft",

so that there can be a proper debate. It said also:

"We disagree with the Chief Secretary's view that the setting of targets is solely the responsibility of central Government";

in other words, local government and other agencies need to be involved. The Committee also recommended external auditing of those targets and the progress in achieving them. It said that there should have been

"publication of a set of principles establishing the ground rules"

for those targets. The Committee is absolutely right. If public service agreements represent a fundamental change in public expenditure, far more thought needs to be given to them.

Liberal Democrat Members do not disagree with the notion of public service agreements. The movement to output and outcome budgeting would be extremely sensible. We would be much clearer in our minds about what we were trying to get from the money that we take in taxes. There could even be a beneficial effect on spending; Conservative Members might well be interested in that. If we can have greater clarity about the targets that we are trying to achieve with public money, public money may be focused more effectively, and we may need less of it.

Public service agreements are a great tool for increasing the accountability of the civil service to Ministers, and of Ministers to Parliament, because they create far greater openness about what public expenditure is intended to achieve.

However, if the Government are not prepared to debate public service agreements in the House, we must question what role they envisage for those agreements. There are many problems with public service agreements, and it is important that they are got right. I mentioned the domination of the Treasury in the setting of the agreements. We need to know whether the correct targets have been set.

The Government said in their annual report, published yesterday, that they had published 600 targets. Where was the debate in Parliament on those 600 targets? Are they the right ones? Have MPs had an input into the setting of those targets? Can we be sure that there will be continuity and consistency in the targets? How do they relate to previous targets that the civil service has been given in setting public expenditure? Those crucial questions need to be answered if we are to improve public services.

We need to know what penalties will result from failure to meet performance indicators. Will cuts in the funding of public services result? I believe that, if so, hon. Members will be very worried, because if something is failing and the automatic penalty of a cut is imposed, we may get a vicious circle, resulting in a continuing degradation of public services. Those are key questions, on which the House has not deliberated before today.

My hon. Friend the Member for Gordon (Mr. Bruce) and I were privileged enough to travel to New Zealand to find out how output and outcome budgeting worked in practice. [HON. MEMBERS: "Oh."] I hear some remarks from Labour Members. I declared that trip in my annual report, which I published to my constituents last year, so I have no concern about that.

On that trip we learned, as a result of talking to politicians and chief executives of the various departments in New Zealand, that although the system focused attention on the efficiency of spending, there were many dangers, such as the mis-specification of contracts and of targets. In addition, we learned that if one tried to include absolutely everything in specified measures, one could miss out on things such as the public service ethos—on the way the public service serves the whole population. Those problems have not been debated.

We hope that public service agreements will deliver what the Government say that they are intended to—the modernisation of public services and reform. However, the Government made a serious mistake by depriving Parliament of its ability to contribute to ensuring that the PSAs are right.

Mr. David Kidney (Stafford): Can the hon. Gentleman confirm, to complete his very fair summary of the Treasury Select Committee report on public service agreements, that the Committee also recommends that Select Committees review the public service agreements of the Departments that they supervise?

Mr. Davey: I can confirm that, and I hope that Select Committees will act on that recommendation. I also hope that they will act on a recommendation made by the Select Committee on Procedure, on which I serve. Just this week we published a report entitled "Procedure for Debate on the Government's Expenditure Plans". It is a very radical report, and it would also place on Select Committees more obligations to examine expenditure.

On entering the House, I was amazed by how poorly we analyse public expenditure; it is a real sham. The Conservative Euro-sceptics talk about the importance of parliamentary sovereignty. I am afraid that, under their stewardship, Parliament has not performed its key role in terms of parliamentary sovereignty—that of scrutinising Government expenditure.

The information that we are given is poor. It will improve with resource accounting and budgeting, but it is still fairly abysmal. The resources of Members in their offices, and of the Select Committees, are tiny. In its report, the Procedure Committee recommends that each Select Committee have more financial advisers attached to it, to give it support in analysing spending plans.

However, the key point of our report is that the procedures of the House do not allow hon. Members really to hold the Government to account on motions. We say:

"we consider that when motions are directed to future plans, motions recommending that 'in the opinion of the House' increases in expenditure or transfers between certain budgets are desirable, should be permissible."

If we could pass such motions, we could significantly improve the quality of debate on public expenditure.

The House can play a major role in improving public services. I ask the Government—I hope that the Minister will give some hint of this when she winds up—to allow hon. Members on both sides of the House to play a role in improving public services, and to help us to contribute our experiences from our constituencies to the debates and enable—

Mr. Letwin: What the hon. Gentleman is saying now is of great interest. Is he saying that the Liberal party is at least beginning to move towards being in favour of line by line appropriations?

Mr. Davey: I do not see how the hon. Gentleman read that into my remarks. What I am in favour of is a radical revolution in public expenditure management, in terms of resource accounting and budgeting, in terms of three-year planning and in terms of the ability of the House to pass motions to change the Government's Budget. That would be a radical change. I hope that Ministers will accept the Select Committee's report.

7.27 pm

Ms Sally Keeble (Northampton, North): I welcome the debate, which deals with two of the biggest challenges facing any Government—the management of the economy and the financial management of public services. I am sure that the hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Mr. Davey) shares many of the aspirations that Labour Members share about public services. Unfortunately, the Liberal Democrats have not yet produced financial plans that match their aspirations, or plans for service delivery that would deliver what they say that they want to achieve for the country.

The management of the economy and the financial management of public services are two of the challenges that this new Labour Government have met. We have provided economic stability, we have managed public finances, we have ensured that public funds are not wasted on the consequences of economic failure and we have put public money into the public priorities—health, education, the eradication of child poverty and the ending of youth unemployment. Those were the challenges that the last Tory Government so disastrously failed to meet. I want to consider some of the consequences of their failure, and of the leaden—not golden—legacy that they left to the present Government to sort out.

First, I want to consider the Tories' record on the economy, especially the number of unemployed and the unemployment rate. I was astonished by the remarks made by the right hon. Member for Wells (Mr. Heathcoat-Amory); I can only assume that he has not studied the unemployment figures for a while. I have in my hand a list—produced not by the Labour party but by the Library—of the unemployment rate for each of the years since 1978. It shows that, in the last full year of the Labour Government—1978—the unemployment rate was 4.3 per cent. In the first full year of the Tory Government, it was 5.1 per cent. In the last full year of the Tory Government, it was 7.3 per cent., and in the first full year of the present Labour Government, it was 4.7 per cent. That shows fairly clearly that it was the Tories who produced record levels of unemployment and who failed to deal with unemployment, and that Labour has consistently supported policies to deal with unemployment.

I also want to consider the costs of unemployment. The global figure for the Tories' 18 years was £158.8 billion. Under the last Tory Government alone, the cost was

[Ms Sally Keeble]

£48.9 billion. It astounds me that the Tories seem to gloss over the fact that they spent that sum on unemployment, yet they begrudge the £40 billion that we propose to spend on education and health.

Mr. Gibb: Is the hon. Lady aware that, in one year alone, 2003-04, her Government will spend £118 billion on social security?

Ms Keeble: I have been careful to speak about particular areas of spend. Certain areas are worth spending on as an investment, but to spend on unemployment, as the Conservative Government did, was a disgrace. It cost the country a huge amount in lost skills, and cost many members of the public a huge amount in lost life potential.

Mr. Bercow: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Ms Keeble: I shall deal first with incapacity benefit. That cost was also an outrage. Between 1979-80 and 1994-95, the number of people on incapacity benefit almost trebled, at a cost of £8.4 billion. In an era when health standards were generally going up, and when there was a drop in the number of people employed in manual labour which produces the industrial injuries that would be expected to lead to incapacity benefit, it beggars belief that the number of people incapacitated should increase so dramatically. All of us who studied the figures knew that incapacity benefit was simply being used as a way to get people off the unemployment register or as a form of early retirement.

Behind the statistics, the human misery was immense. I shall give one example of that, and of the Tories' failure to deal with it. In Birmingham during the early 1980s, when thousands of people were being made redundant, the Tory Government so spectacularly failed to think about the consequences of that, that the Department of Health and Social Security offices in the city all closed down for six to nine months.

Not only were highly skilled people who had engineered much of the country's wealth thrown into the dole queue with no hope of retraining, but for a long time they could not even get the social security benefits that would have kept them out of abject poverty. That is an example of the way in which the Tories failed to think in the short or the long term about the management of public services to deal with the economic mess that they had made.

Various Opposition speakers said that they supported spending on the NHS. Some areas of public spending are entirely justifiable and are investments, but the Tories' crocodile tears over the NHS are not to be believed. At the end of their period of office, in 1996-97, 137 trusts and 72 health authorities were in deficit. The trust deficit totalled £50.5 million, and the total health authority deficit was £238.2 million.

Within months of a general election, my health authority in Northamptonshire was passing a deficit budget of £2 million, with an underlying deficit of £4 million. That was financial management of the public services on the never-never. It was done purely for electoral purposes and not with a view to the sound management of services on which many people rely for their well-being and, in the case of the NHS, for their lives.

When Labour came to power, we faced the consequences of Tory mismanagement not only of the economy, but of the finances for our public services. Sound financial management is the first pillar of good public services. I am delighted that the Government are sorting out many of the deficits that built up in the health authorities and trusts.

A further problem was the disrepair of schools, as local education authorities struggled to deal with the consequences of the erosion of education budgets. There was also the chaos of London Underground, which had been starved of investment for many years. The same applies to the national rail network, which was privatised without regard for good regulation or service development. That is why the introduction of the Strategic Rail Authority is so important for the sound management of that service.

Our record has been to ensure economic stability and the sound financial management of our public services, to provide the economic framework for financial security for our constituents and to provide the organisational and financial framework for the development of public services. Earlier today, we heard the proposals for the air traffic control service, and on other occasions we have heard the plans for London Underground. At every step, we have been opposed by the Conservatives.

I shall set out briefly what we have done. We provided independence for the Bank of England and established the Monetary Policy Committee, which has delivered the lowest interest rates for a generation. The Tories opposed that. I know that many of my hon. Friends give the Opposition the benefit of the doubt and suggest that they take a variety of views, but almost all the speeches that I have heard from the Opposition have consistently opposed the steps that we have taken.

The Tories opposed many of our measures to boost wealth creation and investment, including the dividend tax credit, which was clearly designed to ensure that money was reinvested in businesses and not just paid out in dividends.

We embarked on the new deal, an ambitious programme to combat unemployment, which would have dealt with the problems of Birmingham in the 1980s, for example. The Tories opposed that. The programme deals with unemployment not just among young people, but among single parents, people with disabilities and the older long-term unemployed.

Mr. Bercow: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for giving way. Given her admirable concern for fiscal probity, what assessment has she made of the effect of the changed rules for the use of capital receipts from the sale of council houses on the level of interest repayments on local authority debt?

Ms Keeble: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising that. I shall answer briefly, as I want to deal with other matters.

There must be careful management of public finances. Although I welcome extra money for housing, I believe that it is right for that to be phased. If a disproportionate amount of a council's budget is tied up in servicing debt

rather than running services, that does no service to the public who provide the finance. *[Interruption.]* The hon. Gentleman may laugh, but having dealt with such matters in real life, I understand a wee bit about it.

Single parents, people with disabilities and the older long-term unemployed were the three particular categories that the Conservative Government kept in a state of welfare dependency. I am particularly pleased that those people are being given the targeted attention that is needed to get them back into work. We are also breaking the welfare dependency culture by making work pay, specifically through the working families tax credit, which will benefit 1.3 million people. The Tories opposed that, too. I sometimes think that they used the welfare state to replace religion as the opium of the masses. They certainly failed to stimulate people to rebuild their lives and be financially independent.

Our economic measures will ensure that there is more money—£40 billion—in education and health over the next three years, but of course the Tories oppose that. In their last five years, they were happy to spend £48 billion on unemployment, but not on health, education or the measures needed to combat unemployment.

Labour has been the party of sound management of the economy and of the public sector finances. I am sure that my constituents and many other people throughout the country for generations to come will reap the benefit of the Government's prudent financial management.

7.39 pm

Sir Richard Body (Boston and Skegness): The Chief Secretary to the Treasury opened the debate with appalling complacency. He trotted out a list of favourable statistics, but surely he has been at the Treasury long enough to know that there is a considerable time lag—never less than 18 months, seldom less than two years, but often as long as three years—before a decision made in Whitehall permeates all the way down to the economy. At least three quarters of the favourable facts that he gave us are therefore attributable to what the previous Government did. None the less, he spent the rest of his time attacking Conservative Members. Attack may be the best form of defence, but he will be blown off course before long. We are just beginning to realise that some rather ugly facts are just round the corner.

Most of us have tried to put out of our minds in the past few weeks what has gone on in Yugoslavia, but we now know that the cost of reconstructing that sorry country will not be just a billion or two, but an incalculable number of billions. Mr. Ian Milne recently tried to make an approximate calculation, but all that he could say was that it would cost billion upon billion upon billion. Who will pay for that? In that country, 30 per cent. of people are out of work and vast areas of infrastructure have gone.

We all know why the situation came about, but it is now leaking out that, on 23 March, soon after the bombardment began, the Parliament in Belgrade announced counter-proposals to Rambouillet, which have now proved to be substantially the same as those which were agreed on 3 June. If that is true—it undoubtedly seems to be true—that bombardment of some 10 weeks was obviously unnecessary.

Who, then, will pay? There is a heavy moral duty upon those Governments who were responsible for that decision. The United States Government have given a broad hint that they will now wash their hands of Yugoslavia; that they have done all that they need. The major countries of the European Union, France and Germany in particular, are in the eurozone. They cannot increase expenditure without increasing taxation. No one could possibly believe that either of those countries will be willing to increase taxation to pay for what has happened, so that leaves Britain. We shall be called upon to make a major contribution to the cost of reconstruction.

How will that be paid for? It is unrealistic to add to our tax burden. We heard from my right hon. Friend the Member for Wells (Mr. Heathcoat-Amory) some appalling figures—a £40 billion increase in taxation. My hon. Friends will repeat that over and over again as a measure of how dishonest the Government have been in pretending that there would be no increase in taxation. It is only thanks to the Library that we have been able to discover that figure. Labour Members will have to defend that £40,000 million and, in particular, the added burden that will now be placed upon virtually every business in Britain. Such businesses will not be able to pay the extra taxes and at the same time invest or pay a larger wage bill. In that respect, unless we are careful, we shall see a contraction of the economy.

The hon. Member for Northampton, North (Ms Keeble) spoke about our public services. I wonder whether she realises how serious are the prospects for the long-term future of some of our public services. If we are to increase expenditure without increasing taxation, we shall have to borrow money, and that means increasing the national debt.

Ms Margaret Moran (Luton, South): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that, under the previous Government, between 1990 and 1996, the public sector borrowing requirement—the national debt—doubled at a cost to the average family of about £5,500, while, at the same time, investment in education was going down and the cost to the Government of unemployment was increasing? That is hardly the golden economic legacy that the hon. Gentleman and his colleagues describe.

Sir Richard Body: Had the hon. Lady been a Member of the House at that time, she would have known that the Government had one or two critics. I repeatedly complained about the rise in the national debt under the previous Government. Rightly or wrongly, I was independent during some of that time. I am well aware of those figures. The situation was far worse when my right hon. Friend the Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (Sir E. Heath) was Prime Minister when the figures rocketed. I was a strong critic at that time. I was co-author of the monetarist papers which set out the pitfalls if the Government carried on on those lines. I can assure the hon. Lady that I am well aware of that history.

Over the years, a large number of economists have urged another way of making up the budget deficit. When we issue short-term gilts and Treasury bills, they are effectively IOUs, and they bear interest. When they mature, there is almost invariably a further issue for the same amount plus the interest. That is essentially why the national debt tends to rise year after year. The appalling fact is that, if we continue on that course, within about 20 years from now, the national debt will, according to the estimate of those who study the matter, have risen to £1,000 billion.

[Sir Richard Body]

The hon. Member for Northampton, North talked about public services, as she did so eloquently earlier, I beg of her to bear in mind what the interest on that national debt will be in 20 years' time if we carry on as we are doing now. We will not then be able to talk about increasing expenditure on this, that or the other; on all the good things about which she spoke and on all the goods things that Conservative Members would like to see spending on increase. That will not happen because we will have to pay the interest on the national debt.

One does not have to be a mathematical genius to work out what the interest is likely to be in 20 years' time if that forecast is right. One has only to look at the latest Budget statement to see that we are on the upward path again. If one looks at some of the other figures, one sees that the proportion of debt-free money in circulation is in steady decline. Some 30 years ago, it was 17 per cent. and it has been dropping ever since. We now have what I might call a 3 per cent. Chancellor, because only 3 per cent. of our money stock now is directly in his hands. Next year, it will almost certainly be 2 per cent. One cannot go below 1 per cent. I beg the hon. Lady to bear in mind what will happen, almost in the lifetime of this Parliament, if we do not put on our thinking caps and consider how we will cope with the decline in debt-free money.

For some half a century on and off, a number of distinguished economists have argued that the Government have exclusive control of debt-free money. Only the Government are in charge of the Royal Mint. Only the Government can authorise the manufacture of notes or coinage. Therefore, they should be using that mechanism—MO—to pay off an increasing amount of the debt. However, if they go on, as they have done for far too long, merely reissuing those IOUs on which interest has to be paid—that may benefit the banks, some of the pension funds and some of the other institutions, but it certainly does not benefit those who are arguing for improved public services—there are bound to be severe and unjust cuts in public services. I cannot believe that any hon. Member on either side of the House would want that to happen. We should all be agreed on that, but I fear that we must change direction in this respect.

We must also recognise what so many distinguished economists have said. I do not know whether I ought to mention Milton Friedman. That name does not always appeal to Labour Members, although the Treasury has imbibed every syllable that he uttered about monetary policy, which is very good. He is one of the many distinguished economists who have argued that the Government should increase the amount of debt-free money to pay for that deficit, particularly when it is caused by an increase in capital expenditure. That is not inflationary. The issuing of gilts and bills is inflationary because they are used as a deposit by the banks to enable them to re-lend, often by a multiple of 10.

My plea to Treasury Ministers is that they should look again at those forecasts for a steady rise in the borrowing requirement. It was clear in the Budget statement that it will increase again next year and the year after, but, in the meanwhile, we may have to accept our moral duty to play a part in the reconstruction of Yugoslavia, if what I said about the Yugoslav Government proposal of 23 March is correct. In all events, I believe that the Government will be blown off course, and when the Chancellor of the Exchequer has to speak on this subject again—next year or perhaps in years hence—he will have no cause to be complacent.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael J. Martin): I call Mr. Blizzard. I am sorry; I call Mr. Rammell.

7.52 pm

Mr. Bill Rammell (Harlow): Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. That is not the first time that that mistake has been made.

We heard from the hon. Member for Boston and Skegness (Sir R. Body) wishful thinking similar to that which we heard in last year's debate. Labour Members will remember that Conservative Members told us that we were heading towards a deep and damaging recession. Those fears have not been fulfilled and I am certain that the fears to which he has referred today will not be fulfilled either.

I am happy to participate in the debate and it is no exaggeration to say that the macro-economic framework that the Government have set in place and the strong public finances that they have established are the best for many years. That does not mean that we will not continue to face dilemmas, that there will not be objectives that we wish we could achieve more quickly and that there will not always be greater demands on public expenditure than we can meet at any particular time. Such stresses and strains are inherent in any developing or changing society. However, their singular achievement, in contrast to what occurred previously, is that the strong state of public finances means that our electors will have a right to expect steadily improving public services and steadily increasing expenditure on them year on year.

We have been able to achieve that because of the way in which the Government have managed the economy during their two years in power, and I make no apology for saying that. The whole of my adult life before 1 May 1997 was spent under Conservative Governments and they and supposedly well-informed media commentators constantly told us that the Tory party was the party of sound financial management and that the Labour party was emotionally, psychologically and ideologically incapable of running the economy sensibly.

Given the previous Government's record, it is puzzling that that caricature was allowed to be established: in their 18 years in power they presided over the two worst recessions since the second world war, the heart of manufacturing industries was ripped out and a huge productivity deficit was established between this country and the European Union and our American competitors. Their management of the public finances meant that, steadily and proportionately over their period in office, more and more money was spent on the cost of social failure—paying unemployment and social security bills—and less was left for education.

The way that the Government have managed the public finances in their first two years in office has put that shocking Tory record into its proper economic and political context and they have received a lot of independent support for it. *[Interruption.]* From a sedentary position, the hon. Member for West Dorset (Mr. Letwin) mocks what I say. He should look at what the independent commentators have said about the

Government's management of the economy. They have a very impressive record, setting in place a framework for economic stability and granting operational independence to the Bank of England, which established greater confidence for investors and the belief that decisions would be taken for sound economic reasons, not for short-term party political gain. The immediate benefit of that—longer-term interest rates—is there for all to see.

The long-term monetary framework is based on clear rules and open procedure. We took tough action at the beginning of this Parliament to deal with the fiscal deficit that we inherited and we established clear rules to borrow only to invest over the course of the economic cycle. All those changes were designed to create a climate of confidence and to generate stability and a base from which we could make progress on public services and public expenditure. It is fair to say that the results of that strategy are remarkable in terms of any historical comparison. Interest rates and mortgage rates are at a 20-year low and, although inflation is at its lowest since 1993, unemployment is still falling. Hon. Members should think back to the 1980s: the Conservative party achieved low inflation, but always at the price of extraordinarily high unemployment. Almost uniquely, the Government have brought inflation down while steadily reducing unemployment and for the first time in a generation, in what is still termed a downturn in the economic cycle, we will not have gone into a formal recession. That is no mean achievement.

In the early 1990s, a different economic strategy had an impact on the lives of ordinary people in my constituency: interest rates were 15 per cent., people had negative equity, houses were repossessed and businesses went bust every day. In contrast, our achievements have benefited the lives of real people. Crucially, they have also created the conditions for steady improvement in our public services. We have made £40 billion extra available for investment in schools and hospitals. Although that figure has been mocked, that £40 billion constitutes substantial rises above and beyond the rate of inflation for the coming three years and there will be a significant boost to public transport and other areas.

In terms of overall economic policy and attitude to the public finances, people want a Government to achieve steady, year-on-year improvements that give confidence to the consumer and to the providers of public services so that they can plan for the long term, not dramatic, unsustainable changes that cannot be sustained in the longer term.

Mr. Letwin: As a matter of genuine curiosity, how does the hon. Gentleman respond to the facts brought out by the hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Mr. Davey), who said that, at the end of the Government's term in office, the proportion of gross domestic product spent on health and education will be broadly identical to that which they inherited?

Mr. Rammell: I do not accept those figures. If hon. Members consider the full five-year term, they will see an improvement. However, on all the available evidence the Government will not be in power for only five years; we will go beyond that. I am confident that we will roll forward the three-year spending review to achieve further significant increases in the key areas of public expenditure.

Against the background of macro-economic stability and sustainable increases in public spending that Labour has created, we have to judge the Conservative's party critique. I think that it wholly lacking in credibility. Conservative Members exhibit the salient features of an Opposition who have yet to come to terms with the fact that they are in opposition. Conservative Members always know which tax rises they are against. They are against the fuel escalator, despite the fact that they introduced it in the first place, and against increases in stamp duty. As they pointed out in a debate on the Finance Bill, they are even against capital gains tax. They also always know what extra spending they are in favour of. As we discovered from the comments of the right hon. Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood), a Conservative Government would spend more on roads. What they never do, however, is square the circle and say how they would balance the public finances.

During the passage of the Finance Bill, Conservative Members proposed amendments that would have created multi-billion pound holes in the public finances, yet they never said that they would make good those holes, apart from general unspecified cuts in social security expenditure. That is an abdication of serious politics in government.

Mr. Gibb: Was not the Labour party elected on the pledge that it could fill the hole—the extra spending on health and education—by cuts in social security spending? What we were doing on the Finance Bill Committee was opposing the tax rises, which the Labour party said, during the election campaign, they had no intention of introducing.

Mr. Rammell: The Labour party has fulfilled its election manifesto pledge to balance the Budget in a way that has sustained public confidence. That is borne out by any election that takes place—it was certainly borne out by the by-election in Eddisbury last week—and by public opinion polls. People trust the Government to manage the economy and the public finances.

Sir Richard Body: I am sure that the hon. Gentleman has read carefully the Budget statement and has seen the figures. There was a balanced budget for two years, but as I sought to explain earlier, that was the result of a time lag and of policies pursued by the previous Government. We are now embarking on a borrowing requirement, because we have a major deficit, which must be made good by issuing gilts and Treasury bills. Next year that will not be the case. That is in the Chancellor's statement.

Mr. Rammell: This Government have removed the structural fiscal deficit that we inherited from the Conservative party and created conditions that give the City and the financial markets confidence that our increased expenditure plans are sustainable. That view is held in the City and elsewhere, even if it is not held within the Conservative party. Thus far, we have substantially won that argument.

The other element of the Conservative party critique that needs to be brought into the open is the clear difference between what Conservative Members say they would do if they were re-elected to government and what the Labour Government are doing. The Conservatives say that they would abolish the national minimum wage.

[Mr. Rammell]

Does the House remember the national minimum wage—the measure which, when it was debated during the election campaign, was to cost a million jobs? The Conservatives also say that they would abolish the working families tax credit and the new deal. Those are all measures designed to help people back to work and to make work pay.

We should not be surprised that that is the Conservative party's attitude. When it was in power in the 1980s and 1990s, it showed scant regard for the interests of people on low and middle incomes. It must be remembered that the only people who were paying less tax in 1997 than they were when the Tories came to office in 1979 were those earning more than £64,000 a year. The only reason that they were paying less tax was that everybody else was paying more. That was the reality for people at the bottom of the income scale under the previous Government: a higher tax burden; higher marginal tax rates for those coming off benefits and going into work; and other barriers that prevented people from taking up work.

With such a record, it is hardly surprising that the Conservative party opposes this Government's proposals to make work pay and to tackle poverty. The Conservative party's critique lacks credibility. It is holed below the waterline, so it is hardly surprising that it is receiving so little support. We have made an enormously positive start.

I wish to comment on two other areas. The first is an area of public expenditure where the Government have made significant progress but where we need to go further—public housing. With the release of capital receipts at the start of the Government's term in office, we produced an enormous boost for housing investment—a 33 per cent. increase over the first two years of this Parliament, and a further 50 per cent. in the three years of the comprehensive spending review. However, we must remember that we started from a low base. During the 18 years of Conservative Government, no area of public expenditure was hammered as hard as public sector housing.

Based on 1997-98 prices, in 1979 expenditure on public housing was £8.8 billion; by 1997, when the Tories left office, it was £2.1 billion. That is a 75 per cent. cut, and the cost of that cut in public expenditure can be seen by every Member of the House when we undertake our weekly constituency surgeries and hear of the ever-lengthening housing waiting list, the chronic disrepair and the human cost of such a policy. We have made a good start. I hope that, as we go beyond the comprehensive spending review, we can invest even more money in public sector housing.

The second area that I want to comment on was picked up in the Treasury Committee report on the Monetary Policy Committee. It is described as the "EMU dilemma"—the dilemma between aiming for a 2.5 per cent. inflation target and reaching an exchange rate parity with the euro to enable Britain to join the single currency. I share the Government's analysis that, if we pursue the correct economic policies in the medium term, we shall tackle that problem. However, the price for non-participation, in EMU terms, is of a higher exchange rate vis-a-vis the 11 Euroland countries. Moreover, those 11 countries are already beginning to see price reductions as a result of price transparency, a huge growth in the eurobond market and the removal of exchange rate fluctuations, which facilitate trading between those countries. Given those advantages, which I believe will increase over time, I am pleased that, in the past few days, the Government have reiterated their policy that, if and when the criteria that we have set for entry are met, we shall recommend to the British people that they should join the single currency. That is the right policy.

The wrong policy would be that recommended by the Conservative party: whatever the circumstances and whatever the national economic interest, the people will not be allowed to decide this issue for an arbitrary period of 10 years.

Mr. Edward Davey: Does the hon. Gentleman support the idea that there must be a referendum on this issue in the next Parliament?

Mr. Rammell: I shall not give an arbitrary commitment on when the referendum should take place. The tests that the Government have set are meaningful, and if we do not meet those criteria it would be wrong to hold a referendum. As I have said to the hon. Gentleman before, given that, on any available polling evidence, those who are most hostile to the single currency are those who say that they would vote Liberal Democrat at a general election, his time might be better spent convincing his supporters of the merits of the single currency instead of constantly lecturing the Government that they are wrong on this issue.

We have put the right conditions in place, in terms of both macro-economics and public services. It used to be said that the prospect of a Labour Government would put the wind up the City and the financial markets. In the current circumstances, the only prospect that would create such a fright in the City and among investors is an opinion poll showing a narrowing of the Labour party's lead and the possibility of the Conservative party being elected at the next general election.

8.9 pm

Mr. Crispin Blunt (Reigate): I am disappointed to follow the speeches of the hon. Members for Harlow (Mr. Rammell) and for Northampton, North (Ms Keeble). Theirs were the sort of speeches that give Labour Members who entered the House in 1997 a bad name. They did not stand back and analyse the wider position, which was eloquently put by my hon. Friend the Member for Boston and Skegness (Sir R. Body). That is what I hope to do in the few minutes available to me.

If we look at the economic position in which our country is in today, we see that we are in a historically benign economic position. We do not have to deal with an inherited debt to pay for a world war. We no longer have to support the armed forces and the military posture that was required to sustain freedom and peace in Europe during the period of the cold war. We do have to deal with the historic retreat from empire that cost this country so much during the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s, and with the debt overhang that was faced by the Governments that followed.

In the 18 years of the Conservative Government, there was an enormous change in the conduct of economic policy in the United Kingdom. It was a victory of the ideas of liberal markets. That was mirrored in the victory

of the west in the cold war, and in the changes in the Labour party. It was not until 1997 that the electorate was prepared to entrust Labour with the government of the country. Its reputation for economic competence had been undermined by its previous performance in office. The Prime Minister, as Leader of the Opposition, had to undertake a three-year exercise to reassure the electorate that his party was fit for government and would not ruin the state of the economy that it would inherit.

Mr. John Cryer (Hornchurch): The hon. Gentleman talked about economic competence. Does he recall that on Black Wednesday in 1992 a huge gap of about 20 per cent. was opened up between the Labour party and the Conservative Government, which to this day has never closed? What does that tell him about economic competence?

Mr. Blunt: I agree with the hon. Gentleman's analysis. That was a seminal event, and it destroyed public confidence in the Conservative Government. However, the picture was not as straightforward as some would like to believe. Everyone advocated going into the exchange rate mechanism when we did so in 1990—the Labour Opposition, the trade union movement, industry and the City. There was an enormous and overwhelming sea of support. Everyone thought that the right thing to do was to join the ERM, and it had some beneficial effects. It bore down heavily on inflation. The danger of inflation in our economy was eliminated in the two years that we were members of the ERM.

The then Prime Minister and Chancellor of the Exchequer staked their credibility on the United Kingdom staying in the ERM, but the markets and speculators took us out because our position was unsustainable, given the level of our economy as against those of our European partners. That destroyed public confidence in the Conservative Government. However, that does not alter the fact that the macro and micro changes to the economy in those 18 years—which have been adopted and taken forward by the present Government, who have gone even further on privatisation in some areas than I would support—show the victory of the ideas of liberal economies in an era that is economically benign.

In the time since coming out of the ERM, we have seen how much more similar our economy is to the economic cycle of the United States than it is to that of our European partners. On all the indicators, the trend of our economy since 1992 when we left the ERM is towards the United States, particularly on unemployment rates.

Another reason why the economic situation is so benign is the extraordinary motor, which the world has relied on, of this unprecedented period of growth in the United States. That is probably explained by the internet and the new technology of e-commerce, in which the United Kingdom has more involvement than any of our European partners, thus accentuating the link between us and the United States. In that context, we must examine the conduct of Government policy and how we are to deal with our public services.

If we consider the wider economic position and tie that to Government expenditure on public services, we realise that things have not really changed. When we consider how much expenditure on the health service has risen under the Government, we have to admire the presentational coup of giving the whole figure for the Parliament in a oner, and continually repeating it so that it is lodged in the public mind as an increase in investment in health. The increase in expenditure on health in real terms is less than it was in the Parliament of 1992-97, and is almost exactly the same as the real increase in health expenditure over the 18 years of Conservative government.

The challenges that the Government must face in dealing with the health service are precisely the same as those faced by previous Governments. The Government have handicapped themselves by abolishing the internal market. They will handicap themselves further by the creation of primary care groups, and by getting rid of the advantages of fundholders and the ability of individual doctors to find the right treatment for their patients. They will have to deal with the ageing population, as we had to, and with an increasing drugs budget. Those issues make the delivery of increased health outputs, as the Chief Secretary told us—it is now all about outputs—as difficult for this Government as it was for previous Governments, with no significant change in the real increase of expenditure on health.

The position is the same for education. My colleagues from Surrey and I went to see the Under-Secretary of State at the Department for Education and Employment, the hon. Member for Norwich, South (Mr. Clarke), about what has happened to the schools' budgets in Surrey. My constituents are enormously confused. They hear the Government talk about education, education, education, and they ask the head teachers and governors of their schools why cuts are being made if the Government are giving all that money. When we analyse what has happened, we realise that the Government have given a 5.9 per cent. real increase in spending on education, but 4.8 per cent. of it has gone into teachers' pay and 1 per cent. has to be added to the pay bill because of incremental drift.

Ms Keeble: Does the hon. Gentleman accept that it is not just the total amount of money that matters, but where it is spent? We took the money spent on the assisted places scheme and put it into getting down class sizes in primary schools, which is a much more cost effective way of driving up standards and providing better education for more children. It is about where we spend the money, not just about how much we spend.

Mr. Blunt: Unlike the hon. Lady, I do not claim a monopoly of wisdom. I would far rather leave the expenditure of money in schools to the governors, parents and teachers, and let them decide the priorities for their school. That was one of the complaints made to me and other Surrey Members, and I am sure that it is echoed in discussions that other Members have with teachers' representatives. They have to make ridiculous, time-consuming, bureaucratic bids to get hold of the money that is controlled by Ministers in their pet schemes, such as the political target of reducing class sizes for five to seven-year-olds. That is the headline target that the Government set themselves, never mind the fact that class sizes for every other age group are increasing.

That situation is mirrored in the Government's handling of the health service. Clinical priorities are overturned to meet the targets for cutting waiting lists. Health and education professions are beginning to lose faith, because

[Mr. Blunt]

the Government's rhetoric departs significantly from reality. They have built up expectations that will be impossible for them to meet, because they have to deal with the same realities in the public services that every other Government have faced.

I want to offer a way forward. My right hon. Friend the Member for Wells (Mr. Heathcoat-Amory) talked about churning taxes into social security expenditure: people pay their taxes and receive them back in benefit. That same churning of taxes is happening in health and education. People working in the health service and in education will wake up to the fact that it is the teachers, doctors and nurses who bear the burden of providing services in the public sector.

In fact, a nationally provided health service probably provides quite a good deal. Spending on health as a proportion of our gross domestic product is artificially depressed, because the Government must deal with a number of competing priorities, and do not want to increase taxation more than is necessary. In a sense, they are denying individuals a choice in regard to how much they will spend on health. Certainly we spend far less on health services than other developed countries, because our health services are in the public sector. The Government demand output from doctors and nurses, and they are the people who bear the pressure.

Mr. Leslie: Is the hon. Gentleman suggesting that we would be better off if everyone paid for their own health care?

Mr. Blunt: My point is that the duty of any Government is to underwrite access to good health and good education services. Until either my party or the party that is in government is prepared to face up to the situation and deal with the whole issue of "churning", and the public sector provision of those major services, we shall continue to engage in what is, in my view, a fairly sterile debate about whether real growth in health and education expenditure has amounted to 3 or 3.1 per cent. Once such matters are in the public sector, and are subject to all the demands of public-sector financial management—as long as the Government do not become reckless in regard to the use of public finances—we shall all be pursuing the same series of efficiency savings.

Mr. Love: It is now 8.21 pm. We have been debating economic stability and public services for nearly three hours, but I have yet to hear an Opposition Member make a single comment about economic stability. The right hon. Member for Wells (Mr. Heathcoat-Amory) refused to comment on the independence of the Bank of England two years on; perhaps the hon. Gentleman will give us his view.

Mr. Blunt: I should be delighted to do so. Let me add that I was saying that we are enjoying relatively benign economic circumstances, which is probably why there is relative economic stability. Personally, I consider it right for the Bank of England to be independent—not least under a Labour Government, because Labour does not believe that the markets can be trusted with the handling of monetary policy. It is probably as well, from the point of view of the United Kingdom and for prosperity generally, that Labour made the Bank independent.

There is a question mark over the make-up of the Monetary Policy Committee, and the rules that underlie it. Those who look at the rules relating to such matters as the three-year term will see just how independent the Bank of England really is, and will see what powers will be left to the Chancellor of the Exchequer in extremis. In general, however, I support the Bank's independence.

I believe that tackling the questions of public service in relation to health and education, and dealing with the whole business of "churning" in social security, is the only way of making a serious difference to our economic performance, if we are prepared to face up to the issues.

Ms Keeble: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Blunt: No. I want to make a final set of points.

Only by making a new contract with the people in regard to the provision of services that must be underwritten by the Government will we make a significant change in the rather sterile debate about the increase in expenditure, in terms of percentage points, while those services remain in the public sector.

Given the presence of the Chief Secretary, I want to say something about one more public sector service. The armed forces are now in crisis, particularly the Army. The strategic defence review, which took place last year, was underwritten by operational assumptions supposing the existence of an operational deployment pattern through which a coach and horses has now been driven. An unending deployment to Kosovo and Bosnia has shot down those assumptions. The Government must have another look at funding for the armed forces.

The Chief Secretary will recall that the budget was determined on the basis of a 3 per cent. efficiency savings target, and that the last 1 per cent. was added about a week before the announcement of the strategic defence review. Most of us regard those savings as impossible to achieve. The evidence is that the Army is now recruiting as many people as it can train at one time, and that people are still leaving. I hope that the Chief Secretary will deal kindly with the Secretary of State for Defence when he next approaches him asking for funds.

8.25 pm

Mr. David Kidney (Stafford): I want to speak briefly about three issues: the Government's achievements so far, some likely future developments, and the contribution of local government to economic stability and public services.

First, I shall deal with the Government's achievements so far. It may be a short circuit to say that I entirely agree with much of what has been said today about their achievements in regard to economic stability. I am thinking particularly of what was said by my right hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Mr. Radice)—an excellent Chairman of the Select Committee on the Treasury, on which I serve—about the independence of the Bank of England and the contribution of the Monetary Policy Committee to our current climate of economic stability.

It could be said that the time for political argument about whether the Bank's independence is a good idea is coming to an end as reality takes over. We are seeing the results of the MPC's work. Even allowing for the time lag

to which the hon. Member for Reigate (Mr. Blunt) referred, it will soon be plain for all to see that the decision was right, and that the Bank's independence has been an unqualified success.

It is on the back of that success that the Government have been able to conduct the wide-ranging and comprehensive spending review that has taken place during the current Parliament. I am impressed by the way in which they have engaged in that zero-based budget building, with three-year—not one-year—programmes for Departments. The real gainers from the process have been health and education, which have received an extra £40 billion, but we should not forget the other gainers. I am thinking of crime reduction, transport and regeneration. Health and education between them, however, won more of the spoils than the other 19 Departments put together.

It should be borne in mind that the application of the comprehensive spending review only started in April this year. We are still in the first of the financial years that resulted from those decisions. I believe that the public will see a real difference as the years go by, and as consistent and cumulative extra spending takes effect.

Moreover, on top of the revenue spending unlocked by the review, the Government have made possible additional capital investment, even within the golden rule that permits borrowing only for investment rather than consumption. I also welcome—this is a rather different point—the separation of accounting for capital spending from accounting for revenue spending, which adds to the discipline involved in ensuring that capital investment goes ahead even when times are hard.

As a result of the comprehensive spending review, there are more modern hospitals, clinics and general practices. I invite hon. Members to come to my constituency, and see the new building that is taking place at Staffordshire general hospital. The review means more beds for the accident and emergency unit, more doctors and nurses—better paid—the treatment of more patients, shorter waiting lists, and more emphasis on primary care, public health and the reduction of health inequalities.

Mr. Blunt: On that point, a new hospital in my constituency, East Surrey hospital, was opened about 10 years ago by the then Prime Minister, but efforts to secure efficiencies and new buildings go on throughout the health service. In the next door constituency to mine, that of the hon. Member for Crawley (Laura Moffatt), a Labour nurse—she was advertised as such in Labour party political broadcasts—the accident and emergency department is being closed and moved to East Surrey hospital in an effort to make the efficiency savings that have to be found in the health service. The search for those savings will go on and result in new buildings opening and old buildings closing. It happened under previous Governments and it will happen under the present Government—nothing is new.

Mr. Kidney: I hope that the hon. Gentleman is saying that he approves of the efficient use of public resources, including money that is spent on our health service. I applaud the fact that we get best value for the money that we invest in health, as in any other sector of spending.

That can be said of education, where extra money from the comprehensive spending review means more new schools. Again, the hon. Member for Reigate can come to Stafford to see the new Sir Graham Balfour high school that is about to be built under a PFI scheme, or the almost completely new buildings of the Cooper Perry primary school—part of the same PFI scheme. There are more repairs, renovations and extensions.

As I visit the schools of my Stafford constituency, I am pleased to see the new windows, new energy-efficiency measures, new security measures and the indoor toilets that have appeared in some schools. School staff talk about new extensions to their schools. I am impressed by the number who have seen schemes to improve the building that they occupy. There is more money for books and equipment. I accept that Stafford local education authority is a pilot for the national grid for learning, but it has made a reality of the grid, with all schools either connected, or about to be connected, to the internet, and it means more money for teachers pay.

On future development, the first thing that I hope to see—it is not in the Government's gift—is the Tories complete their U-turn on Bank of England independence. All-party agreement on that would add to the credibility of monetary policy. I would next look forward to the locking-in of the benefits of the Chancellor's fiscal action to date, the elimination of the current account deficit, and the reduction in Government debt to about 40 per cent. of gross domestic product or lower, leaving the country well placed to take advantage of changes and opportunities in future.

Those include the ever increasing opportunities from the continuing information technology revolution. We will be well placed to withstand external shocks—such as the one last autumn when Russia defaulted on its debt, and a number of south-east Asian economies collapsed—and the continuing doldrums of the Japanese economy. Those were serious shocks. Thanks to the economic stability that we have achieved in this country, we have survived all those shocks without a recession.

I would like the new public service agreements to be used as a tool to ensure that we get value for money from public spending. The public service agreements, the new accounting standards that have been set following the 1995 European standards, which we adopted last September, and the new rules for resource accounting and budgeting that will be introduced in the next few years, will mean considerable opportunity not only for the country to manage its finances more carefully, but for Parliament to have greater scrutiny over the Executive's spending plans. I echo the point that was made by the hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Mr. Davey).

I move to the future of PFI. The Chief Secretary mentioned that £4 billion of spending had already been achieved through PFI schemes. That will, no doubt, continue. This week, the result of the second Bates review of the PFI has been announced, with a recommendation that a new partnership UK ensures that we get value for money and monitor the future development of PFI. Next year, the next round of the comprehensive spending review will take place. I hope that that sees a continuation of three-year budgeting and three more years, as promised, of real increases in public service spending—real increases year after year.

I ask the House to have regard to two offshoots over coming years. The last Budget promised a review of the inter-generational effects of decisions that we make in our lifetimes and in our time in Parliament on public spending

[Mr. Kidney]

and public borrowing. What debt are we leaving to the generations to come and what assets are they getting for their money? The other offshoot is the distributional effect of our decisions. Who are the winners and losers when interest rates fall, or rise? Who are the winners and losers of a decision to increase, or to reduce direct taxes? Who are the winners and losers if we increase or reduce indirect taxation?

Thirdly, I look at the contribution of local government. Never let it be forgotten that it is a major contributor to public expenditure—more than £50 billion this year, three quarters of which comes from central Government, either in grant or in the distribution of business rates. Local government is a main deliverer of public services.

Some national issues have very important repercussions on local government. Establishment of the national assets register, requirements for asset sales and rules on private finance initiative schemes, for example, impinge on the role of local government. I call on the House to ensure that, in all those schemes, there is sufficient accountability in the decisions made by local government. Nationally, there should be sufficient access to figures on the schemes, and to information on the figures consequences on the national accounts—and, therefore, on national economic stability.

As the hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton said, when departmental decisions on public service agreements have an impact on the performance expected of local government, it seems perfectly reasonable to allow local government to have some say in how the agreements content is decided.

Some aspects of national accounting—such as the definition of public spending—have particular importance for local government. Local government is sometimes—in borrowing, for example—very much bound by central Government's control over its spending decisions. At other times, however, those rules can be relaxed, bent or changed. At one time, for example, some local councils had a stake in regional airports and were allowed to borrow extra money that did not count as public borrowing. Another specific example is that of local authorities that still have council housing stock and want more freedom to borrow money, perhaps through local housing companies. The definition of public spending is, therefore, a very important issue for local government.

A growing issue is the earmarking of specific tax income. Hypothecation is currently a very live issue for local government, which is having lively debates on matters such as congestion charging and whether revenue from such charging might be used in implementing local transport policies. Another related issue is how fine income gained by using speed cameras might be used—an issue that I have previously championed in the House.

I should like to make one final point on local government spending. As I said, much of the money spent by local government is provided as grant from central Government, and central Government distribute that money according to standard spending assessments. For some local authorities in the south-east of Britain, SSAs include an area cost adjustment element, which is meant to deal with the assumption that, in the south-east, the costs of employing people are higher. I believe that that assumption could easily be refuted by various figures, such as those produced every month by the Reward Group.

All things being equal, a higher SSA leads to a higher level of central Government grant, thereby clearly affecting most services that local government provides to the public. A majority of local authorities, such as Staffordshire county council, lose out because of the area cost adjustment. Figures from the Library—an august and independent body—show that, for the current financial year, Staffordshire county council could have received another £28.6 million in Government grant if it had received the arithmetical mean of the area cost adjustment received by some local authorities.

Mr. Edward Davey: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that some borough councils in the south-east of England—indeed, in London—lose out from the current area cost adjustment system? One of the most authoritative analyses of reforming the ACA explains that reform would make it possible to provide some councils, such as my own council of Kingston, with significant grant increases. The analysis specifically stated that ACA reform would enable £2 million extra to be provided to Kingston council. Does the hon. Gentleman therefore accept that changes to the ACA would not only create both gainers and losers, but that the gainers and losers would be in various parts of the country?

Mr. Kidney: I currently have in my sights those who benefit from the area cost adjustment. I shall, in a moment, make some suggestions on how the ACA might be improved—although some of those suggestions might not be attractive to the hon. Member for Reigate, who did not seem to favour bidding, which I shall deal with later in my speech.

Most people realise that, in one way or another, the system of distributing central grant to local government is flawed. I think that there would have been a change in the system were it not for the fact—which was just emphasised by the hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton—that there are so many possible ways of changing the system that the Government have found it difficult to separate a clear leader from the pack of possibilities. That is why a lengthy and detailed review is currently taking place. In answer to a written question recently, the Government said that they expected to consult publicly about possible choices early next year.

One improvement would be to build on the success of systems that recognise extra need or innovation, such as the modernisation fund for capital spending and the standards fund for education spending, and reduce the variations in the basic distribution of grant between local authorities. A more radical suggestion that could be considered on another occasion would be to allow local government to raise more of its income and become less dependent on central Government grants.

In summary, I should like to see fair funding and fair treatment for local government. That would lead to a renaissance of local enterprise. If local government was not exactly at the centre of it, it would at least be a major player. I believe that central Government deserve a bouquet for the work that they have done so far in managing the country's economy, putting the national finances in order and increasing transparency and public

accountability. Over the years, the public will benefit increasingly from the Government's stewardship of the economy. It is no wonder that even the Opposition are resigned to seeing Labour in government for years to come.

8.41 pm

Mr. Nick Gibb (Bognor Regis and Littlehampton): I certainly do not agree that the Government deserve a bouquet. However, there is a pattern to their approach to public spending and taxation involving deception, breach of promise and obfuscation.

Before the election, Labour had a problem: people did not trust Labour on tax or believe in its ability to keep public spending under control and maintain stable public finances. At the same time, Labour was making huge political capital from claiming that there was insufficient spending on the health service and education. So Labour, and the leader of the Labour party in particular, made a commitment not to raise taxes at all. There are numerous quotes from the Prime Minister and other Labour Members, including the Chancellor of the Exchequer, to the effect that Labour's spending plans involved no increases in taxation. They said that all their plans for extra spending could be funded from savings in the £100 billion a year social security budget. There are a number of quotes from the Prime Minister who said in July 1994:

"A large social security budget is not a sign of socialist success but a necessary consequence of economic failure."

In October 1996 he said:

"Our priorities should be to re-order public spending so that we are spending less on welfare and more on areas like education."

He made the pledge, commitment or vow to which my right hon. Friend the Member for Wells (Mr. Heathcoat-Amory) referred.

Far from cutting social security spending, it has risen by some £38.2 billion over the three years of the spending review—about as much as the increases in health and education put together. Because of that failure, the Government have been raising huge amounts of extra taxation. They have imposed tax increases by stealth.

One of the many great legacies of Margaret Thatcher's period in government is that no Government since 1979 have been able to increase the basic rate—or any rate—of income tax; so all tax increases have been through back-door methods, by stealth. The present Government are the masters of that.

The Conservative party has pledged low and honest taxation, so we will help people by revealing how much tax is being raised by other methods—from taxes on petrol, whisky and food—so that people in a mature democracy can make a conscious and informed decision about the level of taxation that they want to pay and the level of spending that goes with it.

Mr. Love: The hon. Gentleman talks about low and honest taxation. Perhaps he can tell us about low and honest public expenditure and say where the Conservatives would make savings to create that low taxation.

Mr. Gibb: I shall come to that point in a moment. The Conservative Government got social security spending under control. The Labour Government were elected on the platform that they would cut social security spending and use the savings to fund their health and education plans. In the Standing Committee considering the Finance Bill we opposed the tax rises because the Labour party made a pledge—a commitment to the British public—that it had no plans to raise taxes at all. Yet we have had a plethora of stealth taxes raised by the Government since they came to power.

There has been the £5 billion-a-year pensions fund tax from the ending of the repayment of dividend tax credits. The quarterly corporation tax payments will raise between £2 billion and £3 billion a year from business over the next four years. The fuel escalator has been increased to 6 per cent., and there have been two increases in one year. Now, £8.50 of every £10 spent on petrol goes in tax. There have been huge stamp duty increases, the abolition of MIRAS, the abolition of relief for home income plans and the abolition of the married couples allowance, even for those who turn 65 after next April. There have been increases in the landfill tax and in insurance premium tax. All of this amounts to some £40.7 billion of extra taxation over this Parliament—this from a Government who said that they had no plans to raise taxes at all.

When Labour Members are challenged, they respond by claiming that, during the election, they did not say that they would not raise taxes at all, but that they had no plans to raise income tax. However, Labour gave the impression that the promise extended to taxation as a whole, since all their attacks on the Conservatives were about "22 Tory tax rises". None of those 22 tax rises was an income tax rise—they were all non-income tax rises.

The reality was that the Government's promise extended only to income tax—but they have not even fulfilled that promise. The abolition of MIRAS and the married couples allowance means that people will pay more income tax. A married couple will pay £200 more income tax a year as a result of the Government. A newly retired couple will pay £500 more income tax than they had expected. Now, the Government's promise is diluted further—they promise only not to raise income tax rates. It all sounds like an unscrupulous salesman selling a defective product and referring to the small print of the contract.

The spinning that Labour is so good at has been applied to the public accounts. The Government claim that, despite raising an extra £40.7 billion in taxation, the burden of tax is falling. That is a huge sum of money, and it is simply not credible to say that the Government can raise that sum and not raise the burden of tax. The way in which this is presented in the Red Book is disgraceful. A series of deceptive presentations and absurd assumptions have been allowed to be put into the Red Book, such that it is almost becoming a meaningless document unless it is translated by the Library or by specialists.

The working families tax credit—the replacement for family credit—is now, to a large extent, accounted for as a reduction in tax, rather than as public expenditure. That has the effect of reducing the key figure in the Red Book—on net taxes and social security spending; the figure that people always turn to to assess whether the tax burden has risen. The remaining element of the working families tax credit—which is accounted for as spending—is not included in the social security line, but is further down the table in "Accounting and other adjustments."

[Mr. Gibb]

When commentators come to judge the Government's record on social security spending, they will see an artificially reduced figure.

The Government now accept that there have been increases in social security spending, which means that they have abandoned their claim to be decreasing it. They say that it is increasing by 2 per cent. a year in real terms. However, if one adds back the £5 billion a year of working families tax credit, the increase amounts to 3.2 per cent. from 1998-99 onwards. That figure comes from the House of Commons Library.

By contrast, the same Library produces figures for the Conservative years—including the two years of Conservative spending plans adopted by the Labour Government—up to the time of the working families tax credit, which show that social security spending fell by 0.2 per cent. a year from 1995-96 to 1998-99. As a consequence of the Government's plans, social security spending will rise to £118.5 billion by 2001-02.

Another hugely deceptive device used by the Government in the Red Book is the table on pages 112 and 113, headed "Budget Measures". This used to be used to provide a summary of the effect of the tax changes in the Budget. One could then look at the total at the bottom to see the overall effect. The Government have included in the list several items of public expenditure and classified those items of expenditure as a tax cut. Nowhere else in the public accounts are those items listed as tax cuts. For example, item 22, entitled "Sure Start Maternity Grant", a £20 million expenditure plan, is included as a £20 million tax cut. The £100 winter allowance is a £640 million public expenditure plan but it is listed as a £640 million tax cut. That makes the whole Red Book completely meaningless.

The Government have used many sleights of hand in presenting the public finances. We have already heard about current versus capital expenditure. One wonders whether such a distinction can be of any use, because little of Government capital spending generates any income and because of the difficulty of assessing what is investment: is teachers' pay an investment for the future or revenue expenditure?

The Government have ruthlessly talked of the surplus on the current budget, giving the impression that they are running a budget surplus, when in fact they are running a deficit. For example, the Red Book lists a so-called surplus on the current budget of £2 billion, £4 billion, £8 billion, £9 billion and £11 billion in the years from 1999 to 2004, but the same table—B5 on page 151—shows an overall deficit of £3 billion, £3 billion, £1 billion, £3 billion and £4 billion in those years.

In any interview or article, the Government trot out the current budget figures—total revenue less current spending—in a deliberate effort to mislead and obfuscate. The classic example is how the Government spun the lower growth forecast in the March 1999 Budget. The June 1998 comprehensive spending review report mentioned a current surplus of £7 billion, £10 billion and £13 billion, adding up to £30 billion over three years, despite the fact that there was a deficit in those three years.

The Chancellor spoke of a £30 billion current surplus, but the growth forecast was revised downwards in December 1998, and in the March 1999 Budget we saw the effect of the lower growth figures on the public finances. Lo and behold, instead of the £30 billion current surplus being reduced, as one would expect, it is now talked of as a £34 billion current surplus. How can that be? The Red Book shows a current surplus of £2 billion, £4 billion and £8 billion, which adds up to only £14 billion, but if one adds in the next two years, with a surplus of £9 billion and £11 billion, the total comes to £34 billion. The Government are now including five years instead of three, which is totally deceptive—why not six or 10 years?—and undermines the Chancellor's credibility.

I have been trying to get to grips with what is going on. I tried to clarify the effect of all the Government's tax measures by tabling a written question using almost the same words as the now Home Secretary did in 1981 when he was a humble Back Bencher. I asked how much tax, including income tax, national insurance, VAT and council tax, was paid by different types of typical households such as single people or married couples in different income groups.

That question was answered fully and honestly every year under the previous Government, but the current Government said:

> "Estimating the impact of indirect taxes is imprecise as spending patterns vary widely between households with the same composition and income."—[*Official Report*, 16 April 1999; Vol. 329, c. *388*.]

The problem was ever thus, but the Conservative Government made reasonable and sensible assumptions and gave the figures.

When I asked for the figures on the basis of such assumptions, I received the same brush-off. When I asked for a list of the assumptions used to answer the question since 1981, I was told that they were part of advice given by civil servants to the previous Government that was not available to the public. That is absolute nonsense. I asked for a list of facts, and it is disgraceful that those facts have not been forthcoming.

Clearly, the Government are frightened to reveal the figures. For all their protestations about freedom of information, the Government know that including their stealth taxes—most of which are indirect—in figures for the tax burden will show that that burden has increased hugely.

The Government have raised taxes by £40 billion despite promising not to raise them at all. They are trying to hide those increases and how they are reported in the Red Book. The Government have lost control of social security spending, and are trying to hide that fact, too, in the Red Book.

The Government are famous for spin, and they are spinning the presentation of the public finances. I do not believe that that is acceptable behaviour for the Government of this country.

8.55 pm

Mr. John Cryer (Hornchurch): I wish to return to matters concerning central banks, first raised in this debate by my right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary to the Treasury, who dealt with them at length.

The European central bank represents, in its most refined and powerful form, a feature central to the neo-liberal economic catechism—the independence of central banks. Two reasons are usually adduced to support

that independence. The first is that, given that the matters involved are technical and concern the long term, it is much better to take them out of the hands of politicians—who think only in the short term—and hand them over to clever technocrats who understand them. The second is that the long-term economic benefits that can be achieved by economists are a fair price to pay for the loss of democratic control.

The arguments put forward in support of the first—political—reason for central bank independence can be advanced for other areas of Government policy. For example, health and social policies are notoriously complicated. Long-term decisions and considerations are involved, so why should they not be handed over to technocrats?

The same could have been said in 1939. When Chamberlain declared war on Nazi Germany, it could have been argued—in fact, it was argued—that the conflict had arisen through public pressure stemming in part from what happened in the Spanish civil war. According to that argument, foreign policy decisions should have been handed over to technocrats who had the country's long-term interests at heart, and taken away from politicians and their short-term considerations.

The evidence for the second argument—that independent central banks deliver long-term economic benefits to their economies—is patchy, at best. Even in connection with fighting inflation, the evidence is extremely thin, and the evidence for independent central banks meeting with success in fighting inflation in developing countries is non-existent. Their record is, if anything, worse than that of developing country central banks under Government control.

However, the first argument that I described—that power should be handed over to bankers and taken away from politicians—is the more important. More and more people around the planet are increasingly suspicious of globalisation and regard that process as a menace. Yet globalisation has been a key factor in persuading many Governments to give up control over monetary policy and hand it over to central banks.

Obviously, powerful financial and business elites have a much greater interest in conservative monetary policy and in price stability than workers and trade unions. Many trade unions in this country have secured conference decisions against the single currency and against the creation of the European central bank.

That is the background that enables us to see the European central bank for what it is. It is an attempt by the western European business and economic elite—and to some extent by the political elite as well—to take decisions away from ordinary voters, and hand over increasingly concentrated power to the business and financial elite.

The ability of people in the street to get hold of those who make economic decisions that affect everyone's future, to hold them to account and, if necessary, to turf them out at the next election is being removed. Democratic rights and controls are being handed over to people such as Mr. Duisenberg in his office in Frankfurt. That is extremely dangerous.

In fact, the transfer of power to the ECB is even less democratically accountable than that to the MPC and the Bank of England, where proceedings are reported and where decisions and the reasons for them are clear. In a recent interview, Mr. Duisenberg said that he would not explain which ECB members voted for what because it might subject them to political pressure at home. Such pressure is part of the process of democratic accountability. People should be able to argue their corners and explain why they have come to decisions, but, crucially, members of the ECB do not face election.

By the same token, public services should remain publicly accountable and publicly owned. I have lived in London for 17 years and I have seen a sometimes gradual, often rapid, disintegration in the quality of London Underground. Under the previous Government, there was a concerted attempt to destroy the tube. In his final Budget, the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke) announced cuts of £300 million that would have happened over two years if the Conservatives had won the 1997 election.

In November 1993, I lived in Ladbroke Grove and worked in King's Cross for *Tribune*, a weekly newspaper known and loved by many of my hon. Friends on the Front Bench. One day, the tube system virtually collapsed, and I walked from west London to north London. That collapse was not a result of industrial action, or of bombs planted by the IRA. A piece of cabling on the eastern section of the network, which had been due for renewal for years, had broken, bringing the system to a halt. That happened two days after the then Environment Secretary published, with no hint of irony, a consultation document titled "London: Making the best better".

At least the present Government are trying, through the public-private partnership, to get investment into the tube. However, the process is fraught with difficulties. I have increasing reservations about the possibility of success under the PPP. My right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister has told us that the Government are in exclusive talks with Railtrack on the sub-surface, shallower lines. Why are we talking to a company that has such an appalling investment record? Hon. Members who have read the report of the Select Committee on the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs will have seen Railtrack's vaunted claim to be investing £27 billion over 10 years. However, when the figures are broken down, new investment is actually £1.5 billion over 10 years. That is pathetic, but Railtrack is trying to get its clutches on the sub-surface lines.

There are also difficulties over the return that the private sector will want on investment. The Select Committee considered that 20 to 25 per cent. over 15 years would be reasonable, and would mean about £1.5 billion on the investment made, but why not directly invest public money in the tube—borrowed, if need be, at a cheaper rate than a private sector company would receive—to build the system that people want?

The fire service is also under pretty concerted attack. The London fire and civil defence authority is getting rid of one of the two fire engines in my local fire station, for example. There is no financial argument for doing so, and the LFCDA seems to have no decent reason for its action, but the authority is ploughing ahead in the teeth of local opposition amounting to thousands of people.

Nationally, meanwhile, the agreement that firefighters struggled for in the national strike of 1977 is under threat. The employers are determined to get rid of the national agreement, which safeguards firefighters' pay and conditions. Having heard the employers' side, I have no

[Mr. John Cryer]

doubt that they are looking for a fight with the Fire Brigades Union. That is outrageous and disgraceful. The employers are threatening the terms and conditions of men and women who risk their lives day in and day out, week in and week out, on our behalf. I should like Labour Members to make it clear to the employers' side that we are not going to put up with this; I am sure that we all will. The employers should treat the union decently, get back round the table and stop trying to break the national agreement.

9.5 pm

Mr. David Ruffley (Bury St. Edmunds): A precondition of economic stability is sound monetary policy, which was the subject of a report published yesterday by the Treasury Select Committee, on which I sit. I do not share the optimistic gloss put on its recommendations by the right hon. Member for North Durham (Mr. Radice). I shall therefore direct my remarks to three points relating to the operation of the monetary policy framework.

First, it is too early to say whether the existing arrangements are successful. Secondly, I want to draw attention to the structural defects in the framework set out in the Bank of England Act 1998, particularly the shortcomings in making the Monetary Policy Committee accountable. Thirdly, I want to discuss the role that the level of sterling is playing in the deliberations of the MPC.

In considering why it is too early to make a definitive or sensible judgment on the performance of the MPC, it is important to remember the muted inflationary environment over the past two years. That relates partly to the weakness in world commodity prices, partly to the strength of sterling, and partly to the Asian crisis. But we should not kid ourselves that the MPC has been tested seriously. Lord Burns, the former permanent secretary to the Treasury, has rightly noted that only when there is a serious inflationary shock—a serious upsurge in the world prices—will the House and the country be able to determine whether the MPC is up to the job. It is worth emphasising that the Deputy Governor of the Bank of England, Mervyn King, has said:

"the environment in which we have been working is one that has made it easier to bring inflation down and keep it close to target."

The primary test of how well the MPC is doing—how far it is able to hit the 2.5 per cent. target—is thus not something that we can judge. I am not impressed by the boastfulness with which the Chancellor talks about the target being hit within 0.7 percentage points over the two-year period, because in their paper on the mechanism of transmission, the MPC and the Bank have said that there is a lag of at least two years. That is why we cannot make sensible judgments about inflation outturns. We can only consider forward inflationary expectations.

Hon. Members have already observed that there has been a dip since the introduction of the MPC in real and nominal gilt yields, and that long-term interest rates are very low, the lowest for decades. However, that is not to say that we have entrenched a permanently low inflationary culture in this country. All we can say is that a certain initial credibility has attached to the MPC. Definitive judgments cannot yet be made.

It is too early not only to say whether the MPC has succeeded in achieving its primary objective, as set out in the Bank of England Act 1998, but to make any sensible judgment about whether it has achieved its secondary objective, which is defined in the Act as supporting economic policy, including objectives for growth and employment. The Treasury gloss on that, put forward by the Chancellor, is that the MPC should aim to achieve high, stable levels of growth and employment.

I suggest that we cannot take seriously Labour Members' views that not only have we achieved low inflation in the new monetary policy framework, but we have done so with unemployment in this country lower than in other low-inflation countries on the continent. Surely, and regrettably, we must expect unemployment to rise. We have yet to see the full effects of the social chapter on the British labour market. We have yet to see the full effects of the fairness at work proposals in the Employment Relations Bill, which has been through its final stages in the House this week. Unemployment will go up. What will the Monetary Policy Committee do then; and how will it interpret its secondary objective, as defined in the 1998 Act?

The best way to illustrate my first point about whether it is too early to tell if the MPC has been successful is to consider the reaction to the increase in base rates of 25 basis points in June 1998. At the time, commentators observed, as they still do, that it was a mistake. The distinguished economist Roger Bootle observed that the decision may in itself have contributed to a lack of confidence the following autumn. The TUC observed that the evidence simply did not support an increase at that time. William Keegan, the distinguished economic commentator, observed at the time that the MPC did not pay proper attention to business surveys; indeed, it ignored them. That is why the Treasury Committee observed:

"It is too early to be sure that the interest rate increase of June 1998 was not a potentially serious mistake."

My second main point is that we should ask ourselves whether the new monetary policy framework is accountable to this place and to the country at large. It is not enough for an independent monetary policy merely to hit an inflation target of 2.5 per cent. or anything else. Surely it is important for the process to have democratic legitimacy. The current system lacks such legitimacy. There is a democratic deficit.

In opposing that view, proponents of the MPC, who think that it cannot be improved at all, point out that minutes are now produced two weeks after meetings—formerly they were produced six weeks afterwards—that voting records are disclosed in those minutes, and that there can be a public debate about the contents of the minutes. That does not amount to much accountability, and it is not enough by a long chalk.

The Governor and members of the MPC said in their evidence that they are very responsive to demands for information about their activities. The Governor made the curious observation that he makes many speeches and talks to the business community a great deal. Members of the committee said that they would make sure that the Bank's regional agents got out more. Mervyn King suggested that he would conduct public opinion polls through the Bank to find out what the public thought about what was going on. That is pretty thin fare.

The Treasury Select Committee has at least made a start by agreeing to a recommendation to toughen up the accountability that is so sadly lacking in the current arrangements.

One suggestion is that the MPC hold its monthly meetings outside Threadneedle street and away from London, in towns and cities the length and breadth of the country. One hopes that it would at least make a splash in the local newspaper and with the local business community. I am making an early bid for one such meeting to be held in the town of Bury St. Edmunds. I do not see why the Monetary Policy Committee should not be exposed to what life is like in the real economy—not only in big regional centres, but in market towns and rural areas. I shall write to the Governor of the Bank of England, extending that invitation to him. It is important to emphasise that point, because the Select Committee, with cross-party agreement, remarked that it was

"surprising that no presentation of the differential effects of monetary policy on sectors of the economy and on regions has been made by the Bank since the MPC was formed."

That is a lamentable omission.

There are other ways in which we can ensure that the MPC is more accountable. In particular, we can ensure that not only the voting record but the views of each member of the MPC are disclosed. It might be argued that if members of the committee think that all their views will be recorded and attributed to them, they will be inhibited from free decision making, but that is not a convincing argument. We look forward to the recording of individual views, so that we may judge over a period the performance of individual members of the committee, and decide whether they are good at, or bad at, their job.

Most important, we need to ensure that the confirmatory hearings, which all members of the Committee believe are a good idea, are placed on a statutory basis. Few of us were convinced by the Chancellor's view on the subject. He said that the very fact that nominees had to come before the Select Committee ensured that they did their homework, and that they were prepared to answer difficult questions. We need more than that. The Select Committee must have teeth—the power to veto nominees with which it is not happy. In that connection, the Select Committee would be standing in the shoes of Parliament as a whole in ensuring that there was some democratic accountability on the part of the MPC and its members.

Mr. Kidney: Before the hon. Gentleman leaves the point about confirmatory hearings, can he confirm what he said about the veto? That is certainly not part of the practice of the Treasury Select Committee, or of the recommendation that it made, during the passage of the Bill that became the Bank of England Act 1998, about the procedure for confirmatory hearings.

Mr. Ruffley: I see it as a natural future extension of the request from the Select Committee this week that the confirmatory hearings be placed on a statutory basis.

My third and final point concerns the high level of sterling. We know that there is an implicit dilemma in achieving convergence on interest rates and inflation rates in preparation for joining the euro, in achieving an inflation objective of 2.5 per cent., and in getting sterling down so that it is at a level ready for entry to the eurozone. I did not find the answers that we received from the Chancellor about whether that was a future possibility convincing. He talked about his current intention. He did not rule out the—probably covert—pursuit of an exchange rate policy while aiming to achieve an inflation objective. We shall wait with interest to see how the Government get sterling down—as they will have to if they seek entry to the European single currency.

Finally, the shadow Chancellor announced this week that he would institute a commission to look at all the issues of which I speak—the absence of accountability, and the fact that we do not know whether the MPC has performed properly or not. Given that the Labour party did not tell us two days before the election about its position on an independent monetary policy, it is entirely right and proper that, two years before the next general election, we have a considered—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order.

9.20 pm

Mr. Christopher Leslie (Shipley): Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for calling me this evening.

The hon. Member for Bury St. Edmunds (Mr. Ruffley) has been very brave this evening. He is one of the few hon. Members on the Opposition Benches who voluntarily raised the issue of Bank of England independence, and the wonderful independent commission that the shadow Chancellor has set up—under his own stewardship. The shadow Chancellor is to chair his own commission that will consider whether the Conservatives should do a U-turn on their policy on Bank of England independence. How ignominious, how humiliating for them!

In the wide-ranging debate tonight on economic stability and public services, the Conservatives had a great opportunity to oppose the Government and to show the world and the voters what their alternative would be and what their policies are. They have failed abysmally. Why? Because the Government are so successful with their economic policies, with the way in which the economy has been performing, and with the public expenditure plans that we have put in place, which leave so little to be criticised.

Most of the attacks on the Government have focused on welfare, on various statistical anomalies that the Opposition like to talk about, on whether ISAs have been sufficiently successful, and of course on the perennial subject of Europe. The Conservatives were so desperate for hon. Members to help them out that even those on the Front Bench had to intervene on each other—an unprecedented parliamentary occasion. The Clerks looked extremely perplexed at that interesting innovation. The public outside will have to realise that that was a symptom of a failure to attack a Government who have been performing so well.

Let us look at the state of the economy. Consumer spending is picking up well—2.5 per cent. in July. The growth in gross domestic product is coming into line with the Treasury prediction, coming in at 0.9 per cent. in July. Unemployment, simultaneously with low inflation, has come down from 1.58 million in January to 1.4 million in July.

Headline inflation is now very low—1.2 per cent. in July—which helps pensioners and savers in particular by stopping savings being eroded and ensures that people are

[Mr. Christopher Leslie]

rewarded for thrift and cautious planning for their future. I know that my constituents are extremely grateful to the Government for their policies, which have put in place such low inflation levels.

That is the true characteristic of a one-nation party, because inflation at its present low level helps everyone. People can plan for the future with the certain knowledge that their savings and money will not be eaten away by other external factors. Our record on inflation is highly commendable. Over the summer months, we should continue to repeat how that contrasts with the Conservative record of prolonged double-digit inflation during the 1980s.

Interest rates are extremely low, and mortgage rates are at their lowest for a generation. Home owners across the country and especially in Shipley are pleased that they have been able to plan for the future and borrow at an affordable rate.

Even manufacturing output is edging upwards. Things are looking up for the economy. We have managed to steer ourselves through difficult international times by maintaining a careful course of stability, and by focusing on getting monetary policy and fiscal policy to work together in such a clever relationship.

The monetary policy framework that we have put in place and the independence of the Bank of England have been a success. I should be interested to hear from the hon. Member for West Dorset (Mr. Letwin) his party's policy on the Bank of England's independence. I know that there are many different views, but does he agree with, for example, the shadow Chancellor who, only nine months ago, said, "We would not have given up control of interest rates in the first place", or with the right hon. Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood), then the shadow Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, now the shadow Minister for Transport, who called it a wrong idea and a big mistake?

Many Conservative Front-Bench spokesmen castigated the Government's policies, saying how dreadful and horrible it was that we were creating greater objectivity in monetary policy. Now, when they see the success that the policy has engendered, the only criticism that they have is exemplified by the empty Benches opposite. This is a sad and embarrassing day for them. It is degrading for the Front-Bench spokesmen. We shall watch their U-turn with great pleasure and relish during the summer months.

I shall be interested to know what will happen to the Conservative party's fiscal policy during the summer months. It has made many spending commitments. Just tonight we have heard talk of the Territorial Army, and the hon. Member for Reigate (Mr. Blunt) pleaded for more money for defence. Earlier in the day, the shadow Home Secretary asked for tax relief for donations to political parties. Apparently, the odd couple of dozen million pounds does not matter too much.

Earlier in the week, we heard the Conservatives' policy on London Underground. Instead of investing in London Underground, they want to privatise it and use the proceeds to pay for however many dozen new road schemes the right hon. Member for Wokingham recently put in his new transport policy document. London Members in particular will be curious to know whether the Conservatives intend that any proceeds from the privatisation of London Underground should be ring-fenced for reinvestment in London, or whether it is now Conservative policy to spend that money in the rest of the country. I suspect that Lord Archer, in his campaign to become London mayor, will find that a difficult circle to square.

A Conservative Front-Bench spokesman has committed himself to an extra £227 million for the police budget. Even the *Scunthorpe Evening Telegraph* makes it clear that the Conservatives have committed themselves to massive extra expenditure. In March, its headline was "Hague's promise of free travel" for sixth form students. Their spending commitments are being piled on top of each other.

The problem is that such commitments simultaneously undermine the Exchequer revenue. The Conservatives commit themselves to more and more expenditure, but at the same time undermine what is available for the public sector. As the Chief Secretary said earlier, on the past few Finance Bills the Conservatives opposed any changes to advance corporation tax, and they wanted to stop the changes to gambling duties. They argued in favour of retaining the foreign earnings deduction loophole. It is not clear whether that was for the benefit of Michael Ashcroft or others. A great policy is emerging to halve the rate of bingo duty. That should be at the forefront of their manifesto. They oppose the fuel and tobacco duty escalator and stamp duty. They may be only minor amounts, but they add up to a lot of lost revenue—£11 billion in this financial year. Such amounts are significant shortfalls. That money should and could be spent, and is being spent by the Government, on health and education. The Conservatives could not deliver that, particularly with all the other spending pledges that they have made.

The Conservatives have a lot to answer for and, during the coming months and years in advance of the general election, the public will be less and less convinced by the Conservatives' abysmal failure to attack the Government. The risk that they pose, and the threat that the British people would face should they ever be returned to office, becomes clearer and clearer when their policies are compared with the stability and prosperity engendered by the Labour Government.

9.30 pm

Mr. Oliver Letwin (West Dorset): It is extremely useful for the House to debate public expenditure and the economy, and the fascinating speech of my hon. Friend the Member for Bury St. Edmunds (Mr. Ruffley) provided evidence of that—it was an education for us all. I hope that the Economic Secretary will either tell us that she will induce the Leader of the House to provide another such occasion or let us into the secret of when there will be one. Clearly, we should have such debates more often.

The debate occurs against a certain background. It centres on certain facts; the causes, the concealment and the effects of those facts; and certain contrasts. What is that background? My hon. Friends the Members for Reigate (Mr. Blunt) and for Boston and Skegness (Sir R. Body) made it quite clear: over 18 years, the economy experienced probably the most radical micro-economic surgery in economic history that has ever been experienced by any sick patient. It created not only

a golden economic legacy, but a fundamentally sound economy. *[Interruption.]* Labour Members are regaling themselves with amusements, as I rather imagined that they would, so they will be interested to know that that view is propagated by the organisation that is well known to be a mere proponent of the Conservative party—the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development.

Now we move on to certain facts, which have come out well in the debate. We owe a great deal to the hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Mr. Davey) who, in an interesting speech, spelt out clearly what has happened in respect of the well-known vast increases in spending on health and education. In a number of speeches, my hon. Friends brought out the fact that there is an extraordinary contrast between what everybody believes is the case—spending on health and education is huge—and what we see in our schools and hospitals and what we hear. Why is there such a contrast? Because there has not been any huge increase in health and education spending.

Health and education spending will be broadly the same as a proportion of gross domestic product at the end of the Government's tenure as it was at the beginning and the rates of increase will be broadly similar to those achieved under the previous Government. That is why the shadow Chancellor, my right hon. Friend the Member for Horsham (Mr. Maude)—when all those matters were first being discussed and contrary to myths that have been propagated from time to time—said:

"The Chancellor hopes that we will oppose his plans to spend more money on health and education, but I am going to disappoint him."—[*Official Report*, 14 July 1998; Vol. 316, c. 195.]

We were able to disappoint him on that score because not much more money is being spent at all, but something else is happening.

Mr. Rammell: If those expenditure plans do not amount to a great deal more than the expenditure plans of the previous Conservative Government, why were they described as reckless and unsustainable when they were introduced by this Government?

Mr. Letwin: I shall return to the reckless and unsustainable spending with a vengeance; we will get to that in a moment and the hon. Gentleman will be more than satisfied on that score.

Something else has happened and we have another fact to consider. My hon. Friend the Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton (Mr. Gibb), who gave us a classically forensic exposition, brought it out, as did my right hon. Friend the Member for Wells (Mr. Heathcoat-Amory) before him. There have been £40 billion of stealth taxes—£1,500 for every taxpayer in this country. People have had £40 billion extra of tax money taken from them; it has been popped into the Chancellor's coffers and there has been no noticeable additional spending on health and education compared with the previous position.

What has caused that apparent anomaly? The reckless and extravagant spending to which the hon. Member for Harlow (Mr. Rammell) referred: £70 a month for each person in this country—or £38 billion a year extra—will be spent on welfare by the end of the period. That has come out clearly in the debate, but the extent to which the future has been mortgaged has not. Post-dated cheques are being issued. Growth in welfare spending creates growth in welfare spending, the more so when the incentives that it creates are misconceived—a 69 per cent. withdrawal rate has been imposed on a huge new section of the population—and people are given incentives to behave in ways that are likely to make them more, rather than less, dependent in the future.

That is the reality of the so-called "welfare reform". It is not welfare reform; it is welfare increase. It is not even welfare increase; it is spending increase on welfare, which will diminish welfare in the true sense. My hon. Friend the Member for Boston and Skegness referred to it as a set of IOUs. It is not welfare into work—

Mr. Milburn: It is torture.

Mr. Letwin: It is certainly torture. It will be torture for large numbers of taxpayers for many years to come because they will have to continue to foot the bills not just of this Administration but of many Administrations to come.

Mr. Edward Davey: I do not agree with the hon. Gentleman's analysis. If one looks at the percentage of national income that goes into tax, expenditure and borrowing, the percentage that is taken in tax is more or less the same under this Government as it was under the previous one and the percentage on expenditure is more or less the same. The only change is the percentage on borrowing, which has gone down.

Mr. Letwin: The hon. Gentleman brings me to my next point: the figures look like that so long as one relies on concealment, which has bedevilled this whole debate recently. My hon. Friend the Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton brought this issue out extremely clearly. I challenge any Labour Member who cares to spend a nightmare holiday on the beach to peruse the Chancellor's ghastly document—some will have done so already—and to make sense of it. It is never easy to make sense of the public accounts of any country, but no country in the world has managed to produce quite such an obfuscation and concealment. By redefining spending as not spending, by readjusting adjustments as nothing but adjustments, which turn out to be massive expenditure, and by various other obscure means, the Government have managed to concoct so devilishly cunning a scheme that even the hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton is, unfortunately, beguiled by it.

Mr. Blunt: Even?

Mr. Letwin: I say "even", because I fear that many Labour Members would be much more easily beguiled—and have been, as their speeches all too clearly illustrated.

The effect of the disastrous logic that we face is partly short term and partly long term. The short-term effect is that, in 1997, the colossal and probably half-conscious fiscal squeeze that the Government applied to the economy in the apparent pursuit of prudence forced a downturn to occur, which the Bank of England heroically tried to diminish through its interest rate policy. Although little unemployment is being generated, that is because of the background of the colossal micro-shifts and the vast structural changes to which I referred.

[Mr. Letwin]

What we must worry about much more than that short-term effect is the long-term effect of what the Government are doing. The long-term effect arises not only from £30 billion of extra tax on business, but from a series of extra burdens: the working time directive; the national minimum wage; the unfair dismissal regulations; the parental leave directive; and the working families tax credit. According to the Institute of Directors, all those add up to some £5 billion of additional costs to business, on top of the business tax. That is why people such as Professor Minford forecast a net long-term increase of some 800,000 in the unemployment figures due to the Government's policies. That is even more worrying than the short-term effect.

Ms Keeble: The hon. Gentleman read out an impressive list of measures, many of which have been extremely popular with the public. Which of those would he cut?

Mr. Letwin: Once the hon. Lady sees how some of those measures have been implemented and their effects over time, she will be coming to us offering suggestions of how we can deal with them when we next find ourselves in government.

There is another item on the agenda. The problem is not just the background and the causes, concealment and effects of these disastrous facts: it is the contrasts. The contrast between reality and presentation applies not only to health and education, but across the board. Many of my hon. Friends have brought that out clearly in the debate.

There is the Prime Minister's famous statement—not yet famous enough—that

"we've no plans to increase tax at all."

Mr. Leslie: Income tax.

Mr. Letwin: No, he did not say income tax. In the *Financial Times* on 21 September 1995, he said:

"we've no plans to increase tax at all."

The Prime Minister either said that at that time or he did not, or he changed his mind after that time. The fact is that the Prime Minister said it and has not done it. That is the contrast to which I am referring, and the hon. Member for Shipley (Mr. Leslie), alas, cannot get out of it.

That is by no means the end of the contrast. The Prime Minister has been at great pains, aided and abetted by his Chancellor, to make it seem that there are not all these dreadful stealth taxes that the Tories keep going on about. It was odd, therefore, that he said that

"the tax burden will increase over this Parliament".—[*Official Report*, 3 March 1999; Vol. 326, c. 1075-76.]

There is even a contrast between what the Prime Minister tells people when he is outside the House and what he bothers to tell us when he is inside the House and is on the record, so he knows that he has to try to tell the truth.

The situation is even worse on welfare. My right hon. Friend the Member for Wells, my hon. Friend the Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton and several other of my hon. Friends showed the extent of the contrast between what was said about welfare and what is happening on welfare. In addition to all the items that they quoted, I quote another: a speech again by no less a figure than the Prime Minister and to no less a body than the parliamentary Labour party in Church house on 7 May 1997. He said:

"I have asked Ministers at the Department of Social Security"—

I take it that he included the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Mr. Field), the then Minister for so-called Welfare Reform—

"to look in detail at how we can make far reaching reforms that will tackle insecurity and poverty as well as reducing social security bills."

He asked the right hon. Member for Birkenhead to do that, but when he had done it, the Prime Minister got rid of him, and made sure that our welfare system would go on growing from now roughly to eternity.

That is the set of contrasts that we are dealing with. It is say one thing and do another. It is talk about long-term stability, and act to undermine the economic foundations of the restructuring that we so painfully engaged in for 18 years. It is talk about a cost-free health and education expenditure boom, and act to tax by stealth to fund welfare payments. It is talk about economic transparency, and then produce probably the least transparent and most obscure set of non-accounts that have ever been produced by any Government of this country.

That is the record. It is a record that I would be ashamed of if I were in government. It is a record that the Government still have some time to put right, at least in one respect—they probably cannot undo the rest of the damage. They could at least give us an honest set of accounts next year. They could make it possible for the nation to tell whether what I am saying is right or wrong, because they could make it possible for commentators to understand what is in the Budget statement.

I beg the Economic Secretary to make us the tiny promise that, next year, the Government will offer us a Budget statement that an ordinary, moderately intelligent person can make his or her way through, so that they can work out what is spending and what is tax, and how much adds up on one side of the sheet and how much on the other. That would be a major benefit to this country, although it would not, I admit, be a major benefit to the electoral prospects of the Labour party.

9.44 pm

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Ms Patricia Hewitt): This has been an extremely interesting and well-informed debate, largely due to excellent contributions from my right hon. and hon. Friends. I am afraid that I cannot say the same for the contributions of members of the Opposition Front-Bench team. That is perhaps unkind, and I recognise that we must make allowances for the fact that it is the last day of term. It is a well-known tradition that, on the last day of term, children are allowed to bring their favourite toys to school. I think that the right hon. Member for Wells (Mr. Heathcoat-Amory) brought along his favourite speech.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Northampton, North (Ms Keeble) accurately, but perhaps also unkindly, said, the right hon. Member for Wells completely avoided mentioning the Bank of England in his opening contribution. He left that extremely important issue to the hon. Member for Bury St. Edmunds (Mr. Ruffley).

Perhaps the right hon. Gentleman did not want to be reminded—but I shall remind him—of what he said in the House on 26 October 1998, in response to an intervention from a Labour Member. He said:

"The hon. Gentleman has obviously already forgotten that we voted against the Bank of England Bill on Second and Third Reading. We also argued against its provisions in Standing Committee."—[*Official Report*, 26 October 1998; Vol. 318, c. 39.]

Well, we do not forget, the City has not forgotten and the country has not forgotten. The fact is that, as several hon. Members pointed out this evening, the Conservative party has persistently opposed the independence that we granted to the Bank of England, and the creation of a successful monetary policy framework that is delivering the lowest long-term interest rates and the lowest mortgage rates for more than 30 years. The Conservatives are opposed to that successful policy, and their spokesman has nothing whatever to say on the subject.

Mr. Letwin: The Economic Secretary has mentioned something that was mentioned several times by her colleagues. Would she expect interest and mortgage rates to be high at a time of significant economic downturn?

Ms Hewitt: The excellent report published by the Select Committee on the Treasury on this subject rightly reflects the success that is being achieved by the removal of politics from interest-rate decisions. We are seeing that success in the fall in long-term interest rates, and in the narrowing of differentials between our interest rates and those of our European counterparts.

My hon. Friends the Members for Northampton, North and for Stafford (Mr. Kidney) both referred, in excellent speeches, to the benefits that are already being seen in their constituencies as a result of our additional investment in schools, hospitals and housing. What did the right hon. Member for Wells have to say about that additional investment? He said that the extra money was being spent on all the wrong things. All the wrong things? The money is being spent on hospitals, schools, elderly people and the highest-ever increase in child benefit for families with children. Are those, in the eyes of the present Conservative party, "all the wrong things"?

We know, and have known for some time, what the Conservative party is now against. It is against independence for the Bank of England, the minimum wage, the working families tax credit and the new deal. Now we want to know what the Conservatives would cut. Would they cut the extra spending on hospitals and on schools, the additional money being made available to elderly people, or the record increase in child benefit?

My right hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Mr. Radice) made, as we would all expect, an excellent speech. Like many others who spoke today, I thank him and his colleagues on the Select Committee—members of all parties—for their excellent report on the new monetary police framework. The Committee is playing an extremely valuable role in enhancing the transparency and accountability of the framework.

Mr. Blunt: The Economic Secretary speaks of transparency and accountability. Will she deal with the point made so eloquently by my hon. Friend the Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton (Mr. Gibb) about the questions tabled during the 1980s by the right hon. Member for Blackburn (Mr. Straw), which her Department was unable to answer when they were tabled in precisely the same form by my hon. Friend?

Ms Hewitt: I understand that the hon. Gentleman supports the independence of the Bank of England and the new monetary policy framework. I am surprised that he did not intervene to congratulate us on implementing a policy that is supported by him, but opposed by his Front Bench.

In an extremely constructive speech—it was perhaps a little long, but it was very constructive—the hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Mr. Davey) referred to the new public service agreements, an important innovation in ensuring that we achieve the modernisation and results that we need from our public services. I remind him that, in December, we published in the White Paper, "Public services for the future—modernisation, reform, accountability" the first tranche of the public service agreements. They are there in the public domain for all to see—the targets that we have set for improvements in public services. They include reductions in hospital in-patient waiting lists, reductions in class sizes for five, six and seven-year-olds, and reductions in the time between arrest and sentence for persistent young offenders, who for years under the previous Government were allowed to get away with it.

The hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton raised the Select Committee on Procedure report that was published yesterday on debates on expenditure plans. Of course, we will want to consider carefully that extremely thoughtful report and will respond to it in due course, but the report's recommendations are primarily addressed to how Parliament can use the opportunities that are already available to it, rather than a matter for the Government themselves.

The hon. Member for Boston and Skegness (Sir R. Body) raised the question of Kosovo and whether the costs of both the war and reconstruction in Kosovo and the western Balkans will threaten public finances. I assure him, as my right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary to the Treasury has assured the House on other occasions, that, because of the healthy state of public finances, there is no threat to the public finances from the demands that will be made, rightly, by reconstruction in the region.

The hon. Gentleman also raised the wider issue of the state of the public finances. He rightly criticised the record of the Conservative Administration, who, in 1993-94, raised public sector borrowing to £50 billion, the highest level that it has reached since the war. I hope that he and other Conservative Members will congratulate the Government on the fact that, in the first two years alone, they cut borrowing by £32 billion; that total net borrowing over the next five years will be lower than in any one single year in the previous Parliament; and that we are forecasting, and will deliver, current budget surpluses totalling £34 billion over the next five years, compared with a deficit under the previous Government over the previous cycle of a staggering £149 billion.

[Ms Hewitt]

The hon. Gentleman raised in particular his fears about what would happen to the national debt. As I have said, the national debt doubled in the early 1990s under the Conservative party, but, if he looks at the projections in the financial statement and Budget report in table B6, he will find that the national debt is set to fall from a peak of over 44 per cent. of GDP in 1996-97 to under 40 per cent. this year and to under 35 per cent. in 2003-04.

Sir Richard Body: In the Budget statement, that is not the forecast. Perhaps the Minister will good enough to remind herself. The figure will go up again. It is true that there has been a small surplus in the past two years, but, as I pointed out, that was the result of a time lag following decisions by the previous Government.

Ms Hewitt: As I have already said, current budget surpluses will total £34 billion over the next five years and the national debt will fall substantially as a proportion of GDP, compared with the peak that was reached.

Mr. Gibb: The hon. Lady has trotted out the £34 billion figure that I referred to, which is the so-called current surplus over the next five years—1999 to 2003-04. Why has she chosen five years? Why not six years? Why not four years? What is the reason for the five-year period?

Ms Hewitt: It is the lifetime of this Parliament, and a perfectly reasonable period to choose.

Mr. Gibb: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Ms Hewitt: No, I shall not give way again. I am sorry, but this has been a lengthy debate, and I should like to do justice to the many speeches that we have heard.

My hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Mr. Rammell), in a thoughtful speech, stressed again the improvement in public finances, the investment in public services, the achievement of economic stability and—underlining the point made by the Select Committee on the Treasury—the success of our new monetary policy framework in avoiding recession despite the world financial crisis.

The hon. Member for Reigate (Mr. Blunt) raised the issue of health spending. I should remind the House of the facts on health spending: over the comprehensive spending review period of 1998-99 to 2001-02, there will be real annual average growth of 4.7 per cent. in national health service spending; and, over the entire Parliament, there will be a real annual increase of 3.7 per cent. We should compare those percentages with an annual increase of 2.5 per cent. in the previous Parliament, and with an increase of a mere 3 per cent. in the 18 years of the previous, Conservative Government. On both measures, therefore, the Government are providing a significantly higher annual real increase in funding for our hospitals and the national health service.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stafford, in a typically well-informed and excellent speech, raised the extremely important issue of separating capital and revenue accounting, and stressed the importance of doing so to ensure that we achieve the levels of long-term investment that the economy needs. He was absolutely right on those points. I simply draw his attention to the Government's plans to introduce resource accounting and budgeting, which will ensure that, in the public sector, we do indeed have proper accounting for both capital and revenue.

For much of his speech, the hon. Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton seemed to be suffering from amnesia—he quite clearly forgot the 22 tax rises under the previous, Conservative Government. Like other Opposition Members, he also mentioned social security spending. It is worth remembering that, under this Government, social security spending will rise by a mere 2 per cent. annually—which is half the level that was achieved by the previous Government.

In contrast to the previous Government—who preached an end to the dependency culture, but locked millions of people into dependence on means-tested benefit—we are reforming the welfare system, so that it springs people out of the trap of unemployment. The success of our policy is demonstrated by the contribution that welfare to work is making to the fact that 400,000 more people are employed in the United Kingdom now than were employed at the time of the previous general election.

Mr. Blunt: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Ms Hewitt: No, I shall not give way, if the hon. Gentleman will forgive me. I have been generous in giving way, but we are running short of time.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hornchurch (Mr. Cryer) rightly mentioned the years of Conservative neglect of public transport—a neglect that we are now having to make good.

Finally, the hon. Member for West Dorset (Mr. Letwin), in a tortured speech, referred not only to health but to education. I remind him that, under the Labour Government, in the three years of the CSR period, there will be a 5.1 per cent. annual real increase in investment in our schools; and that, in the whole period of 1996-97 to 2001-02, there will be a 2.9 per cent. real annual increase. The final percentage should also be compared with the 1.5 per cent. real annual increase under the previous, Conservative Government—demonstrating that we have virtually doubled real annual growth in the United Kingdom's education budget. It is a tribute to our commitment to education, education, education.

The Government are determined to get rid of the boom and bust of the Conservative years. We are delivering low inflation, the lowest interest rates for 30 years, rising employment and a reform of the welfare system that is delivering opportunity—

It being Ten o'clock, the motion for the Adjournment of the House lapsed, without Question put.

PETITION

Cancer Services (Colchester)

10 pm

Mr. Bob Russell (Colchester): I wish to present a petition in the name of my constituent, Mrs. Susan Brooks, and signed by approximately 25,000 residents of Colchester and elsewhere in the county of Essex concerning cancer services. For the third time in 10 years, the local cancer services are the subject of a review.

The petition states:

The petition of the Evening Gazette, published in Colchester, and residents of Colchester and surrounding areas of Essex

Declares that we are opposed to the closure of cancer treatment services in Colchester.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Secretary of State for Health to do all in his power to ensure that cancer treatment services continue to be provided in the town and that a cancer centre of excellence be built in Colchester.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.

To lie upon the Table.

House Procedures (Reform)

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Robert Ainsworth.]*

10.2 pm

Mr. Peter Bradley (The Wrekin): It is a privilege—if I may use that word—to have the last hurrah of the summer. I see that Opposition Members have stayed behind for this Adjournment and I do not know whether I should disappoint them now or later, but my speech contains no mention of sex, drugs, rock and roll or Michael Ashcroft. I have no wish to keep hon. Members from the beach or the Minister from exercising his right to roam. However, I wish to make some serious points about the way in which we conduct our business in the House.

Although our traditions are important, they too frequently oppress originality of thought, expression and debate and limit our ability to serve—and remember that we serve—our constituents as effectively as we should.

I have contemplated initiating this debate almost from the day that I entered the House and for the past two years I have effectively bitten my tongue and suppressed my growing indignation. Had I spoken before, my views might have been uncharacteristically ill-considered and intemperate, but now, as all will recognise, I have matured with experience on the Back Benches and am widely recognised as a man of sound judgment who commands respect from all sides of the House as a consensus politician. I believe, therefore, that the time is right to state my views.

Some of my early frustrations in the House have certainly dissipated. For example, I am not sure that I would support the introduction of electronic voting in the House. Although voting in the Lobby does not guarantee that right hon. and hon. Members know what has been debated or what they are deciding, it gives them access to Ministers and that is an essentially democratic experience for them and for us. It provides the opportunity—which I have taken on many occasions—to raise important issues on behalf of constituents.

Other reforms are long overdue, however, and I find the pace of change painfully slow. I ask myself frequently what the Modernisation Committee has achieved. Thursday morning sittings are not much of a breakthrough and certainly offer no solutions to the late night sittings and the early morning Committees that mean that exhausted Members of Parliament are increasingly detached from family life and are often too shattered and too drained to do the work that they need to do on behalf of their constituents.

I grant that there have been advances and I particularly welcome the break with the 500-year-old tradition, dating back to the days of Henry VII, of printing Acts of Parliament on vellum made from animal hide. I believe that that break with tradition represents a great leap to freedom for the goat, but not much of a step forward for mankind.

[Mr. Peter Bradley]

This is a radical and reforming Government. Yet it is accountable to a Parliament which is top-heavy with tradition, cloaked in almost a masonic ritual and bound by labyrinthine procedures so complex, convoluted and arcane that only men in wigs are masters of them.

Mr. Tony McNulty (Harrow, East): Leave the hon. Member for Lichfield (Mr. Fabricant) alone.

Mr. Bradley: With some honourable, and less honourable, exceptions.

There are procedures in this House that are so deliberately mysterious and obtuse as to be impenetrable to the majority of hon. Members—and, more importantly and more damagingly, to the public whom we serve. That is a serious point. Turn-outs in local and European elections are down because people, for whatever reason, have become disengaged from the democratic process. They love the pageantry and tradition of Parliament, but do they understand it? Does it speak to them, or for them? Do they own it, and own this institution?

It is a disgrace that the public are so unwelcome in this place. When they visit, they must queue outside in the wind and rain, and when they enter, there are precious few catering facilities open to them and few toilets for them to use. This is their Parliament—this is where they send us to make their laws. This is not our place. None of us was born to rule. We are sent here on licence and for a purpose—to serve our constituents, to interpret their aspirations, to meet their needs and to speak for them.

But even the language used in this place is a private language. In this Chamber, no one has a name, and we must all refer to each other as hon. or right hon. Members when the large majority of us do not believe that of ourselves, far less of each other. I have worked out that the longest form of address in this House would be for a Privy Councillor who was a commissioned officer, a Queen's counsel and the son of a duke, marquis or earl. He would be the right hon. gallant and learned noble Lord, the Member for Folderol.

Mr. Patrick McLoughlin (West Derbyshire): He could be a reverend as well.

Mr. Bradley: I am grateful for that intervention. I would submit that what I have described is not a form of address, but a filibuster. A former right hon. Member of this place, not content with having a title and a double-barrelled name—Sir Reginald Manningham-Buller, who adorned this place from 1950 to 1962—had to be referred to as the right hon. learned and gallant Gentleman, the Member for Northamptonshire and the Soke of Peterborough—or presumably just as the Soke of Peterborough for short. *[Interruption.]* Conservative Members knew him better than I do.

I spoke of a private language. This is a place where we may abolish the House of Lords, but not mention it in our proceedings; where we pass laws expressed in a language of statute which few of us can penetrate and which would be meaningless to our constituents for whom those laws are framed. I would submit that that is nonsense—but it does not have to be that way.

In the Scottish Parliament—born of centuries of history but unburdened by them—they meet in the morning and they finish their business in the afternoon. It has agendas that even I can understand, and it allows Members to call each other by name without necessarily ensuring that they are two sword-lengths apart—and the world north of the border simply has not ended.

Why can we not speak the language of our constituents when we claim to speak on their behalf? We wander corridors in the Palace of Westminster and sit in Committee Rooms hung with second-rate portraits of forgotten grandees who frown down upon our deliberations. Why do we not tear them down and replace them, for example, with views of our constituencies and of our constituents—views of life in contemporary Britain? That would inspire us more purposefully than the eminent Victorians who currently hang there in suspended animation.

Our detachment from the outside world is both insidious and dangerous. There are men in this place who have never been properly exposed to the harsh realities through which their constituents too often have to live—sometimes because of what we do here.

I call it the oak-panelled syndrome. Men born into oak-panelled manor houses, who attend oak-panelled prep schools and oak-panelled public schools, graduate to oak-panelled Oxbridge colleges or to Sandhurst, then go to oak-panelled inns of court and clubs in St. James's and make their progress from the Commons to the Lords, until they are interred in an oak casket.

Too many conceive of this place as a club, defined as much by those who are excluded as by those who are admitted. That exclusivity is pernicious and often nasty. I remember with shock and shame when the Lawrences were sitting beneath the Gallery and Opposition Members were making mischief about the writ for the Newark by-election; when my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford, South (Mr. Sutcliffe) sought to intervene with the Chair to move to the statement on the Lawrence inquiry, you, Mr. Deputy Speaker—I mean no offence to you—said:

"I say to the hon. Gentleman that there is no one in the Chamber apart from right hon. and hon. Members."—[*Official Report*, 29 March 1999; Vol. 328, c. 753.]

That was not only insensitive but demonstrably untrue. It is an Alice in Wonderland sense of reality so distorted that we see only ourselves here. That is to our shame.

Exclusivity is not limited by background or political persuasion. Just as it corrupts our relations with the outside world, a seductive but unhealthy exclusivity exists between hon. Members. So arcane are the rules and procedures of the House that one needs to have been here for at least 30 years to have mastered them. Those who have—Members and Officers alike—constitute a club within the club; an institution within the institution; an establishment within the establishment.

That establishment transcends political differences. No matter how radical or opposed to privilege hon. Members may profess to be, they use their knowledge of the procedures to their own advantage and too frequently to the disadvantage of others. Why should those who, simply because of their longevity or long service here, have spoken many times before, be allowed to speak many times again, before a younger and newer Member of Parliament is allowed to contribute ideas, energy or enthusiasm to the debate?

I was fortunate enough to be called to speak on the first day of Second Reading of the House of Lords Bill, but I lost count of the number of my hon. Friends who had spent time considering what they wanted to say and researching and preparing their speeches, and then spent two days in the Chamber without being called. That is a waste of time and energy. They could far more usefully have spent that time serving their constituents. There is a need for more equity in the arrangement of our debates. There is simple common sense in at least letting hon. Members know whether they are likely to be called. That would refresh and improve the standard of debate.

Life in the House is improbable, but I have discovered that death is impossible. Black Rod may batter at our doors, but the grim reaper does not have an official pass. When, sadly, a Minister in the previous Government died at the Dispatch Box, *Hansard* records that he ceased in mid-sentence, and marks his demise as "*Sitting suspended.*" If the four horsemen of the apocalypse were to gallop headlong into the Chamber, breathing fire and brimstone, I have no doubt that a Conservative Member would have the presence of mind to seize a collapsible top hat and cry "I spy strangers." Those words would no doubt be inscribed on vellum and published in *Hansard* shortly before the world ended.

Reform is overdue. One reform was suggested to me this afternoon. I know that Conservative Members, in particular, like conspiracy theories involving politicians and journalists, but I believe that we should allow journalists access to the Terrace. That would mean that, when we plotted and conspired with them, at least they would be able to buy a round.

I am a great respecter of tradition, but we are weighed down with it in the House and that is not good for us. It does not help us to serve. It prevents the House from working as effectively, efficiently and equitably as it should.

The Government have a radical, modernising constitutional agenda, which has all but bypassed Parliament, and that is wrong. The Modernisation Committee must be bolder and try harder; otherwise, as we lurch into the 21st century, it is in danger of dragging us kicking and screaming into the 19th. I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister can be more radical when he replies.

10.15 pm

The Parliamentary Secretary, Privy Council Office (Mr. Paddy Tipping): To debate reform of procedure at this late hour and with the school holidays well under way may seem ironic. After what has been said about the conventions of the House, it is with caution that I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for The Wrekin (Mr. Bradley) on securing this debate. Presumably he applied for it about a fortnight ago. In the meantime—last Wednesday—he demonstrated some of the merits of the House's conventions on freedom of speech. His actions were not without controversy, even though he admits to increasing maturity.

Before I address what has been said about our procedures and practices, let me remind the House that some changes have been made in the last two years. Despite what has been said, there is no longer any risk of this debate being interrupted by the apocalypse, or by hon. Members spying strangers or raising points of order while wearing an opera hat. Neither need we be concerned that the military background of any hon. Members who seek to intervene in this debate will lead to them being referred to by the term "gallant"—the Modernisation Committee put that tradition away in the cupboard. At the same time, the precedence of Privy Councillors in debate has been dispensed with.

I understand what has been said about the conventions of addressing the Chair, referring to other Members as honourable and referring to their constituencies rather than surnames. Personally, I do not get enough opportunity to use the word "Bradley" in this House. My colleagues in the Ministry of Defence can say the word "Bradley" when they talk about military tactics and vehicles. Ministers at the Department for Education and Employment, when answering the frequent debates on devolved theories of the metaphysical basis of absolute idealism, may invoke the memory of the philosopher Francis Herbert Bradley. Even my hon. Friend the Minister for Sport may talk about Bill Bradley, who played basketball for the New York Knickerbockers before becoming Democratic Senator for New Jersey.

It is strange that we can now call Sebastian Coe by his real name since he ceased to be the hon. Member for Falmouth and Camborne. However, that other Olympic runner must remain the right hon. and learned Member for North–East Fife (Mr. Campbell).

As hon. Members will know, others have tried before to reform some stranger aspects of this place. Richard Crossman tried to abolish the Clerks' wigs. His diary records that

"I even got the Cabinet to grant the wish of the Clerks at the Table to have their wigs abolished—despite the Prime Minister's proposal that they should wear them during Question Time and take them off at 3.30 pm."

In the event, the motion to abolish the wigs fell because the Opposition did not support the change.

My hon. Friend the Member for The Wrekin—as I call him more in affection than by tradition—has fallen foul of these conventions from time to time. His political career nearly came to an untimely end on 1 February this year when he said:

"The hon. Gentleman misses the point. The point is that in your election guide in 1997, your party made great play of the fact—"

At that point, the Deputy Speaker called him to order and said:

"The hon. Gentleman should use the correct form of address. He is addressing me at the moment."

To which my hon. Friend replied:

"Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. The conventions of this House require attention, like the conventions of the other House."—[*Official Report*, 1 February 1996; Vol. 324, c. 674.]

My hon. Friend recovered later when he described the Opposition spokesman on constitutional matters—the hon. Member for Woodspring (Dr. Fox)—as the Scarlet Pimpernel:

"They seek him here, they seek him there, but they cannot find him anywhere".—[*Official Report*, 1 February 1999; Vol. 324, c 666.]

That remark was in the highest traditions of invective in the House—it amused all present and left the victim uncertain whether to feel flattered or insulted.

The convention that remarks are addressed to the Chair is not unique to this House and its advantages are well known. Apart from avoiding overly personal remarks,

[Mr. Paddy Tipping]

it avoids ambiguity about who is being addressed. In a packed House such as tonight's, confusion would easily arise if my remarks were not addressed to the Chair.

To many new Members, it seemed old-fashioned that Members were referred to not by name, but by constituency. Apart from anything else, it involved learning not just the names and faces of fellow Members but also constituency names—not all of which are as distinctive as The Wrekin or Sherwood. I recently heard the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, my hon. Friend the Member for Knowsley, North and Sefton, East (Mr. Howarth) refer to the Member for "Easter Island"—what a treat it would be to represent such an exotic place.

A senior Member put all this into context for me when he said:

> "I wish to make one point about our practice of calling hon. Members by their constituencies rather than by their names. I have always been proud to be the Member of Parliament for Ashton-Under-Lyne. It is my constituency and I am not here because I am myself, but because I represent the people of my constituency. It would be a retrograde step if we were to abandon that practice."—[*Official Report*, 13 November 1997; Vol. 300, c. 1072.]

The third strand of our conventions is wording—is another Member hon. or right hon. or a Member or a Friend? I do not recall any hon. Member being called to order for omitting the "hon.". We have all tripped over whether a particular Member is "right" as well as "hon." or whether to say "Friend" or "Member". I am told that in the House of Lords, peers refer to extended relatives who are also peers as "my noble kinsman". It would give us all a great deal of pleasure if my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds, Central (Mr. Benn) described my right hon. Friend the Member for Chesterfield (Mr. Benn) as his "right hon. kinsman". Perhaps we should not encourage such familiarity, given the record number of Members with a spouse in the House. Who knows where such intimacy might lead?

When the House resumes in October we will have a debate on the procedural consequences of devolution, and will be able to compare procedures in the devolved legislatures with those operated here. Some of us may envy the opportunities that the Scottish Parliament and the National Assembly for Wales have had to start with a clean sheet. How different things might be if we could start again from scratch. We will be able to watch how the new procedures in Edinburgh and Cardiff work in practice, and there will be lessons to learn and new methods to copy. We should not be afraid of trying to identify good and improved practice elsewhere or of considering its introduction here.

Mr. Paul Tyler (North Cornwall): The Minister is replying engagingly to an engaging speech by the hon. Member for The Wrekin (Mr. Bradley). Will he address one point? The hon. Gentleman was critical of the Select Committee on Modernisation, but was guilty of a misunderstanding. The Committee has made serious proposals that deserve the attention of the House, but it has run into extreme difficulty among the dinosaurs, particularly those who are part of the usual channels. The House must decide on the modernisation of our procedures rather than allowing the Opposition or the Government to do it.

Mr. Tipping: The autumn will bring experimental sittings in Westminster Hall, allowing four more Back Benchers' debates a week. It will also enable three dozen more Select Committee reports to be debated each year. Refinements will be needed as we learn how those sittings work. It will be interesting to see whether the semi-circular layout of the Grand Committee Room encourages a different atmosphere and more informal style of debate.

Sir Patrick Cormack (South Staffordshire): I wish the hon. Gentleman a good recess but does he agree that the only modernisation or experiments that count are those that bring more life back into this Chamber?

Mr. Tipping: The hon. Gentleman sheds light with all that he says. I read his columns with much interest. The task before us is to encourage the Westminster Hall experiment but ensure that the prime focus remains in this Chamber.

Mr. Andrew Mackinlay (Thurrock): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Tipping: I am not going to give way any more.

Mr. Mackinlay: I am a kinsman.

Mr. Tipping: As my hon. Friend is a kinsman, I give way.

Mr. Mackinlay: The real radical changes that are required involve not the cosmetics of wigs and silk stockings but whether we can make the Chamber able to scrutinise the Executive and make them accountable to this place. That is what has been eroded over many years, not just by this Government, and it should be repatriated by a radical Government to this place.

Mr. Tipping: As my hon. Friend knows, I am keen to give Back Benchers an opportunity to raise and pursue issues, as he just did so vigorously. The Westminster Hall experiment will give us an opportunity to do that but we can do far more.

I am delighted that the end of this year will see stage 1 of the reformed House of Lords, if all goes to plan. We can only speculate on the effect that the departure of 90 per cent. of hereditary peers will have on that place. The removal of the hereditary element will be the most dramatic form of modernisation of our Parliament, a truly radical reform of our procedures of which we can all be proud.

We must recognise that over the past two years several improvements have been made in our procedures. The work of Select Committees in pre-legislative scrutiny has been widely welcomed. My hon. Friend the Member for The Wrekin played an important part in examining the draft Freedom of Information Bill as a member of the Public Administration Committee. When that and other draft Bills come to the House in their final form, we will all benefit from greater scrutiny. The quality of the eventual Acts of Parliament will be all the better.

As part of the process of improving the quality of legislation, we have also published new explanatory notes setting out the purpose and implications of each Government Bill, giving a detailed commentary on each clause. What is more, they are written in a language that we can all understand.

I talked earlier about getting rid of the term "gallant", and the Modernisation Committee has done that. It has done other things. The report on conduct in the Chamber published in March last year talked about greater flexibility in time limits on speeches. Tonight, we had a 15-minute rule on speeches. We relaxed the rules on quotations from other proceedings. The farce of opera hats and spying strangers has gone. The scrutiny of European documents has been extended as promised in our manifesto.

One reform that was examined but not proceeded with was electronic voting. The Modernisation Committee—I think that this was the point of the hon. Member for North Cornwall (Mr. Tyler)—consulted all Members but none of the options commanded the support of more than 13 per cent. of those who responded. Despite what was said tonight, I think that we will eventually return to that.

Only last week, the Modernisation Committee reported on how the new arrangements for Thursday sittings have worked and concluded that on the evidence that it had received, the balance between work in Westminster and in our constituencies had been maintained. Its report conclusively showed that the topics for discussion, the substance and the extra time available constituted a useful and radical step forward.

In closing my remarks, I turn to an annual procedure and tradition—the summer recess. It will be a time not only for rest but to address the concerns of all our constituents, who live in the real world. More importantly, it gives us time to reflect and formulate proposals for change. Our procedures have changed, and I anticipate that they will continue to do so. The rate of change is in our hands. With that, I wish you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the House and its staff and all my colleagues an enjoyable break.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): I am sure that I reciprocate the Minister's final remarks.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at half-past Ten o'clock.

House of Commons

Tuesday 19 October 1999

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

DEATHS OF MEMBERS

2.34 pm

Madam Speaker: I regret to have to report to the House the deaths of Mr. Roger Stott, Member for Wigan, and the right hon. Alan Clark, Member for Kensington and Chelsea. I am sure that hon. Members in all parts of the House will join me in mourning the loss of our two colleagues during the recess, and in extending our sympathy to the families and friends of those Members.

WRITS ISSUED DURING THE ADJOURNMENT

MADAM SPEAKER acquainted the House that during the Adjournment, pursuant to the Recess Elections Act 1975, the Chairman of Ways and Means on her behalf had issued warrants to the Clerk of the Crown for new writs for the electing of Members to serve in this present Parliament for Wigan, in the room of Roger Stott, Esquire, deceased, and for Hamilton, South, in the room of the right hon. George Robertson, who has been called to the House of Peers.

PRIVATE BUSINESS

CITY OF LONDON (WARD ELECTIONS) BILL (*By Order*)

Order for further consideration, as amended, read.

To be considered on Tuesday 26 October.

Oral Answers to Questions

HEALTH

The Secretary of State was asked—

Brain Scans

1. **Miss Anne McIntosh** (Vale of York): What is the *(a)* length of the waiting list and *(b)* average waiting time for a brain scan for those aged (i) under 18 years and (ii) 18 years and over; and if he will make a statement. [92584]

The Secretary of State for Health (Mr. Alan Milburn): Brain scans are diagnostic procedures carried out in radiology departments. During the quarter ended June 1999, the average waiting time for a radiology out-patient appointment was two weeks.

Miss McIntosh: I congratulate the Secretary of State for Health on his appointment, and welcome him to the Dispatch Box in that capacity. Is he familiar with the tragic case of Shaun Johnstone, aged 16, of Boroughbridge, who was not given a brain scan within two weeks but was asked to wait two months? Perhaps that reflects on the present obsession with the distortion of waiting lists in the health service, with, in that case, tragic consequences. The father is especially concerned to raise the question of confidentiality, as neither the patient, who was 16 and therefore no longer a minor, nor the father, was told of the diagnosis, which could not be confirmed before the boy died. Will the Secretary of State make a ruling on that case?

Mr. Milburn: I am aware of the case of Shaun Johnstone, and I am sure that the whole House will join me in passing on our condolences to the family. The case was especially sad, not least because it is extremely unusual for a young person of Shaun's age to have a cerebral tumour. I understand, however, that both Shaun's general practitioner and the consultant neurologist who dealt with the case believe that even if Shaun had attended his first out-patient appointment, which I understand he was unable to do, he was suffering from an inoperable tumour, so treatment would have made no significant difference. I know, however, that that is of little comfort to Shaun's parents, other relatives and friends.

Of course I shall gladly look into the case. I understand that the health authority has already done so, and the parents have been advised that the most appropriate course of action would be to approach the health service commissioner. I strongly advise them to do that, but I will still look into the case.

The general point that the hon. Lady made is wrong. We are bringing waiting lists down for in-patients, and we will continue to do so, but there is now a change of tack. We are ensuring, in particular, that there will be faster and more convenient care across the piece in the national health service. We will begin with the core priority areas of cancer and heart disease. It is important to improve those services; we have already set in place a two-week standard for patients referred with suspected breast cancer, and I want to improve on that.

Mr. Nick Harvey (North Devon): I too congratulate the right hon. Gentleman on his appointment. As some people are waiting for brain scans for as long as nine weeks in Oxford and 16 weeks in Birmingham—as he has acknowledged, none of those waits shows up on the Government's much vaunted waiting lists measure—and as yesterday he seemed to be reorienting his priorities for the health service, will he follow the example of the new Scottish Administration and recognise that measuring waiting lists is not the right thing to do? Will he put the emphasis on waiting times instead? Surely what is of concern to patients is how long they have to wait for the totality of their treatment, not how many people have the misfortune to be in the same boat.

Mr. Milburn: I welcome the hon. Gentleman to his new post, too. We have made it clear from the outset that it will take some time to get waiting lists down. They are coming down and they will continue to come down. The drive on waiting lists will be unrelenting. They are now about 70,000 lower than those that we inherited from the previous Government, when numbers were rising at a record rate. That has taken some time to get right.

We shall continue to get waiting lists down, and by the end of this Parliament we will have fulfilled the pledge that we gave to the people at the general election. The difference between the Labour party and the Conservative party is that we keep our election promises rather than break them. However, we have also made it clear that reducing waiting lists is just the start. We want to modernise each and every aspect of NHS treatment and care, so that patients everywhere get the fast and convenient services that they want.

Dr. Nick Palmer (Broxtowe): I, too, welcome my right hon. Friend to his new position. Those of us who have campaigned on health issues over the past couple of years have been impressed by the clear sense of priorities of many people both inside and outside the national health service. Before the election, the main worry was the enormous explosion in in-patient waiting lists, which was getting out of control and discrediting the health service. I also welcome the fact that the health service is now—

Madam Speaker: Order. As the hon. Gentleman knows, this is Question Time. Would he move on rapidly and ask the question directly? It should relate to waiting times for brain scans.

Dr. Palmer: I want to ask the Secretary of State this question. Will the priority that he is giving to heart disease and cancer treatment improve waiting times and waiting lists in those areas, as that will reflect the priorities of ordinary people?

Mr. Milburn: My hon. Friend is right. There has always been a connection between reductions in waiting lists and waiting times. As we get waiting lists down, so waiting times will come down. We can now guarantee—the Opposition were never able to do this when they were in government—that patients will wait no longer than 18 months for treatment. During the past year, we have reduced the number of people waiting more than 12 months for treatment by a third. There is obviously a long way to go, but patients want fast and convenient care and they know that they will get that from the Labour Government.

Dr. Liam Fox (Woodspring): I welcome the Secretary of State to his post. These days it is nice to see Ministers who are willing to come along and defend their positions. What my hon. Friend the Member for Vale of York (Miss McIntosh) says is true: this initiative is an example of distorted clinical priorities in the health service. The Secretary of State is new to the job. Does he accept that patients care not how many people are behind or in front of them in the list, but how long they and their families will have to wait for treatment? Will he abandon the waiting list initiative, which is reducing the NHS to a shambles, with extraordinarily distorted clinical priorities?

Mr. Milburn: No, I will not do that for two reasons. First, when politicians, whether in opposition or in government, make promises at general elections, they should keep them. We intend to keep our promise that, by the end of this Parliament, the number of people on waiting lists will be 100,000 lower than we inherited. Secondly, we are taking this initiative because it is the right thing to do. As waiting lists come down, so will waiting times. That is happening already, and in the core priority areas of cancer and heart disease we are now setting in train action that will ensure that patients are seen in a timely fashion. That is what patients and staff in the national health service want.

Dr. Fox: Under this Government, getting on to the waiting list is an achievement in itself. An extra 190,000 patients have been waiting to get on to the waiting list since Labour came to power, and that does not take into account the fiddling of the figures that seems to take place daily.

The British Medical Association, the Royal College of Surgeons, the Royal College of Nursing and just about every medical and nursing body in the country say that the waiting list initiative distorts clinical priorities and keeps the sickest patients waiting longer than necessary, because minor cases are treated earlier in order to get the figures down to suit Ministers. Why does the Minister not realise that? Is it because this is about the Prime Minister's ego and not the running of the health service? The Secretary of State knows that this policy is flawed, that it is the wrong way to run the national health service and that it is bad for patients, but that it is the Prime Minister's second political prisoner.

Mr. Milburn: It is a bit rich for the Conservatives to give lectures about fiddling figures, given that they spent 18 years fiddling figures. They fiddled the employment figures not once, not twice, but more than 30 times. They tortured the statistics until they confessed.

If the hon. Gentleman had bothered to listen to what heart surgeons, heart specialists and the royal colleges had to say yesterday, he would have learned that they welcome the direction that we are now taking in the national health service to modernise and speed up all aspects of care.

Terminally Ill Patients

2. **Ms Hazel Blears** (Salford): What steps he is taking to ensure that appropriate care is available to terminally ill patients admitted to general hospitals. [92585]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Yvette Cooper): All terminally ill patients should receive appropriate and sensitive palliative care whether in hospitals or other settings. To support that, in June 1998 the Department of Health distributed throughout the national health service three documents on good practice in palliative care, produced by the National Council for Hospice and Specialist Palliative Care Services. Copies are available in the Library, and one of which covers "Palliative Care in the Hospital Setting."

Ms Blears: I welcome my hon. Friend to her position on the Front Bench. In her public health role, she has one of the most important jobs in government. I look forward to working with her to tackle health inequalities in deprived communities such as mine, and I thank her for the reply to my question.

I understand that the Department is aware of the sad case of Mrs. Carol Green from Salford, who in March last year died in Hope hospital having been admitted as a terminally ill patient. Her husband, Mr. Green, was forced

to watch her in pain, agony and distress during her final hours. Mr. Green and I are pressing the Department to ensure that district general hospitals provide the same pain relief, nursing and supportive care as hospices. Often patients are admitted when they are already dying, and it is too late for them to go to a hospice. Those patients are entitled to the same dignity and care that they would have in a hospice, and I ask the Department to look into the matter seriously.

Yvette Cooper: I thank my hon. Friend for her kind remarks, and offer my sympathy to Mr. Green following the death of his wife. I am aware of the case, and I know that my hon. Friend has been pursuing it locally. I hope that it can be speedily resolved.

Everyone should have access to sensitive care, whatever the setting. Guidance on caring for people during the last days of their lives is now available in the national health service. In addition, strategies for high-quality palliative care should be part of local health improvement programmes. I am aware that a significant number of health authorities do not yet have such programmes and strategies for improving palliative care; they must have such programmes, so that realistic funding for palliative care is secured and the quality of services is maintained.

Mrs. Marion Roe (Broxbourne): I congratulate the Minister on her promotion. Will she take this opportunity not only to recognise fully the work of the voluntary hospice movement and its tremendous contribution to care for the terminally ill, but to say whether she is aware that NHS Executive advice on service agreements with voluntary hospices is still not being followed in two thirds of cases? Will she tell us what action she is prepared to take to ensure that that is put right?

Yvette Cooper: I shall certainly look into the points that the hon. Lady has made. I take this opportunity to recognise the superb work of the voluntary sector. One of the things that the Government have done is to set up a cancer care action group, bringing together a range of voluntary organisations, the NHS and the Department of Health to consider issues relating to palliative care—particularly in the field of cancer—and to draw on the voluntary expertise throughout the country.

Health Action Zone

3. **Mr. Jeremy Corbyn** (Islington, North): What discussions he has held with *(a)* the health authority and *(b)* health trusts in Camden and Islington concerning the operation of the health action zone. [92586]

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr. John Hutton): Ministers have not yet had meetings with local health authority or trust officials on the progress of the Camden and Islington health action zone. However, my ministerial colleagues and I are currently visiting all the newly established second-wave health action zones, including Camden and Islington. I am pleased to inform my hon. Friend that I shall be visiting Camden and Islington health action zone on 10 November. I hope very much that he will be able to join me.

Mr. Corbyn: I thank the Minister for his answer, and look forward to his visit on 10 November. He will be aware that the reason for the declaration of the health action zone was the high infant mortality and low life expectancy in the district, and the high incidence of notifiable diseases. What resources does he expect to bring to bear to improve general practitioner services and, in particular, to make it possible to examine the serious link between child poverty and child ill health in the area? What consultation does he intend to undertake with community organisations and community groups representing those who are suffering because of a combination of poverty, poor housing conditions and ill health?

Mr. Hutton: Over the next three years, nearly £8 million will be spent on developing health action zone proposals in my hon. Friend's constituency and in others in Camden and Islington. I also reassure my hon. Friend that the principal focus of the HAZ will be on the development of initiatives relating to primary care, and that we shall involve the local community in every way possible. We shall focus particularly on teenage pregnancies and the plight of those in poverty, to whom my hon. Friend referred.

It is a characteristic of all health action zones that programmes developed locally are done so in full consultation with all local partners. We consider that to be a critical way of tackling some of the health inequalities—two words that the Conservatives always refused to use when they were in government. We are serious about tackling health inequalities. My hon. Friend's constituency includes some of the most deprived parts of the country; we look forward to working with him, and with others locally, to improve the situation and tackle the root causes of ill health.

Independent Health Care

4. **Mr. David Hinchliffe** (Wakefield): What steps he is taking to regulate the provision of health care by the independent sector. [92587]

The Secretary of State for Health (Mr. Alan Milburn): I am determined to improve the current arrangements for regulating private health care. An effective regulatory system is essential to provide patients with the protection to which they are entitled. I shall set out my proposals on the way forward shortly, following the extensive consultation that we have undertaken and taking account of the helpful report from the Select Committee on Health earlier in the year.

Mr. Hinchliffe: I welcome my right hon. Friend to his new position and pay tribute to his predecessor, my right hon. Friend the Member for Holborn and St. Pancras (Mr. Dobson), who did a first-class job for the past two years.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has mentioned the Select Committee report on regulation of independent medical care. The Committee as a whole was concerned at the extent to which the national health service in a number of ways subsidises the private health sector. It was especially concerned about the way in which repair work is undertaken in the NHS where things have gone wrong in the private sector, which happens quite frequently. Has my right hon. Friend any assessment of the costs to the NHS of such problems in the

private sector? Can he say what steps he will take to recoup such costs directly from the private hospitals concerned or the insurers who are involved with the patients?

Mr. Milburn: My hon. Friend raises an extremely important issue. I join him in praising the work of my predecessor, my right hon. Friend the Member for—

Mr. Simon Burns (West Chelmsford): Holborn and St. Pancras.

Mr. Milburn: Thank you. It is always nice to have a bit of co-operation from the hon. Gentleman. It makes a change. My right hon. Friend the Member for Holborn and St. Pancras (Mr. Dobson) did a sterling job in laying the foundations for a modernised health care system. I was very proud to serve with him and to follow in his footsteps.

Clearly, we need to look extremely carefully at the relationships between the private and public health care sectors. It is not just about regulation: we must ensure not only effective regulation, but that, where there are arrangements between the NHS and private sector, they are not to the detriment of the NHS.

Mr. Stephen Dorrell (Charnwood): I join others in welcoming the Secretary of State to his new responsibilities. I invite him to mark his appointment by telling the House when he expects the Government to redeem their election pledge to make proposals for the reform of the finance of long-term care in the independent residential and nursing home sector.

Mr. Milburn: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for his kind comments.

We have fulfilled our election pledge by establishing the royal commission on long-term care for the elderly. However, we are considering its conclusions. I will make an appropriate statement after I have considered them.

North-east London Health Economy

5. **Mr. Mike Gapes** (Ilford, South): When he next plans to visit Redbridge to discuss the north-east London health economy. [92588]

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr. John Denham): I intend to visit Redbridge on 18 November.

Mr. Gapes: I thank my hon. Friend for that reply. I am delighted that a Minister will visit Redbridge. I would welcome the opportunity at that time to show him the serious pressures and problems that NHS staff face in King George hospital, which was originally designed to take 50,000 admissions a year and is currently taking 90,000 a year, and where the accident and emergency department is under great pressure.

I welcome the additional resources that the Government have given to our local health service, but hope that my right hon. Friend will be able to see for himself the reasons why we need more help locally.

Mr. Denham: I look forward to visiting my hon. Friend's constituency. I am determined to ensure that his constituents, like patients throughout the country, benefit in full from the modernisation of the NHS. There are important issues to be dealt with, which are the subject of proper public consultation. They include increased co-operation and better sharing of clinical skills in my hon. Friend's part of London. However, we are already backing that up with substantial resources—nearly £2 million extra—to modernise A and E services for his constituents, and the health authority has received more than £2.5 million of funding over and above the health authority basic allocation from the London fund. I am delighted to have the opportunity to see the NHS on the ground and to discuss how we take forward the modernisation of services in that part of London.

Mr. Simon Burns (West Chelmsford): When the Minister goes to Redbridge to discuss health in north-east London, will he bear in mind that—because of the previous Secretary of State's changing, or fine tuning, of the funding formula two years ago—north-east London has received about £1 million extra funding at the expense of north and mid-Essex? The consequence has been that, in the current year, mid-Essex has had a deficit of £2.4 million, three hospital wards are being closed, and waiting lists have soared. Will the Government re-examine the funding formula for north-east London and North Essex and restore that £1 million to north and mid-Essex?

Mr. Denham: The health service in Essex has received significant increases in resources, as has every part of the health service across the country. As we announced in November 1998, there is dissatisfaction with the allocations formula, not only in north and mid-Essex, but in other areas. We therefore announced a wide-ranging review of the allocations formula, and said that there will be a freeze on amendments to it until the review is completed. Consequently, in coming years, in each part of the United Kingdom, the health service will be able to plan with some certainty and security, to meet the needs of patients.

Mr. Philip Hammond (Runnymede and Weybridge): Over the summer, the Minister's attention will have been focused on Redbridge for another reason—the exposure of the scandal of waiting list manipulation at the King George hospital, and subsequently elsewhere in the country. Will the Minister admit that the Government's waiting list initiative has been an unmitigated disaster for the NHS; that there are still 18-month waiters in the system; and that the Government's very modest progress on their targets so far has been achieved only by a massive distortion of clinical priorities, the creation of a culture of manipulation and deceit in the NHS, a doubling of out-patient waiting lists and the absurdity of forcing the sickest patients to wait the longest?

Mr. Denham: No, I do not accept a word of that, because it is all wrong. We are absolutely determined that the public should have every confidence in the waiting list figures that we publish, and I support entirely the Redbridge health care trust in the tough and prompt action that it has taken against those responsible in that case. However, I do not believe that the hon. Gentleman has any evidence for saying that the waiting list figures that we published have been fiddled—they have not. Moreover, we are determined to ensure that the public have full confidence in them.

We shall deliver on our waiting list promise, and have already reduced waiting lists to 70,000 below the level that we inherited. When Conservative Members criticise that fact, they are criticising the fact that another 450,000 in-patients were treated last year. I have not yet heard Conservative Members say which of those 450,000 people should not have had that treatment.

Although the Government will fulfil our waiting list promise, in doing so we shall ensure that conditions that deserve high priority—such as cancer and coronary heart disease—are given proper priority. We have already established a two-week maximum waiting time for breast cancer referrals, and that maximum will be extended to other cancers. In due course, we shall introduce the national service framework on coronary heart disease, which will demonstrate very clearly the priority that we are giving to treating that condition.

Bowel Cancer

6. **Mr. Peter L. Pike** (Burnley): What investment his Department is making in services to combat cancer of the bowel. [92589]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Yvette Cooper): We have invested £20 million in colorectal cancer services to improve access to diagnosis and treatment. Additionally, £10 million is being made available to support the two-week waiting time standard for all patients urgently referred with suspected cancer. The £93 million in England from the new opportunities fund will buy additional and replacement equipment for the diagnosis and treatment of all cancers.

Mr. Pike: My hon. Friend will know that, in far too many cases, cancer of the bowel is detected far too late. What can we do to encourage earlier diagnosis of cancer of the bowel to ensure that action will be taken speedily? What action can we take to ensure that the survival rate is the same across the United Kingdom, so that there are not survival black spots in some parts of the country?

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Screening can be effective in promoting the early diagnosis of other cancers. Pilot studies for colorectal screening were announced in March in order to see whether a national programme would be feasible or acceptable. My hon. Friend is also right that it is outrageous that people from low-income areas are more likely to die of cancer. That is unacceptable. The Government are prioritising cancer not just because it is one of the biggest killers in the country, but because it lies at the heart of deep-rooted inequalities in Britain.

Rev. Martin Smyth (Belfast, South): In welcoming the steps taken to advance cancer care, I urge the Minister to ensure that more money is spent on drawing the attention of the public to the fact that they could take greater care in detecting things and by going to the doctor sooner. Is there collaboration in England—similar to that involving City, Belfast and Johns Hopkins hospitals—to bring centres of excellence together to combat this scourge?

Yvette Cooper: I am encouraged by the centre of excellence that the hon. Gentleman describes. The matter is a huge priority for the Government. We are working with organisations across the country on a strategy that will look not simply at cure but at prevention and the action that individuals can take to improve their health. One of our most important acts in that regard is to ban tobacco advertising from this country.

Dr. Desmond Turner (Brighton, Kemptown): I deeply welcome the sharper focus on cancer care and coronary disease, although there has been some press speculation—probably idle—that some of the extra resources will be at the expense of public health initiatives. Will the Minister assure the House that there will be no dilution of public health initiatives that are aimed at preventing those diseases?

Yvette Cooper: I can do that. In fact, the reverse is true: we are making cancer and heart disease a priority, although public health must be at the forefront of tackling those diseases. It is not simply about what happens in hospitals, but about what happens in every household in every street in this country.

Dr. Liam Fox (Woodspring): I welcome any increased targeting on cancer, although the task is a difficult one that cannot be achieved by gimmicks, soundbites or the sort of double accounting that we have seen from the Government recently which has been worthy of the Home Secretary himself. There is a difficulty with the cancer pledge that I would like the Minister to address. In gynaecology, it would be ridiculous to refer every woman with post-menopausal bleeding. Likewise, it would be impossible to refer everyone with altered bowel habits simply because they may have cancer. What level of clinical suspicion is required to meet the time pledge, and what guidelines have been issued to GPs throughout the country?

Yvette Cooper: We are working with GPs on the guidelines to ensure that referral takes place properly and according to appropriate clinical priorities, as it is a matter of clinical judgment for the doctors involved. It is a bit rich to be lectured on clinical priorities by a shadow spokesperson who believes that we should be encouraging more private insurance at the expense of the NHS and that we should be shunting people into private health care instead. I can think of no greater distortion of clinical priorities than rationing treatment according to how much people can afford to pay.

Organ Transplants

7. **Mr. Tam Dalyell** (Linlithgow): What discussions he has had with the Scottish Executive on Government policy relating to organ transplants. [92590]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Gisela Stuart): Department of Health officials hold discussions with officials in the Scottish Executive Health Department on matters relating to organ transplants. All countries of the United Kingdom continue to co-operate on transplantation to ensure the effective provision of services including maximising the number of organs available, and that patients receive the best-matched available organs.

Mr. Dalyell: May I wish my hon. Friend well on her first appearance on the Front Bench? Is it not sad that

highly personal decisions on the donation of organs have to be made at the moment of maximum grief? That is not the right time to make them. In view of the change of heart by the British Medical Association, is there any change in the thinking of the Government on organ donation and on an amendment to the Human Tissue Act 1961?

Gisela Stuart: I thank my hon. Friend for his kind words. He is right to point out that decisions about organ transplantation have to be made at sensitive times. The current arrangements work on the basis of consent. It is a giving relationship based on a positive step. There have been suggestions that we should have an opt-out system so that decisions on organ donations were made without further discussion. Even countries that have such an opt-out have a system of consultation. We do not want to move away from that. A survey has suggested that 50 per cent. of the population are content with the current arrangements. More importantly, there is no evidence from European countries that have an opt-out that it would increase the number of organs available. The biggest hinderance to organ donations is the place where the death occurs, which often has to be in hospital.

Mr. John Wilkinson (Ruislip–Northwood): I welcome the hon. Lady to her appointment. Will she address her fresh mind to Government policy on transplantation not just north of the border, but in the London area? Does she recognise the immense merits of Harefield hospital in my constituency, which has an international reputation second to none on the transplantation of hearts and lungs—sometimes both together? Will she ensure that that centre of excellence is built up, not reduced in scale or scope as seems to be the present plan?

Gisela Stuart: The current arrangements on transplantation and the availability of organs are still organised on a UK-wide basis, including Ireland. Every hospital in the country will have the best and most suited organ available, irrespective of funding. It is a question of matching. I am content with the systems that are in place.

Mr. Michael Connarty (Falkirk, East): I also welcome my hon. Friend and the other sisters who have been promoted to the Front Bench in the recent reshuffle. Is she aware that, when I wrote to my right hon. Friend the former Secretary of State for Health requesting information on transplantation policy, particularly for people with Down's syndrome, I received a letter saying that, as a Scottish Member of Parliament, I should write to the Scottish Parliament about the matter? My request has been addressed again and I have had a reply saying that it will be dealt with properly. Does my hon. Friend accept that the health service often has to provide for people across borders, depending on where a speciality lies? I have had constituents who have had to come to London for particular operations. Will she assure the House that there will be seamless availability of health service provision for people throughout the United Kingdom, particularly for those who suffer from Down's syndrome or some other incapacity?

Gisela Stuart: It is right that health is now a devolved matter, so to some extent my hon. Friend was correctly advised to approach Members of the Scottish Parliament. However, the legal arrangements for transplantation are unusual. While there is theoretically provision for different arrangements north of the border, we should be very concerned if there were not close discussions in preparation. I remind my hon. Friend that the United Kingdom Transplant Support Service Authority and the Unrelated Live Transplant Regulatory Authority work across the United Kingdom despite devolution.

Dental Services

8. **Mr. Andrew George** (St. Ives): What assessment he has made of the provision of dental services in Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly; and if he will make a statement. [92591]

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr. John Denham): I understand from the health authority that, at 40 per cent., registrations in Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly are 7 per cent. lower than the England average. In recognition of the problem in Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly, the Government have approved 12 investing in dentistry bids and a personal dental service pilot to establish drop-in dental centres at various locations in the county. I am pleased to say that Cornwall will be at the forefront of modernising dental services. We are working on links with NHS Direct so that a phone call to it will put the patient directly in touch with a clinic that is able to accept them for treatment.

Mr. George: But phone and go where? Does the Minister accept that, with only four practices out of 88 in Cornwall accepting new adult NHS patients, there is a crisis in provision there? Does he also accept that it is time for proper action to address the real problem of access to NHS dentists rather than initiatives that simply seek to grab headlines?

Mr. Denham: I am sorry, but the hon. Gentleman misunderstands the situation. The combined effect of the 12 investing in dentistry bids, when they have their full impact, should enable at least another 32,500 patients to register with an NHS dentist. The drop-in centres are expected to treat an additional 28,000 patients a year. That is not empty words for headlines but real action to give new confidence to the NHS dentistry service in Cornwall.

Vaccines (Bovine Material)

9. **Mr. Norman Baker** (Lewes): If he will make a statement on the use of bovine materials in vaccines. [92592]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Yvette Cooper): No bovine material has ever been used as an active ingredient in vaccines. Some bovine material is used in the early stages of manufacture of some vaccines and as a medium for cell growth for some vaccines. Since 1993, all vaccines in use were manufactured without UK-sourced bovine material. In 1989, guidelines were issued by the Committee on the Safety of Medicines that advised manufacturing companies to switch to non-UK-sourced bovine material. No vaccines licensed since the guidelines were issued have contained UK-sourced bovine material. Vaccines already licensed in 1989 may have been using

UK-sourced bovine material in the manufacturing process, but by 1992 all manufacturers of existing vaccines had confirmed that they were sourcing bovine material from outside the UK.

Mr. Baker: I am grateful for that full answer, but in parliamentary answers to me earlier this year the Government admitted that stockpiles of vaccines containing bovine material that may have come from BSE-infected cows were not recalled when such material was banned from the food chain, and nothing was done to prevent their use between 1989 and 1992 by the previous Tory Government. How many people have been injected with such vaccines, and what steps have the Government taken to monitor any long-term health consequences?

Yvette Cooper: I will write to the hon. Gentleman with the answer on the number of people who were vaccinated between 1989 and 1992. Responsibility for advising the Government on the licensing of vaccines rests with the Committee on the Safety of Medicines. In 1989, the risk from UK-sourced bovine material was considered to be "remote" and theoretical. The CSM's view at the time was that the risk to public health through the spread of serious infectious diseases was greater than the risk associated with the use of the UK-sourced bovine material. Therefore, in 1989, the decision was taken on the basis of that advice that the vaccine programme should not be stopped immediately.

Mrs. Caroline Spelman (Meriden): May I also welcome the Minister to the Front Bench? I also welcome the reassurances she has just given, which are good for public confidence in our immunisation programme. However, in view of the sharp fall in vaccinations for mumps, measles and rubella from the target figure of 95 to 87 per cent.—which places children at risk from a measles epidemic—will the Secretary of State lift the ban on single-dose vaccines and give parents back that choice?

Yvette Cooper: I thank the hon. Lady for her kind remarks. The single vaccines have not been withdrawn for reasons of cost or to deny parental choice, but on grounds of safety. The action is not a blanket ban and we have acted under the Medicines Act 1968, restricted by the Medicines Control Agency, on several grounds, including the principle that an unlicensed medicine should not be imported when a safe and effective licensed alternative is available. A growing body of evidence suggests that the single-dose mumps vaccine, which was being imported unlicensed, is not effective in protecting children. No evidence exists to demonstrate that the use of single vaccines is any safer than using MMR.

Medical Treatments (Prisons)

10. **Mr. David Tredinnick** (Bosworth): What discussions he has had with the Home Secretary concerning the range of complementary and alternative medical treatments available in Her Majesty's prisons and Her Majesty's young offenders institutions; what was decided; and if he will make a statement. [92593]

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr. John Hutton): The priority to be accorded to such treatments and the suitability of particular complementary and alternative treatments in prisons and other custodial institutions were considered by officials from the Prison Service and the Department of Health earlier this year. It was decided that a limited number of complementary therapies of potential benefit to prisoners and regimes should be provided, subject to the prison doctor's assessment of individual health needs and resource availability.

Mr. Tredinnick: Does the Minister not think that it is nonsense that the number of treatments available in the Prison Service has been reduced from 24 to six, when more and more treatments are being made available in the national health service? Does not he recognise that many complementary and alternative practitioners use more than one treatment? Does not he think that it is fundamentally crazy that homeopathy has been dropped from the list of treatments available in prisons, despite the fact that it has been used in the health service since that service's inception and that a new homeopathic hospital is coming on-stream in Glasgow?

Mr. Hutton: I am not sure that I want to echo the adjectives used by the hon. Gentleman. The decisions that have been taken are not crazy. They are sensible and well balanced, and take into account the obvious question of resources. We are trying to improve, across the range, the health care services available to prisoners. We are doing that, but we must take into account the priorities facing the prison population. We must also take into account the special mental health problems that arise in prisons, and improve mental health services to prisoners. We are continuing to make complementary treatments and therapies available to prisoners in the prison estate.

Chiropody

11. **Mr. Eric Pickles** (Brentwood and Ongar): When he plans to bring forward regulations to govern the chiropody profession. [92594]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Gisela Stuart): Chiropody is currently regulated by the Professions Supplementary to Medicine Act 1960. The Health Act 1999 provides for the making of an order to replace that Act and will establish a new health professions council. The chiropody profession will be among those to be registered by the new council.

Mr. Pickles: I am grateful for that reply. The Minister is in the first few weeks of her new job, but is she aware of the considerable concern in the profession due to the delay in consultation on that order? Will she take this opportunity to reflect on the anxiety about whether the regulations will protect the title of chiropody? Does she agree that any body looking into matters of fitness to practise should be composed mainly of members of the relevant professions?

Gisela Stuart: I am aware of those concerns and should like to point out to the hon. Gentleman that a consultation process is in place. It is proposed that the process will start this month or in November, and we hope that the legislation will be in place in summer 2001. The hon. Gentleman appears to feel that there is an

extraordinary urgency about this matter, so it is quite surprising that nothing has been done about it in the past 20 years.

I should also point out that the professions will be fully consulted. Under the new legislation, the health professions council will contain a majority element of professionals, and its membership will be broadly based. Above all, the professions will play a key role in formulating the proposals to be put forward.

Mrs. Anne Campbell (Cambridge): May I add my congratulations to my hon. Friend on her promotion, and welcome her to the Front Bench? Is she aware that the previous Government's health cuts mean that elderly people in my constituency are no longer eligible to receive free chiropody treatment, even when they are badly in need of it? Will she look at the problem again, to see whether there is any way to make such free treatment under the national health service a national right for elderly people who may be having problems?

Gisela Stuart: I thank my hon. Friend for her kind remarks. Of course, we will strengthen community services to make chiropody available to any age group, and especially to the elderly. Part of the NHS modernisation proposals is to put more funds into primary care. That will include the group referred to by my hon. Friend.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): I congratulate the Minister on her appointment, and wish her success. When she reflects on chiropody services, is the Minister aware of the remarks attributed in *The Health Service Journal* to the Chairman of the Select Committee on Health, the hon. Member for Wakefield (Mr. Hinchliffe), in which he denounced all who work in the private health care sector? I shall not repeat the word that he used, but it begins with "b" and ends in "s". Does the Minister share that assessment of people working in that sector, or does she agree with me and other Conservative Members that the hon. Gentleman's description is deeply offensive, both to private chiropodists and to people who are illegitimate children?

Gisela Stuart: I have some difficulty in sharing the hon. Gentleman's synthetic outrage. Fifty per cent. of the chiropody profession are in private practice and 50 per cent. work in the NHS. Both groups play a vital role in the provision of medical care.

Casualty Modernisation Schemes

12. **Mr. Ronnie Campbell** (Blyth Valley): How many casualty modernisation schemes are planned to improve security for staff. [92595]

The Secretary of State for Health (Mr. Alan Milburn): Of the 171 schemes currently under way to modernise and expand accident and emergency departments, 55 are concerned specifically with improvements to security for staff and patients. The other 116 schemes are more general and will also benefit hospital staff.

Mr. Campbell: First, may I welcome my north-east colleague to his new post? His statement that he will save the lives of cancer and heart patients should have been made from the beginning. I am beginning to warm to new Labour—*[Interruption.]* Before my colleagues get too excited, I am only saying warm.

I appreciate what my right hon. Friend plans to do about casualties. It is hypocritical of the Tories to say that they will do all that they claim while cutting taxes at the same time. I cannot understand how they mean to do both.

Mr. Milburn: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to level that charge against the Opposition. Their agenda is very different from ours. The hon. Member for Woodspring (Dr. Fox) clearly laid out the Conservative agenda when he told a fringe meeting at his party conference that he was an "unreconstructed Thatcherite free marketeer" and a "great believer energetically" in markets. He told his audience:

"The biggest problem that we have in the NHS is that it is not a proper market."

The hon. Gentleman went on to set out the real agenda behind the Conservative party's patients guarantee, saying:

"what we are proposing could revolutionise private insurance in the way we revolutionised pensions in the 1980s."

We all remember pensions misselling. The patients guarantee was, the hon. Gentleman said, a Trojan horse, and so it is. The Tories would privatise the national health service; we will modernise it.

Accident and Emergency Unit Mergers

13. **Mr. Peter Lilley** (Hitchin and Harpenden): If he will commission a study of the effect of mergers of accident and emergency units on clinical outcomes. [92596]

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr. John Denham): In considering whether to merge accident and emergency services we review a range of aspects of service quality, such as the availability of specialist doctors and nurses, access to investigation such as CT scanning and specialist back-up in hospitals. We must take other factors into account, such as location and accessibility of service. It is essential to ensure that we modernise all our A and E programmes, and, as my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health said, we have a programme to modernise every A and E department that requires such investment.

Mr. Lilley: I thank the Minister for his answer, but think that it could have been put more tersely—"No." Can he confirm that although Labour opposed all hospital closures and promised before the general election to stop them, the Government plan no fewer than 80 closures across the country? The justification given for closing the accident and emergency unit at St. Albans, and for similar proposals elsewhere in Hertfordshire, is that it will improve the clinical outcome for patients. Before any more closures of accident and emergency departments, there should surely be a proper study to demonstrate that larger units do indeed result in improved clinical outcomes. Will the Minister carry out such a study?

Mr. Denham: In every case, we will make sure that the measures that we take are in the interests of delivering the best quality of patient care. It is not only what happens

in accident and emergency departments that is important: events there link with what happens to a patient before he or she arrives at that department—including the quality of paramedic care—and the quality of support available in a hospital once a patient has been admitted. The right hon. Gentleman was a member of a Conservative Government who cut 100,000 hospital beds, so he is the wrong person in the wrong position to raise this matter. The changes that we bring about will be in the best interests of patients.

Emergency Cases

14. **Mrs. Janet Dean** (Burton): How many emergency cases were treated by the NHS during the years to the end of March (a) 1999, (b) 1998 and (c) 1997; and if he will make a statement. [92597]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Gisela Stuart): The numbers of emergency cases treated by the national health service are as follows: in 1998–99, 3,904,162; and in 1997–98, 3,783,350. The figure for 1996–97 is not included as that year was the first that data were collected for admissions rather than consultant episodes and the data are not as reliable.

Mrs. Dean: I would also add my congratulations to my hon. Friend on her appointment to the Front Bench. I wish her well and I thank her for her answer. We must all be concerned about the number of emergency admissions to the health service. Will my hon. Friend tell the House how the Government are tackling that increase?

Gisela Stuart: I thank my hon. Friend for her kind remarks.

It is the Government's long-term aim to provide alternatives to acute hospital admissions. While it is true to say that accident and emergency admissions have increased year on year, the increase of 3.2 per cent. in the last year represented a slower rate of increase than in previous years. The actions that we have taken include rapid response teams, which enable patients to stay in their homes while care packages are put together. More importantly, we should recognise that one of the Government's priorities is to invest in improved emergency services. To that end, we have invested about £150 million alone in the last year to improve facilities. My hon. Friend will be aware that the Queen's hospital in Burton has received about £1.6 million in the current year.

Mrs. Virginia Bottomley (South-West Surrey): In congratulating the Under-Secretary and her colleagues as well as my right hon. Friends on their new posts, I understand that the hon. Lady is to see representatives from the West Surrey health authority shortly. A recent casualty watch has found a series of patients waiting more than 20 hours at the Royal Surrey County hospital accident and emergency department. Last week, two parents told me that after their children had waited an hour and a half for head injuries to be examined at the department, they were told that it would be better to take them home and hope that all would be well. The situation has never been so bad in west Surrey. If, to the Labour party, tackling inequalities means driving through an unacceptable deterioration in services in the home counties together with hits on social services, the situation is not containable. The hon. Lady is driving people into the private sector and delivering an unacceptable level of care in the NHS.

Gisela Stuart: I am afraid that I cannot accept the right hon. Lady's assertions. If she would like me to pick up on particular cases involving hospital and trolley waits, I will be happy to do so. In general, the Government have improved not only the amount of funding for accident and emergency provision but winter planning, with which I am involved at the moment, to ensure that over the winter hospital services are improved—that provision has been better planned and better organised than ever before.

Merton, Sutton and Wandsworth Health Authority

15. **Mr. Tom Brake** (Carshalton and Wallington): If he will make a statement on the financial position of the Merton, Sutton and Wandsworth health authority. [92600]

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr. John Hutton): The health authority has a recurrent deficit of £500,000. However, at the end of June 1999, the authority was forecasting a surplus of £600,000 for the current financial year. It is in the process of producing a recovery plan designed to bring it into recurrent balance in the year 2000-2001.

Mr. Brake: I am grateful to the Minister for his response, but I am afraid that the financial position is worse than that he has outlined. The three local NHS trusts are all predicting large deficits. What reassurance can the hon. Gentleman give my constituents, many of whom are experiencing four to five hour waits at the accident and emergency unit at St. Helier hospital that in the coming winter months the level of service and care that they receive will improve rather than deteriorate?

Mr. Hutton: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that question as it allows me to point out to him and his constituents that a £3 million programme is under way at the St. Helier hospital to modernise its accident and emergency facilities. I hope that he will join me in welcoming that.

The hon. Gentleman expressed concerned about the financial implications that have arisen as a consequence of the trust's merger. As a direct consequence of that trust reconfiguration in his constituency, it is estimated that £1.5 million of additional resources will be transferred, as it were, from the back office to the front line to improve patient care for his constituents. I hope that he is also able to welcome that announcement. For his constituents and for everyone else in the country, the Government are committed to modernising the national health service to produce a first-class service that will provide timely and appropriate health care whenever a person needs it. I am sure that he would want to welcome all the initiatives that I have been able to outline.

Special European Council (Tampere)

3.30 pm

The Prime Minister (Mr. Tony Blair): Together with my right hon. Friends the Foreign Secretary and the Home Secretary, I attended a special meeting of the European Council from 14 to 16 October in Tampere, Finland. The main purpose of the meeting was to agree the priorities for action by the European Union and member states in justice and home affairs.

We agreed action in three areas. First, on asylum and immigration we agreed: a common approach to the way in which member states deal with applications for asylum, to remove the incentive for asylum seekers to shop around, and to ensure that asylum seekers are dealt with in the first European Union member state that they enter; effective action against illegal immigration, especially against trafficking in people; and a commitment by all EU member states to treat third-country nationals who are legally resident in their countries fairly and without discrimination. All EU countries are now committed to providing equal access to education, health care and other benefits, as we do already for long-term residents in the United Kingdom. Action was also agreed in relation to the six countries of concern studied by the high-level working group, set up last year. Those countries were Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, Somalia, Morocco, Albania and Iraq. We are using a broad approach involving all available policy instruments to tackle poverty and other root causes of migration.

Secondly, on judicial co-operation, we agreed that there were important areas where court decisions in one jurisdiction should be recognised elsewhere in the EU. This is needed to provide legal redress for individuals and companies when their problems, in business or leisure, originate in another member state and to co-operate better in bringing criminals to justice.

The British proposal that the cornerstone of policy in this area should be mutual recognition of court decisions, rather than the harmonisation of laws, was adopted unanimously. The European Council agreed that there must be drastic simplification of the present, slow and laborious arrangements for giving effect in one member state to the decisions of a court in another member state.

The European Council also decided that practical steps should be taken—for example, agreeing on common procedures for making small claims across internal European borders, together with making better information available to the public—in order to improve the access of all member states' citizens to justice throughout the European Union.

Thirdly, the European Council decided on a series of measures on combating cross-border crime. At our suggestion, there is to be a new task force of European police chiefs working alongside Europol, to plan and organise joint police operations across Europe. There was also agreement on our proposal to set up a European police college. A new body will be established, consisting of national prosecutors, magistrates and police officers, to assist and support investigation of organised crime and the prosecution of those involved. The principle of mutual recognition that was agreed should apply to judicial decisions in criminal cases, particularly those required to secure evidence and seize assets.

Action will be taken in due course to replace extradition with a simplified system for convicted criminals. We will also develop a fast-track extradition process for those accused of a serious crime. In addition, we agreed on a new focus among member states on youth crime, crime prevention and the protection of the victims of crime.

A comprehensive list of the action agreed by the European Council is to be found in the Council's conclusions, a copy of which has been placed in the Library.

In addition to its main business, the Council discussed the situation in Pakistan, following the military takeover there. It also had a preliminary discussion of the prospects for EU enlargement, an issue that will be a major topic for the Helsinki European Council in December. It was unanimously agreed that our commitment to enlargement must proceed.

In the margins of the European Council, I made it clear to the Prime Minister of France and the President of the European Commission that France's failure to permit the sale of British beef was unacceptable, and that the French Government had to implement EU decisions.

The EU Scientific Steering Committee is due to complete its review of the French advisory committee's report before the end of this month. If there is no new scientific evidence, the President of the Commission has agreed with me that he will insist that France implements the earlier ruling, and will take legal action if the French Government fail to do so.

We will pursue every available avenue to ensure that British farmers can exercise their right under European law to sell beef throughout the European Union and, of course, it is only because of European law that we are able to do this with the backing of the law.

At the Tampere Council, we restated and safeguarded essential British national interests on asylum and immigration. We reached agreements with our European partners on law and order issues, which of their nature do not respect national boundaries, and on which international co-operation is vital. We restated the overwhelming scientific evidence on the safety of British beef and the fundamental importance of swift observance by the French Government of European Union law. In short, it was, I believe, a successful Council in which we engaged constructively with our European partners in support of British national interests.

Mr. William Hague (Richmond, Yorks): We welcome the progress made at Tampere on co-operation between EU member states in the fight against drug trafficking, organised crime, money laundering, fraud and theft. Clearly, progress was also made on improving co-operation on asylum procedures and the creation of a European police chiefs task force. Where such co-operation takes place between nation states within the European Union, we welcome it. The mutual recognition of court decisions agreed at Tampere obviously has merits and we await further details of that.

Is it not important to ensure that, with such co-operation, we do not give away the right of this country to make its own decisions? The Home Secretary tells us that we are not moving towards a single system of justice, but, these days, when the Home Secretary has been to visit, we all start counting the spoons. In the light of this, can the Government guarantee that none of the

measures to which they have signed up will undermine our own system of justice or lead to a corpus juris in Europe—something to which we should be implacably opposed?

The Prime Minister referred to the continuing ban on British beef in France. Can we ask him to try a new tactic to get France to lift the ban? Why does he not show his confidence in British beef by lifting his ban on beef on the bone here in Britain? What does he say to the French Prime Minister? "Please lift the ban on our beef? Mind you, I don't touch it myself if it has a bone attached to it." What a stupid position to be in.

We welcome the commitment to enlargement. Everyone acknowledges that this will require changes in the way in which Europe operates. The important question is what those changes will be. Is it not in the interests of Britain and of Europe to argue the case for a more flexible Europe of nation states co-operating together? Government committed to that vision would be pressing for treaty amendments at the next intergovernmental conference that would allow nations greater flexibility. Is that not necessary to make an enlarged Europe work? Is it not necessary to protect the great strength that nation states bring to Europe?

Is it not Britain's responsibility to stand firm for this vision of a flexible Europe? Is not the truth that, instead, our Prime Minister is going along with, and encouraging, a more centralised, more bureaucratic, more interfering Europe? Did we not see yesterday that agenda unfolding as his so-called wise men, including his own former Minister and current adviser Lord Simon of Highbury, published their report? It included a massive increase in qualified majority voting, the abolition of the national veto in key areas including even changes to existing treaties, a separate European defence capability, a written constitution for Europe, and substantial new powers to be taken from national Governments and given to the unelected Commission.

Is it not the right position for the Prime Minister of this country, in the interests of Britain and Europe as a whole, to put forward the alternative to those ideas rather than welcoming them and persisting with his fraudulent insistence that the advancement of any alternative proposals means withdrawal from the European Union? He would have told anyone arguing for the British rebate, for opt-outs from the single currency or for the social chapter that they wanted to withdraw from the European Union. Perhaps we should remind the Prime Minister that the only one of the two of us ever to have fought an election on a platform of withdrawal from Europe is him.

Does the Prime Minister recall that Romano Prodi was meant to concentrate on the heroic task of cleaning up the Commission? Now, he is spending his time saying that, for the first time since the fall of the Roman Empire, we have the opportunity to unite Europe. Talk about delusions of grandeur—from hero to Nero in a few short months. Why is the Prime Minister so content to be carried along with the tide to a single European state? What the great majority of the British public want from Europe is very straightforward. They want co-operation with other European nations on issues such as fighting drugs and many of the other issues rightly discussed at Tampere, but what they do not want is for ever more rights and powers of this country to be taken away slice by slice with our own Prime Minister wielding the knife. That is why the party that stands for being in Europe, not run by Europe, defeated his party at the European elections a few months ago. Is it not time that he listened to that majority? He is not listening to the British people, so it falls to us to speak with clarity and consistency, and to speak up for the people of Britain.

The Prime Minister: It is no wonder that Norman Tebbit said that he had never felt happier in the Conservative party than today. The Thatcherites have won, have they not? They have taken it over. Not the back-seat driver any more, she has kicked the right hon. Gentleman out of the front seat. Now, she is going to be driving that flat-back lorry as it goes around the country. The only chance that the right hon. Gentleman will get to have a spin is when his L-plates are on.

I shall come back to that rant in a moment. First of all, in so far as the right hon. Gentleman had any substantial points on Tampere, let me answer those points. Will the agreement undermine—*[Interruption.]* Calm down. Will the agreement undermine the justice system of Great Britain? No, of course it will not; it is a very sensible set of proposals. I point out to the right hon. Gentleman that he actually opposed all those proposals when we negotiated this at Amsterdam. He opposed the very things that we have now agreed at Tampere, but I thank him for his welcome.

In relation to enlargement, and the wise men's report, let me point out, as the right hon. Gentleman attacks the President of the Commission, that the President was talking about uniting Europe and about enlargement. He was saying how good it was that eastern Europe, which used to be divided from western Europe, is now part of the European family of nations again. I would have thought that Conservatives could welcome that.

The report itself is an advisory report to the President of the European Commission, not a statement of the European Council. As we enlarge the European Union, from 15 to 20, or to 25, we shall have to look at the ways in which we take decisions in the European Union to make it more streamlined.—[HON. MEMBERS: "Ah!"]—There is no hidden agenda. It is a sensible debate to have. The experts on qualified majority voting are the Conservatives in power. They agreed 42 different changes, allowing qualified majority voting. I do not criticise them for that. We could not even argue that the ban on British beef should be lifted were it not for qualified majority voting. We shall not agree to any lifting of the veto in areas such as tax, defence, or our border controls—again, something that we secured at Amsterdam, but I am perfectly prepared to look at it in other areas, if it is in the country's interest. That is a sensible position—not the sort of hysterical rant that we got from the right hon. Gentleman a moment or two ago.

As for the right hon. Gentleman's actual policy, there are two points. First, he is saying that he will renegotiate the terms of entry for Britain into the European Union, and will block—[HON. MEMBERS: "No!"]—Oh, yes. He is saying that, unless he is allowed to choose which areas he agrees to—other than free trade, or the internal market—he will block all European Union change. That is his policy; it cannot have changed just in the past two weeks. If the rest of Europe says no, then he will have no option but to leave. That is why his policy puts us on a conveyor

[The Prime Minister]

belt to withdrawal. *[Interruption.]* Do not take my word for it. This is what the former Chancellor, the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke), said. He said:

"The Eurosceptics in my party have been given a free rein. They have taken advantage of that to try and force the Conservative party to take more extreme anti-European views."

The former Deputy Prime Minister—

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East): Who is he?

The Prime Minister: Who is he? Well, some of us are not going to airbrush the right hon. Member for Henley (Mr. Heseltine) out of history. He said that the Conservative party

"is being taken down a road where the Eurosceptics have got a hidden agenda, which is beginning to emerge, called 'Britain Out'."

Chris Patten said:

"The Conservative policy now appears to stop enlargement unless we get our own way on opt-outs from everything that moves. I just don't understand where we have got to."

The former Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major), said:

"The acid test of whether we go into the euro will, at the end of the day, be an economic test: are we being damaged by staying out?"

He called the sceptics policy "politically crazy". Douglas Hurd said:

"Judging from last week's speeches in Blackpool, Conservative policy in Europe is increasingly based on caricature, not on reality."

Malcolm Rifkind said that the Conservative policy is

"a call which is little more than a euphemism for us to quit Europe."

The Conservatives do not agree with any of those remarks, so let me tell the House what they do agree with—*[Interruption.]* The hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow), who is the new Conservative spokesman on education and employment shouts, but this is what he said previously:

"Renegotiation should start from the premise that we will stay in the European Union if we can strike a deal that is in our interests and pull out if we cannot."

As someone once said, "game, set and match".

The truth of the matter is that the Leader of the Opposition has turned his party into a single-issue pressure group that is anti-Europe. He has turned his leadership over to the far-right Thatcherites. He might save his leadership and get some media backing, but he is playing a dangerous game of politics with the fundamental interests of Britain. The party that now represents mainstream sensible thinking on Britain in Europe is the Labour party.

Mr. Charles Kennedy (Ross, Skye and Inverness, West): It is easy to agree to a great extent with the Prime Minister's sentiments—apart from the last one, with which some of us might take issue.

This European statement gives me my first opportunity to contribute from my new, lowly vantage point—my elders and betters are all behind me, I look no further than the hon. Member for Moray (Mrs. Ewing) when I say that. I beg your indulgence, Madam Speaker, in the hope that the Prime Minister and the House will take this moment to pay tribute to the consistent, coherent and principled contribution made by my predecessor, the right hon. Member for Yeovil (Mr. Ashdown), not least on matters European.

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): No.

Mr. Kennedy: On European issues, no is the only word that the Conservatives have.

Does the Prime Minister agree that much of the detail of the summit, especially in respect of crime and judicial matters, deals with issues that know no borders and respect no frontiers? If ever there were a classic reason why Britain should be in Europe and should be influencing Europe, it is that we cannot pull up a theoretical drawbridge and make ourselves immune from what goes on around us elsewhere in the Community and beyond its boundaries.

The difference between the real world and the unreal world on the other side of the Gangway is that there are those of us across parties and in all parties—including the Conservative party—who recognise that we have to make Europe work for us as a country, as well as for the broader interests and issues affecting Europe as a whole. In the more detailed discussions at the summit, the Home Secretary and the Foreign Secretary were trying to influence the agenda towards improvement, rather than isolation, which is not an answer to anything.

I have some specific questions about judicial matters. There is a genuine citizens' issue regarding Europol, its accountability and Europol members' immunity from prosecution. Does the Prime Minister believe that there is scope to press further to try to ensure that that state of affairs is in the interests of individual European citizens rather than simply in the interests of the members of that force?

Finally, I refer the Prime Minister to the accursed issue of the French attitude to British beef. Can he give us some idea of the scope and time scale involved in pushing the issue hard? Being good Europeans means that, when another member state—in this case, France—flagrantly disregards the jurisdiction of the European Union, we can be in a stronger position to prosecute our case. Let us do so sooner rather than later.

The Prime Minister: I welcome the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Inverness, West (Mr. Kennedy) to his new position and I agree entirely with his comments about his predecessor. As to his elders, at least the right hon. Gentleman gets on with them.

As for the summit, cross-border crime is an area where we need greater co-operation. We must deal also with illegal immigration and try to iron out some of the inconsistencies in asylum rules that cause havoc across the European Union. That task will become even more important as enlargement takes place. As the borders of the European Union are pushed further eastward, it will be very important to have proper controls in place.

Europol will remain subject to ordinary judicial rules and principles. Europol is primarily an intelligence-gathering operation, but it will be subject to strict safeguards to ensure that citizens' liberties are protected properly. We think that it is important that Europol, together with the new police chiefs' task force, draws up an agenda of the changes that can be made within the European Union to try to tackle organised crime.

As to beef and the time scales involved, I think that the Scientific Steering Committee of the European Union will meet on 28 October. We will expect to receive a European Commission statement straight after that meeting and we will obviously progress the matter through the courts as quickly as possible. We have made that quite clear. I have told the French Government that, if the Commission and the Scientific Steering Committee decide, as I believe that they will, that there is no fresh evidence that casts doubt on the safety of British beef—all the evidence submitted recently was available previously to the committee—I hope that the French Government will abide by the decision.

Mr. Tony Benn (Chesterfield): Is the Prime Minister aware that the long-term question of our relations with Europe is a political matter and not something that should be viewed as simply meeting Treasury criteria? Is he aware also that the "patriotic alliance"—which gives the impression of being a shadow national Government—is being grossly inaccurate and deeply offensive in attempting to characterise those who take a different view as Conservative or extreme in their character? Many people, including me, who are good Europeans do not want to see the people of any European country—let alone those in Britain—denied the right to elect and remove those who make the laws and decide economic policy. European co-operation will not be durable unless it is refreshed continually through popular consent and support for those who govern Europe in the general elections of every country, including Britain.

Hon. Members: Hear, hear.

The Prime Minister: I accept entirely that people who hold the views of my right hon. Friend the Member for Chesterfield (Mr. Benn) are perfectly sincere. I have read some of the comments made by both Conservative Members and the press and I believe that those who have joined the Britain in Europe campaign get as much abuse as those who oppose Britain's participation in Europe.

As for my right hon. Friend's comments—which enjoyed great support from the Conservative party, as he would have seen—he proposes that nobody should make laws other than those whom we elect directly and whom we can remove from office. Being a part of the European Union means pooling our sovereignty with that of other countries. Those who object in principle to any such pooling of sovereignty also object in principle to the European Union. We might as well be honest about it: that is the debate. Those who oppose this idea because they believe it to be fundamentally undemocratic—I do not happen to share their view—should state their argument openly. They should say what a large part of today's Conservative party wants: they want out of Europe. I am afraid that that follows logically from the position that my right hon. Friend has adopted from his perspective, and that many Conservatives adopt from theirs. That is a perfectly sensible debate to have, but I happen to be on the other side of it.

Mr. Andrew Rowe (Faversham and Mid-Kent): The Prime Minister will know, I am sure, that, all over the country, people are pleased to think that the processing of asylum applications will be speeded up. However, is he aware that many of my constituents are increasingly disturbed by the fact that, although we are spending much time and effort on new procedures to speed up asylum applications, law-abiding citizens are having to wait seven, eight or even nine months for a passport—if, that is, the passport has not been lost. This week, I have had the humiliation of having to write to a foreign embassy asking it to intervene because the passport of one of my constituents had been lost by our people, and only an intervention by the Turkish ambassador could allow that person to get back to Istanbul to see deprived and anxious relatives, who had suffered in the earthquake. That is no way to go into a negotiation with Europe, with disgraceful incompetence in our procedures.

The Prime Minister: We are reforming our procedures, precisely because we have a huge backlog of claims. I understand that the casework is now back to normal, but I accept that things have been very difficult for people. However, that does not detract from the fact that it is in our interests to ensure that there are common asylum procedures across Europe. As for our asylum procedures, and our ability to make our asylum system more efficient, the changes that we propose will achieve precisely that. In relation to the matter that the hon. Gentleman raised in connection with his constituents, we have been working extremely hard, and we believe that the casework is now back to normal—but we keep the situation under constant review.

Mr. Bill Rammell (Harlow): I warmly welcome what the Prime Minister has said about our stance on the lifting of the French beef ban. Anyone who believes in the European Union also believes that everyone should abide by the rules. Clearly, the French are not doing that, so it is important that we are challenging the French Government. However, does my right hon. Friend accept that the very fact that we have a legal framework within the European Union, setting out rights and responsibilities, means that we have a method of legal redress against the French Government? If we had followed the advice of the Conservative party, which increasingly seems to suggest withdrawal from the EU, we would have no legal right of redress whatever.

The Prime Minister: It is true that it is only because we are part of the European Union that we can pursue legal redress. It is also true that opting out of everything, which is now the Conservative party's policy, would include opting out of aspects that were nothing to do with the issue. The shadow Foreign Secretary said that Community law should be concerned only with free markets and free trade. That would mean that, in respect of the environment, agriculture and a whole range of other things, countries could simply pick and choose, and do whatever they wanted. That would be used against us, to our detriment; that is what is so crazy about Conservative policy. As the European Union enlarges and more countries come in, it will be in our interests to ensure that a small country cannot block change that we want in the European Union—change that would be in our interests.

Mr. Ian Taylor (Esher and Walton): My right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition was right to welcome the developments at Tampere, and to encourage the Prime Minister to be tougher with the French by using the Commission and the European Court of Justice in the

[Mr. Ian Taylor]

proper way, in Britain's national interests. He was also right to welcome the enlargement measures. However, will the Prime Minister acknowledge the fact that one consistent Conservative policy has always been that, within the European Union, to overcome the protectionist instincts of any one member country, we need qualified majority voting? That is the principle behind the Single European Act, and it will become more important as the EU enlarges.

Did the Prime Minister have time to discuss with his fellow leaders at Tampere the forthcoming world trade talks in Seattle? Again, there is evidence that, because decisions are not taken by qualified majority voting, it may be difficult to reach a common position for negotiating on behalf of European Union interests in those talks, at a time when the Americans are showing more and more protectionist instincts.

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman is right about qualified majority voting, which is why I do not criticise the Conservative Government for negotiating to have many matters decided by QMV. If they had not done so, a series of changes could never have been put through in Europe.

I also agree with the hon. Gentleman about the World Trade Organisation talks in Seattle. We take the forward end of the free trade position. There are varying degrees of enthusiasm for that in the European Union. It is important that Britain has a leadership position in the European Union, so that we can help to push the EU towards the most open policy that it can possibly have at Seattle. The hon. Gentleman is also right about protectionist sentiments in the United States. The worst thing that we could do from a European perspective would be to echo those sentiments rather than to confront them.

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): I was the leader of the Inter-Parliamentary Union delegation to Peru, and we were told that Peru produced more coca leaves and raw material for drugs than any other country in the world. President Fujimori and many others in a position to know, including the United States Drug Enforcement Agency, said to us that Peru was doing its best—"look, you have seen our gunboats on the Amazon and the dogs that smell every bit of luggage"—but, as long as the west has anonymous, numbered bank accounts, drugs operators will get away with it. What can be done about anonymous, numbered, drugs accounts or the suspicion that such accounts exist? It is not easy.

The Prime Minister: That is a good point. It is precisely for that reason that, at Tampere, we discussed the problem of money laundering. We agreed to draw up a list of action to take against secrecy and illegality that make it difficult to trace where much of the drug money goes.

I should point out to my hon. Friend that, as a result of Europol intelligence gathering and the co-operation that we have now established between police forces across the European Union, we have a better chance of taking action in those areas. However, it would be foolish to pretend that we have anything other than a long way to go.

Mr. Michael Howard (Folkestone and Hythe): The presidency conclusions refer to a new agreement to give residents of European Union member states, as well as their citizens, the right to move to, and work in, any other member state. How is that new right consistent with keeping control of our own borders?

The Prime Minister: That is not correct. Residents will get the same rights as they do in the member state: their rights will not be pushed beyond that, so we will be able protect our borders. I should also point out to the right hon. and learned Gentleman that, under the Amsterdam agreement, we still have an exclusive right to protect our own borders. Whatever issues are raised in the legislation that is agreed, we will be able to protect our own borders.

Miss Julie Kirkbride (Bromsgrove): That is an opt-out.

The Prime Minister: That is absolutely right. As a result, even were the right hon. and learned Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard) right, that would not affect our border controls, because we would still have the right to protect the integrity of our borders.

Mr. Howard: I am referring to what the presidency conclusions say.

The Prime Minister: No, they do not say that. They refer to residents having the same rights as in the member state. That does not mean that they have the freedom that the right hon. and learned Gentleman suggests.

Mr. Stuart Bell (Middlesbrough): May I build on the drawbridge analogy made by the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Inverness, West (Mr. Kennedy)? Some of us do not believe that we should construct a new Hadrian's wall across the English channel. In his discussions on the margins, did my right hon. Friend tell his colleagues in the European Council that 57 per cent. of our trade is with the European Union, that 3.5 million jobs in this country, including many on Teesside, are because of our participation in the European Union, that the Government have no intention of renegotiating the treaties or withdrawing from the EU, and that they have majority support in the House and in the country?

The Prime Minister: That is right, and that is why it is important for Britain not just to remain in the European Union, but to be positively engaged in Europe. Some 3.5 million jobs are dependent on our membership of the EU, 800,000 jobs are as a result of inward investment, and 30 per cent. of such investment in European Union countries comes to Britain. Every day, we put and sell into the European Union £320 million worth of goods and services. That is why it is important for Britain to remain part of the European Union. More than that, however, all the decisions that are made in Europe affect our own ability to operate these rules successfully. If we end up without influence in Europe, or sidelined in Europe, or marginalised in Europe, we end up being unable to defend this country's proper national interests.

Mr. John Butterfill (Bournemouth, West): I am sure that we would all agree with the right hon. Gentleman that it is entirely desirable for us to have a system whereby the law can be enforced across the Community, and we can

work together to prevent drug smuggling, the dissemination of pornography and other awful things; but can the right hon. Gentleman explain how the system of common judicial authority will work, particularly in the absence of a common system of law? For example, what is an offence in Greece may not be an offence in this country. Does the right hon. Gentleman envisage circumstances in which a Greek judge could require the arrest of a British citizen, and require that citizen to face trial in Greece, for something that would not constitute an offence here?

The Prime Minister: No. The proposal is in respect of serious crimes that are recognised across Europe. The purpose is to ensure that judgments can be enforced quickly, without there being, as there are now, great delays and problems in the courts. It is a perfectly sensible idea.

Mr. Tom Clarke (Coatbridge and Chryston): Many will welcome the discussion that the Prime Minister said had taken place about the serious situation in Pakistan. Will he give us some more information about that discussion? Will he also confirm that his Government, like the rest of the Commonwealth and the vast majority of the international community, will do everything possible to ensure that that country returns to democracy as speedily possible?

The Prime Minister: We will do all that we can—independently, through the Commonwealth and through the European Union—to try to ensure a return to stability and democracy in Pakistan. The discussion around the table of the European Union showed total unanimity on that point.

Sir Michael Spicer (West Worcestershire): Will the Prime Minister veto any attempt to introduce corpus juris?

The Prime Minister: As far as I am aware, no one has suggested that we have a corpus juris, and I have made it absolutely clear that we do not want a corpus juris across the whole of Europe. There is not even a proposal for that. We will always oppose anything that we believe to be contrary to this country's national interest, and trying to introduce one legal system across Europe would be. *[Interruption.]* I have already said that we would oppose any such attempt; what is more, no such attempt has ever been made. Why do these people raise these scare stories? They do it because they are so obsessed with being anti-Europe that they allow their dogma to blind them to the proper interest of this country, which is to be in Europe—and not just to be in Europe, but to be constructive, to engage and to lead in Europe, rather than being at the margins of Europe, which is where we found Britain two years ago.

Mr. Neil Gerrard (Walthamstow): Could a common approach on asylum mean that, in the future, applicants arriving in this country via another EU country will have no rights in the United Kingdom under the United Nations convention on refugees, even when courts in this country have taken a different view and rejected the view taken by the country from which the applicants have come? If the Prime Minister regards that as undesirable, does he agree that we need common approaches not just on procedures but on standards, and that we must avoid establishing common standards across Europe by sinking to the level of the lowest common denominators?

The Prime Minister: We are trying to achieve proper standards, but it is important for countries to protect their own boundaries, and to protect themselves against illegal immigration—and, indeed, unlawful asylum. What is required is a balance. We want to establish proper standards in regard to the way in which people are treated and received, but we do not favour harmonisation. What we favour is the adoption of some common procedures, and the introduction of proper minimum standards; but, as a result of what we negotiated at Amsterdam, we retain integrity over our own borders.

Mr. William Thompson (West Tyrone): I welcome the Prime Minister's initiative to try to get France to take in British beef, but does he recognise that its refusal to do so is strictly against the spirit of the European Common Market? Furthermore, such action turns people away from wanting to be closer to Europe.

When the Prime Minister raised France's refusal to accept not only beef into France, but lorry transit through the country, did he also raise the severe allegation that France is subsidising its pig farmers behind the back door and is giving other subsidies to its farmers?

Why have we to wait for another meeting of the Scientific Committee before France takes in British beef? If it can get away with that, why cannot another country raise another objection, which would mean that we would have to wait further?

The Prime Minister: The only proper recourse is through the law. The hon. Gentleman has said that the French action is against the spirit of the law. It is against the letter of the law. That is why we are taking the action that we are taking. As I said earlier, it is only because we are part of the European Union that we have any power to take action against the French.

In respect of transit, as a result of the temporary agreement that we have secured with the French, transit is now allowed, so that obstacle has been cleared, but that does not alter the fact that we still do not have clearance of British beef in Europe. We will carry on fighting the case until we win it.

Mr. Denzil Davies (Llanelli): In view of the Prime Minister's fairly recent answer on that pompously named project the corpus juris, I hesitate to ask another question, but will he please tell me whether, during the deliberations on crime and justice, the corpus juris was discussed at all and whether the recommendation by those who wrote the project that there should be a European public prosecutor was discussed?

The Prime Minister: No is the short answer on corpus juris. There are people who talk about having a European public prosecutor. That is essentially to root out fraud in the European Union, but we have not agreed to that and there is no active proposal on it.

Sir Peter Tapsell (Louth and Horncastle): When the Prime Minister was at the European Council, did anyone draw to his attention the fact that, since he told the House

[Sir Peter Tapsell]

last summer that he was planning to sell more than half Britain's gold reserves because so many other countries were planning to do the same thing, 15 European central banks, supported by the United States Treasury and the Bank of Japan, have pledged not to sell any gold for the next five years or longer, with the effect that the Chancellor of the Exchequer sold the first two tranches of British gold at an all-time low price at the end of a long bear market, involving the British taxpayer in heavy losses?

As Germany holds 3,400 tonnes of gold and has said that it will not sell any of it, will the Prime Minister now abandon his Government's plan to reduce Britain's gold reserves to less than one tenth of that amount?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman is back to the old gold conspiracy again. We took the decision for sensible reasons. As for selling Britain's reserves, the one party that I will not take lessons from in the matter is the party that gave us the exchange rate mechanism debacle, where we lost more reserves in one day than this country has ever known.

Mr. Mike Gapes (Ilford, South): It was reported in the press that, during a break in the proceedings at Tampere, some of the Heads of State and Government visited the Lenin museum in Tampere. Is the Prime Minister aware that that museum contains one of the few surviving documents—the treaty of Brest Litovsk—that was signed by Stalin, Lenin and Trotsky? Can he think of any three Conservative politicians who will be able to sign any document jointly?

The Prime Minister: No is the answer to that. I should also say that I was not one of those who visited the Lenin museum.

Madam Speaker: On that note, we shall move on to the next statement.

Paddington Rail Accident

4.15 pm

The Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. John Prescott): Madam Speaker, I wish, with permission, to make a statement about the horrific railway accident that happened at Ladbroke Grove junction on the approach to Paddington station on 5 October, when, at 8.11 am, the Great Western train from Cheltenham collided with the Thames train leaving Paddington. The House will be aware that, last week, my noble Friend the Minister for Transport made a statement in another place.

I am sure that the House will wish to join me in expressing deepest sympathy to the families and friends of those who lost their lives and hoping for the fullest possible recovery of those who were injured.

Immediately, we asked how such an accident could happen and how we could prevent such a thing from ever happening again. The latest casualty figures are 30 fatalities—including both drivers—and 245 injured. It was the worst rail accident in Britain since the Clapham Junction accident in 1988, when 35 people died.

Once again, the vigour, courage and professionalism demonstrated by our emergency services—fire, police, medical and health and safety staff—were outstanding. The emergency services' reaction was the product of constant training and planning, enabling them to perform in a manner of which I know that the whole nation wants to express its appreciation.

A striking feature of the appalling event was the remarkable reaction of ordinary people who were nearby at the time. Railway workers, staff from the local supermarket, others working nearby and, of course, survivors of the collision rushed to help those in distress without regard to their own safety. In the midst of horror, their selfless behaviour was a testament to human courage and willingness to reach out to others during a crisis. I am sure that the House will wish to join me in paying tribute to them all.

In addition to investigations by Railtrack and the railway inspectorate, there is to be a full public inquiry into the Paddington crash, under the chairmanship of Lord Cullen. I am pleased that Lord Cullen has agreed to take on the task and begun his work so promptly, visiting the site on the day of his appointment. He will, of course, soon have the benefit of the Southall inquiry, to which we attach the highest importance.

Lord Cullen will be examining the causes of the tragic accident, and also the wider issue of the overall safety regime in the railway industry. He will, inevitably, take some time to complete his work, but the Government will do all that we can to remove any obstacles to progress and ensure that we avoid the type of delay that the Southall inquiry experienced.

On Friday, 8 October, Her Majesty's chief inspector of railways issued interim findings on the causes of the crash. Subject to final confirmation, we now know that the Thames train passed a red signal before travelling a further 700 m into the path of the Great Western train. The automatic warning system on board would have applied the brakes if it had not been cancelled by the driver.

The chief inspector of railways has made it clear that, whatever the immediate causes of the tragedy, they should be considered as symptoms of a more general problem in the organisation of an effective railway safety regime.

I am determined to ensure that the industry takes firm and urgent action to reduce greatly the number of signals passed at danger—so-called SPADs. There has been considerable concern about SPAD incidents. Although the number of such incidents had been falling—from almost 1,000 in 1991, to just under 600 in 1997—last year it increased to 643. Consequently, last month, the railway inspectorate published a report detailing actions companies were required to take to strengthen safety systems. The chief inspector has my full support in that.

On 7 October, the railway inspectorate wrote to the train operating companies, instructing them to re-brief all drivers on the location of suspect signals and ways of avoiding passing signals at danger, and to review their driver training and arrangements for monitoring performance.

On 8 October, the inspectorate issued three enforcement notices. The first prohibits the use of signal SN109—the signal passed at danger by the Thames train—until Railtrack takes effective action to prevent further trains from passing it at danger. The second requires Railtrack to introduce by 6 November additional controls at 21 other signals passed at danger more than seven times in the past eight years. The third requires Railtrack by the same date to produce plans to reduce the risk at all other signals with a recent history of being passed at danger.

Meanwhile, I have asked for a weekly report to be sent to me on the number of SPADs. The chief inspector of railways has reported to me that, in the seven days after the accident, there were 16 SPAD incidents on the network. That is consistent with the average weekly numbers for October over the past three years. I have asked the railway inspectorate to produce a monthly analysis of SPADs which will be placed in the Library of the House.

The concern about SPADs has been increased by last night's incident at Lewes, where a Hastings passenger train collided with an empty train. There were 11 passengers plus driver and guard on the Hastings train, and all were safely evacuated. Fortunately, no one was hurt. Railtrack promptly informed the Health and Safety Executive, and an inspector from the railway inspectorate arrived on the scene.

The initial report from the HSE indicates that the train left Lewes station against a red stop light, and although the signaller at Lewes put out an emergency general stop call via the cab secure radio network, he was unable to prevent a collision. The likeliest explanation is that a number of errors by the platform staff at Lewes and the train crew combined resulted in a signal being passed at danger. The railway industry intends to carry out an internal inquiry. Meanwhile, the HSE is continuing to investigate, and we await its conclusions.

These incidents have led to a lot of discussion about train protection systems. Indeed, the inspectors consider that the Paddington accident would have been prevented had the train protection and warning system been installed. In 1989, the Hidden inquiry into the Clapham crash recommended the network-wide fitment of automatic train protection, although no workable system was available in Britain at that time. No decision to implement this recommendation was taken, except on a pilot basis.

When this Government came to office, the Health and Safety Commission—aware of my close interest in the area—expressed concern that the industry was not making sufficient progress on either of the two key rail safety issues of the day: namely, the development of train protection systems and the withdrawal of mark 1 slam-door rolling stock.

We made it clear to the HSC in January 1998 that it should bring forward whatever regulations it considered necessary to improve safety on the railways and to reduce the incidence of signals passed at danger. Those regulations—signed by me on 30 July—will introduce train protection across the network and will bring forward by two years the elimination of mark 1 rolling stock.

The regulations require the early introduction of the TPWS and the continued use of ATP where it is already operational. The regulations do not preclude the introduction of further ATP, especially on our high-speed rail network. In fact, ATP is already operational on the Great Western line, the Chiltern line and the Heathrow express. It is being introduced on the channel tunnel rail link and the west coast main line, together with the east coast main line and the midland main line when they are upgraded. There is a balance of systems on our railway network.

There has been much discussion in the media and elsewhere about different types of train protection systems, and a great deal of misinformed opinion and differing technical advice has added to the confusion. I want to identify the safest and most appropriate options for use on our railways. I have therefore asked Sir David Davies, president of the Royal Academy of Engineering, to assess and report back to me on the effectiveness, practicability and cost of train protection systems, and also on how best to reduce the present number of SPADs.

The Paddington incident has of course given rise to a large number of other questions not related to signals being passed at danger. They include the safety of the rolling stock and emergency equipment in case of fire; the behaviour of automatic central door locking; the type of diesel fuel; and the design of the track configuration and signalling.

We would all like instant answers on those issues. They will be examined thoroughly and properly in the investigations into the crash. I trust that the House agrees that it would be wrong to leap hastily to conclusions. Of course, should right hon. and hon. Members wish to raise any specific points, I shall ensure that they are drawn to the attention of those conducting the investigations and the public inquiry.

Concerns have been expressed since privatisation about fragmentation leading to a blame culture. Particular concern has been expressed about the wide range of responsibilities that reside in Railtrack's safety and standards directorate.

Last year, at my request and in line with a recommendation of the Transport Sub-Committee, the HSC began a review of the issue. Its interim report reached my office on the day of the Paddington crash. The report raises serious concerns about the rail industry, largely relating to priorities and decisions on safety standards, approval of the operators' safety cases,

[Mr. John Prescott]

safety audit, incident investigation and the adequacy of strategic research. It states that those issues should be explored further.

As a consequence I acted immediately, and at my request the Health and Safety Commission has appointed a specialist team to investigate those concerns and advise on any action required. I am glad to say that Railtrack has publicly welcomed that initiative.

I am minded to transfer the main functions of Railtrack's safety and standards directorate out of Railtrack, but where those functions are best located requires careful consideration. The answer must be one that ensures greater coherence on safety and does not, through disrupting safety management, result in an increase in risk.

The chief inspector of railways is keeping me informed of the progress of his investigations into the Paddington crash. He hopes to have sufficient additional information from the various tests and examinations now under way to be able to make a second interim report shortly.

I asked for an early report on action undertaken by Railtrack to improve safety on the approach to Paddington station, both in the short and longer terms. Although the emergency services have completed their work and the track has been cleared, Railtrack will reopen Paddington station only when the railway inspectorate is satisfied that it is safe.

There will be some restrictions on services, in particular at peak times, notably because of the closure of the approach to signal SN109. The actions that I have taken since the Paddington crash have been designed to enable the fullest possible investigation of the causes of this appalling accident and the best ways of preventing it from happening again. They should ensure that the decisions that need to be taken will be properly informed, thoroughly considered and as prompt as possible. In the meantime, whenever it becomes clear that a measure needs to be taken, we shall take it. Neither shall we hesitate to introduce legislation to the House, should that be required.

I have summoned the managing directors of all the passenger and freight operators, the shadow Strategic Railway Authority, the Rail Regulator, Railtrack and the general secretaries of the rail unions to a meeting next Monday to thrash out any immediate and additional steps that can be taken to improve safety. In particular, we shall discuss the HSE reports on SPADs and Railtrack's safety and standards directorate.

The Ladbroke Grove junction rail crash touched the heart of the entire nation. It must be a watershed for railway safety. We must make it so. We must emphasise to everyone concerned that safety comes first, second and third on Britain's railways.

The lasting legacy and the outcome of all the urgent actions now in progress must surely be a more open, more responsive, more rigorous culture of safety across the rail industry. We owe the victims and their loved ones nothing less. I am sure that the House agrees.

Mr. John Redwood (Wokingham): I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his statement. On behalf of the Opposition, I send my deepest sympathy to all the relatives of those who died near Paddington. The House is united in a feeling of shock and grief and we all send our best wishes for a full recovery to those who were injured. We shall all find it difficult to put behind us some of the scenes that we saw, particularly those of us, including me, who represent constituencies along that ill-fated railway line. We are all united in thanking the emergency services for all that they did after the crash to take care of those suffering.

Safety is above party. We all want safer railways. From the moment of the crash, the Opposition have stressed two points. First, we must have a full and speedy inquiry into both Southall and Paddington, and we welcome the news on that. Will the Secretary of State give us some firmer idea of the timetable that he has in mind? It is dangerous to leap to conclusions before knowing the full causes of the crashes, but we wish to press on with the issue because of the fear felt by the travelling public. Secondly, the Opposition will support any sensible measures that can make such dreadful crashes less likely in the future.

It is my unwelcome task today to ask some of the questions that the nation wants answered—that is the role of the Opposition—but I do so with a heavy heart. Many people have been shocked to learn of the number of red signals that have been ignored. When did the Secretary of State first become aware that the number of signals passed at danger has been increasing? He has demanded a weekly report of red signals passed, so is he telling us that he can do something as Secretary of State to ensure that it does not happen in the future? That would be most welcome. What action could he take following yesterday's collision, for example?

We all want swifter progress with the Paddington inquiry than took place with the Southall inquiry. Is the Secretary of State aware that the Opposition wish to co-operate with any reasonable change that may be necessary to allow public inquiries to proceed in parallel with other legal processes? We feel that that is most important.

Will the Secretary of State publish all the evidence and advice that has persuaded him to strip Railtrack of its safety responsibilities before seeing the inquiry findings? For example, does he intend that the same staff currently doing the job should perform the duties in a new body, or should they be dismissed and new people found and trained? Will the instructions to the new body be the same as the instructions to Railtrack, or does he now think those instructions were inadequate and part of the problem? Why does he wish to give Railtrack responsibility for a significant part of the London underground when he does not think that it can be trusted with safety responsibilities?

We wish to know what the Secretary of State has decided about the remit of the Southall inquiry. Will he meet the legal representatives of the families caught up in that tragedy, as the Leader of the Opposition, the shadow transport Minister and I did this morning, to ensure that their concerns about the scope of the inquiry are met? They are deeply felt concerns, and we were deeply moved by the requirements that their legal representatives put to us today.

Is it true that the HSE has said that Paddington is unsafe and that the station definitely cannot reopen tomorrow? The confusion surrounding the reopening of Paddington is doing nothing for the feelings of those affected by the tragedy or for the confidence of the travelling public.

They all deserve better. I hope that the Secretary of State will return to the House soon with a plan of action, based on inquiry findings, for better technology and better train driving, so that travellers can be assured that he and the industry have done everything they can to learn from this series of tragedies. He will find the Opposition very willing to help.

Mr. Prescott: I am grateful for the remarks of support for the organisations involved in that terrible tragedy. We are united in wanting to improve safety, and I readily accept that questions raised by the right hon. Gentleman were not raised in a critical tone, but as a proper function of the Opposition in such situations. The House wishes to ensure that we have the best and safest railways, but I have made it clear from the beginning that I have avoided making political points, although it would be easy to do so. They do not help in such situations. People want us to get on with the job, because they are concerned that the railways are not as safe as they should be. They want the Government and the House to work together to improve matters, and that is our intention.

I met some of the relatives of victims of the Southall crash and discussed their concerns. As the right hon. Gentleman will know, I do not wish that inquiry to be delayed or held up while the Cullen inquiry takes place. It is important to get the conclusions of the investigation of the Southall crash before us as quickly as we can. Those conclusions will be relevant to consideration of the automatic train protection system and will have much to teach us about what went wrong that day. That is the purpose of inquiries. Indeed, I have asked Sir David Davies to make his engineering expertise on automatic train protection systems available to the inquiry. It is important that the Southall inquiry should not be delayed; I disagree with the lawyers who argue that it should be delayed until the Cullen inquiry starts. However, that is a difference of opinion. I think that the House would want that report to be concluded. It has been too long in preparation: people want to hear its conclusions, and they want to do so now.

The right hon. Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood) asked when I knew about the increase in SPAD incidents. Almost my first action, in the first month after I took office, was to call for a report on rail safety. Three or four months later, I called in the Health and Safety Executive to discuss precisely how we were to end the delay in the introduction of an automatic train protection system. The advice that I was given was that something like 70 or 80 per cent. of such incidents could be avoided. Naturally, I told the Health and Safety Executive, "Get on with providing the system—bring me the regulations." If the right hon. Gentleman looks at the dates of the relevant decisions in this matter, he will see that I acted promptly, within weeks of coming into office.

The reason why I acted so quickly is simple: I have always been concerned with safety, and have felt that not enough was being done in that regard. That attitude characterised my actions in my early days as Secretary of State with responsibility for rail safety.

The right hon. Gentleman asked what actions we have taken since the inquiries were instituted. Of course we will act on the inquiries' recommendations. The Southall inquiry is a very important matter for us. I am sure that the right hon. Gentleman will agree that the inquiries are crucial in allowing us to learn the truth. We must not try to guess what happened, and then act on emotion. The purpose of public inquiries is to allow reasoned consideration and a thorough examination of what needs to be done.

However, that is not to say that we can do nothing. Indeed, the country would not thank us if we were to say that we should do nothing while awaiting the inquiries' outcome. That is why I have called representatives from across the industry to a meeting on Monday, and why I have made it clear, through the Health and Safety Executive, that there is more that we can do.

I am not convinced that we cannot reduce the number of SPAD incidents, and I believe that more could be done about driver training. More responsibility should be borne by the industry and those who govern it, and there is more that they can do. That is what the public feel, and what I feel, and I intend to make that absolutely clear at the meeting on Monday. I believe that, by working together, we can improve matters. I hope that we can achieve that on Monday.

Everyone agrees that the Southall inquiry should report very quickly. I hope that it will be ready in December, and that we will be able to judge some recommendations then. That is relevant to my previous point: I believe that Sir David Davies can give us some good advice on the technical information that is available. There is a lot of confusion about such matters. Press reports maintain that people are not sure about automatic train protection, but I was asked—as I think were the previous Government—to adopt a system that was not proven to work 100 per cent. of the time. If we are to order safety systems, it is our responsibility to ensure that they work properly and well.

The right hon. Gentleman mentioned transferring the work of the safety and standards directorate, but the conclusions of the report from the Health and Safety Executive were clear. He knows that that report has been published, so he has had access to the evidence that I received. The report suggested that there should be further discussions on train and station operators' safety cases being accepted directly by the HSE. It also suggested the transfer of the oversight of railway standards development to an existing appropriate organisation such as the British Standards Institution, which is an independent body. Other suggestions included the relocation of some safety audit functions, and the development of new mechanisms for strategic research to achieve better incident investigations.

Those are serious charges to be made against a body with responsibility for safety such as the safety and standards directorate. Nevertheless, I have told the Health and Safety Executive to send in an independent body and find out what it has to say about the criticisms. We will report back at the appropriate time and make a proper judgment. I think that that is the proper way to proceed. I await the report, and all the measures that are taken will be presented to the House. That is evidence of our desire to achieve greater safety on the railway system.

Mr. Martin Salter (Reading, West): Will my right hon. Friend pass on the appreciation of the people of Reading for the many messages of support and condolence that they received following the awful news of the Paddington train disaster, not least the messages from him, the Prime Minister and Her Majesty the Queen?

[Mr. Martin Salter]

Does my right hon. Friend agree that my constituents are right to feel angry that such a disaster—I refuse to call it an accident—occurred so short a time after Southall? Does he agree that Railtrack does not have the confidence of the travelling public and that that problem has been compounded by what has occurred in Lewes? Does he agree that the shambles of the reopening of Paddington has compounded matters further, as have revelations that drivers' warnings about lack of visibility regarding signal 109 were ignored, and that drivers' warnings that the infrastructure for the Heathrow express was causing confusion and blocking sight lines were also ignored?

Will my right hon. Friend consider implementing one more recommendation, made by the Select Committee on the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs in March last year? The Committee's report said:

"The Government would be well advised to consider whether it could better obtain its strategic objectives by taking an equity share in Railtrack."

Would it not be of some comfort to the travelling public if they knew that someone on the board of Railtrack had wide responsibility for community safety rather than just a legal responsibility to a group of shareholders?

Mr. Prescott: I will certainly pass on my hon. Friend's remarks about the gratitude felt by many of his constituents. I understand the anger expressed by people in Reading and in other areas. I was pleased to meet hon. Members last week who told me of their concerns.

We must be careful not to jump to conclusions. My hon. Friend has apparently already concluded that the Lewes incident was due to Railtrack, but I am not sure that he can so readily jump to that conclusion. That is the whole purpose of inquiries. The inspectors have already told me that that incident possibly involved a driver passing a red light. I do not want to blame anyone, but we should not jump to conclusions.

I understand why my hon. Friend feels as he does, given all the other matters that he mentioned. However, I must be guided by proper investigation and inquiry that provides a thorough examination of the facts before I can come to conclusions about action needed to improve safety. That is what inquiries are for, and they have played a tremendous role in improving safety in Britain. I am quite a fan of inquiries; they have done an excellent job.

My hon. Friend's point about buying an equity share in Railtrack is interesting. In fact, the Government hold some shares in Railtrack for various reasons, but it amounts only to a small part of the company. I believe that that is not the way in which to control safety. We need properly to apportion the responsibility as between the companies that must implement safety measures and the public authorities that have the duty to interpret and impose safety standards on the industry. The balance of responsibility between those bodies provides the best safety operation.

I believe that there may be a conflict of interest in Railtrack over safety and operation, a point that has been strongly made. The point is not, I am bound to say, unique, as the inquiry conducted by Lord Robens concluded that we should make great efforts to ensure that there was no conflict of interest. Several departments had their safety functions removed on those grounds and there has been a massive safety improvement across the board as well as in the rail industry. I shall take care to ensure that we strike the proper balance between safety authorities and the industry.

Mr. Don Foster (Bath): May I associate the Liberal Democrats with the sympathy expressed by the Secretary of State for all those affected by the tragedy of the Paddington rail disaster? In addition, may we associate ourselves with his comments on the courage and efficiency of the emergency services and, as he was right to point out, of the members of the public who also assisted?

I welcome the right hon. Gentleman's consideration of a separation of safety issues from Railtrack. Will he confirm that he accepts that Railtrack—a for-profit company—must not be judge and jury on rail safety issues? If the public are to regain confidence in our railways, Railtrack must not have the power to set and monitor its own safety standards.

I welcome the Secretary of State's desire to introduce measures intended to ensure the speedy introduction of effective systems to prevent trains from passing red signals. As the right hon. Gentleman knows, modern technology is more than capable of preventing trains from crashing into each other. The public will not understand it if that technology is not used to make our railways safe or not introduced as quickly as realistically possible.

Is the right hon. Gentleman aware that while contractors for the installation of the train protection and warning system—TPWS, to which he referred earlier—have been asked to speed up the time scale within which their bids are entered, Railtrack has not speeded up its process for letting the contract or allowing contractors on site? There must therefore be doubt as to whether the system will be in place within the agreed time. Will the Secretary of State agree to investigate that issue and report back to the House?

Finally, the Secretary of State said that cost is not to be the issue where safety is concerned. Will he therefore clarify who exactly is to foot the bill for safety improvements and assure us that other vital investment in the rail industry will not suffer as a result?

Mr. Prescott: I welcome the hon. Gentleman as the new spokesman for the Liberal Democrat party on transport and the environment, albeit on a sad occasion. I am certainly grateful for his warm words of support for all those involved in this terrible tragedy.

On Railtrack, I agree that there is a problem—it was expressed in the industry and it was certainly expressed in the HSE report to which I referred. Railtrack appears to have the role of both judge and jury with its standards department. That is why the Select Committee recommended that the functions should be separated. I think that when the relevant Bill was before the House both Opposition parties opposed the measure. I have therefore asked the HSE committee, which is an independent body, to study the accusations that have been made about that conflict. We expect a report shortly and I shall deal with it. However, I have a word of warning for the hon. Gentleman—I am not as yet sure to what single body the role should be transferred. No doubt we will debate that.

On the system itself, on contracts, the introduction of TPWS and concerns about automatic train protection systems, it is true that we should use the best technology.

Perhaps we have not been as effective in using the best technology to improve safety on our railways by comparison with some European railways. At the end of the day, we want a technological system that works and is effective. It is not solely about money. Indeed, the various sums mentioned in connection with automatic train protection systems and TPWS could be financed, and properly so. In talks, Railtrack and other bodies have understood that it could be done in that way. Of course, it should become an essential requirement of the industry's charges that they should cover a safe railway system. People in this country are concerned that there should be some form of train protection system. I think that that is a minimum requirement if we are to restore confidence to the travelling public.

I will investigate the hon. Gentleman's concerns. Indeed, the Davies report should give us some good engineering advice, which might deal with some of the conflicting concerns that have arisen in relation to types of technology in automatic train protection systems. I will certainly look into the matter.

Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody (Crewe and Nantwich): The whole House will welcome the focus and urgency of the actions of the Secretary of State on the matter. This is indeed a watershed in railway accidents. People will need to be reassured that the railway system is still among the safest means of transport in the United Kingdom.

My right hon. Friend mentioned moving the safety unit out of Railtrack. It is essential for it to be a free-standing body. The Select Committee on the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs took evidence that made it clear that that could be part of a first step towards an independent safety authority. There is no criticism to be made of the railways inspectorate, or indeed of the Health and Safety Executive, but some worry exists about the HSE's enforcement powers. Will my right hon. Friend study how quickly it can get responses not only from Railtrack but from the train operating companies when they make recommendations?

Will my right hon. Friend also ensure that Railtrack introduces as soon as possible a confidential reporting unit—it could already have announced that—to enable train staff and drivers and anyone else connected with the railways to give confidential evidence about companies or incidents that break the law or safety rules? It is clear from my postbag that there is a nasty atmosphere in some of the companies, with bullying meaning that people are frightened to speak out. The public will be protected only when people are openly able to report on what is happening and on what is endangering lives.

Finally, the House expects not only Railtrack but all the train operating companies to produce new programmes for signalling, to respond by introducing new rolling stock and no longer to talk about bringing new installations into play only when they are given new franchises. That sort of tacky bargaining will not work any more.

Mr. Prescott: I thank my hon. Friend for her remarks. She is right to say that this is a watershed for safety in the railway industry. I congratulate her and her Committee on the good sense of their recommendations on these matters. I find myself constantly following them, whether in respect of the Strategic Railway Authority, the proposals for a separate, independent safety authority, or those for a hotline or confidential line where people can talk with the confidence that they will not be exposed about the pressures that they feel they are under—and then have them properly investigated. People tend to think of that arrangement only in respect of the air industry, but it has been working quite well in Scotland, where it is financed by the companies themselves. Introducing such a scheme to the English railway system is one of the issues that I will discuss with them at the meeting on Monday.

My hon. Friend's Committee is right to propose an independent safety authority. I want to see independence associated with safety and a reduction of the conflicts of interest that, I fear, exist in some areas. I have yet to make up my mind. I appear before my hon. Friend's Committee on Thursday and we may have further exchanges on that, but I certainly want independence; there is an argument only about the sort of body needed. The Committee is again leading the way on that.

I agree with my hon. Friend on whether the TOCs should be as concerned as others in the signalling system and railway safety. In the new franchise negotiations, we have always considered what safety standards and what kind of technology and signalling should apply. The industry is making some steps towards operating nationally rather than as a fragmented body, as we have seen in the past 12 months. Bringing the companies together on Monday will remind them of their national role and of the fact that acting nationally and co-operatively, not in the fragmented way of the past few years, is the way to achieve the best standards.

Mr. John MacGregor (South Norfolk): I join the Secretary of State in expressing my deepest sympathy to the families of the bereaved and my admiration and gratitude for the work of the emergency services. I agree that the highest importance should be attached to safety, not only in the railway industry but in all transport sectors. It is in the interests of the industry itself that it should have that attitude, not least in attracting and retaining confidence with the increasing volume of passengers and freight on the railways.

The right hon. Gentleman is also right not to reach hasty, immediate conclusions on many such matters without the evidence and views of those conducting the inquiries. As he knows, these are never easy matters to resolve. I am grateful for his recognition that it was as much the technical and viability worries as anything else that led the previous Government not to adopt the automatic train protection system.

In the Secretary of State's consideration of what he might do about the safety and standards directorate, will he bear in mind the utmost importance of ensuring that nothing is done to undermine, reduce or take away Railtrack's management, operational and day-to-day responsibility for safety?

Mr. Prescott: I am grateful for the right hon. Gentleman's remarks. In looking up the history of this whole business, I had occasion to read several of his statements as Secretary of State for Transport dealing with these difficult issues of automatic train protection. It is right that we need to get the best system as soon as possible. Cost is not the only consideration; safety is our highest priority, as he has emphasised.

[Mr. Prescott]

On whether there is a conflict of interests in respect of Railtrack and whether safety standards interfere with the operation of the railway system, we must always balance the best operation against the highest safety. I assure the right hon. Gentleman that even if we separate the safety and standards responsibility from Railtrack, which I am minded to do, Railtrack will still be left with the responsibility under present law to operate a safe railway system.

Ms Karen Buck (Regent's Park and Kensington, North): As the Deputy Prime Minister is aware, this terrible crash took place within the borders of my constituency. I am grateful to him for his warm words to local residents for their part. Indeed, as he said, staff at the nearby supermarket and primary school and many local residents not only were among the first on the scene but provided vital support for the emergency services during the course of the day.

Will my right hon. Friend spare a word and a thought for the residents of a number of blocks of flats which directly overlook the site of the crash? Emergency workers have had the grisly task of taking part in the recovery for two weeks, but in addition hundreds of residents—many of them very vulnerable people—have had to confront that sight every day for a fortnight.

Will my right hon. Friend respond to this morning's news reports that an independent safety panel found that there were still severe visibility problems at 24 signals in the approach to Paddington? Can he reassure me that the Health and Safety Commission and the railway inspectorate will examine that evidence as well as all their other findings before Paddington is allowed to reopen?

Mr. Prescott: I am grateful for my hon. Friend's remarks. I hope that she will pass on the feelings that I, the Opposition and all Members of the House have expressed about the tremendous contribution made by the local residents. Anyone who visited the site was struck by the fact that it was narrow, and access for the emergency services was difficult and depended a great deal on the co-operation of local residents. We are all extremely grateful for the role that they played in this terrible tragedy. Their help ranged from helping to get people out of burning coaches to going around offering coffee to members of the emergency services. It was remarkable and I hope that my hon. Friend will pass on the feelings of the House.

As for the 24 signals at Paddington, the various reports are being studied by the HSC and the railway inspectorate. The Paddington line will not be reopened unless the HSC is satisfied that it is a safe operation.

Mr. Nigel Jones (Cheltenham): I thank the Deputy Prime Minister for his courtesy in keeping me informed of developments since the tragic accident and especially for inviting all hon. Members with constituencies along the route of the 6.03 from Cheltenham to the briefing last Monday, which was very useful.

Will the right hon. Gentleman say something about speed limits in the area of the accident in view of the estimated combined impact speed of around 180 mph? Will he put pressure on Railtrack and the operating companies to upgrade the whole of the south-west region to replace single-track lines and introduce electrification so that never again will we see head-on accidents resulting in diesel fireballs such as that which occurred on this occasion?

Mr. Prescott: Yes, I can assure the hon. Gentleman that we, the Health and Safety Executive and the railway inspectorate are looking at how it is possible to achieve the best form of track layout for the railway system. The accident has obviously brought that very much more to mind and the matter is highlighted at Paddington, but there are other pinchpoints in the system that could perhaps be better designed. They are being studied, particularly with regard to signals, by the HSC and the railway inspectorate.

It is difficult to know exactly what speeds were being done at the time of the crash. The black box in the cab of the Thames train was recovered, but in a much damaged state. There was also one in the back of the train, from which some information has been obtained. The other one has been returned to its country of origin for investigation to see whether we can get anything more from it. Until the inquiry gives its judgments on the matter and the HSE completes the second interim inquiry, it is difficult to tell the exact speed of impact. Various estimates from 120 mph upwards have been made, but we must wait to see what the inquiry has to say.

Mr. George Stevenson (Stoke-on-Trent, South): While I welcome the statement made by my right hon. Friend, does not a further profound question need to be addressed? Can the fragmented structure of the present railway system deliver the sort of railway that he has outlined? Does he share the widespread concern that, in spite of the dramatically increased profits of Railtrack, a recent report by the Rail Regulator suggests that the rail infrastructure is deteriorating?

Is it not time to look at whether, under the powers of the proposed new Strategic Rail Authority, enough emphasis is given to exactly how much responsibility it will have in the provision of rail infrastructure in this country?

Mr. Prescott: These matters are of concern; there has been much comment about them. The Booz-Allen report was critical about the amount of money going into rail infrastructure and about Railtrack. Indeed, Railtrack has since argued that it has accepted the criticism of the Booz-Allen report and has improved. An effective infrastructure is very important; we are looking into that at present. I have no doubt that these matters are all part and parcel of what we might call the safety culture or regime in the industry, and that Lord Cullen will address himself to them.

Miss Anne McIntosh (Vale of York): The Deputy Prime Minister has placed great emphasis on the early use of a train protection and warning system. However, on 8 October, in the first interim report from the Health and Safety Executive, it clearly emerged that automatic train protection equipment was part of the pilot scheme and was fitted to the Great Western train. However, the equipment has a great history of unreliability and in this instance, it was switched off. Could the Deputy Prime Minister please make it an early priority to ensure

that that equipment and the train protection and warning system are tried and tested, and operational as early as possible?

Mr. Prescott: Since that terrible tragedy—which Professor Uff is investigating at the moment, and we must await his report—actions have been taken to ensure that those systems are properly implemented and not isolated in the way that was suggested. However, we must await the report, as it has also been suggested that the driver was not familiar with that kind of system and that it had been isolated for a good period. That is another example of the fact that the automatic train protection system is not necessarily 100 per cent. operative on what we call the bolt-on system.

If ATP is put on new track—as has been done in many parts of the continent, especially on the French railways, on our own new European rail link and on the Heathrow connection—where it is specifically designed, it works very well. The difficulties tend to come with the bolt-on systems that we have. That is a difficulty that all Secretaries of State for Transport have had to face—how to balance the high-speed automatic train protection that we want to see brought in against other factors. In some cases, even if there was a workable system and I tried to bring it in, it would take 10 years to do so, whereas the one that we are now dealing with—the TPWS—can be introduced by 2003 and will reduce 70 per cent. of these incidents. I think that is a good decision to take.

Fiona Mactaggart (Slough): I represent a constituency in which five people who were killed in the incident worked, and the people of Slough are concerned to ensure that lessons are learned fast. They appreciate the message of sympathy and the speed with which the Deputy Prime Minister has acted in the matter.

However, we should not focus only on technology. I had a meeting with representatives of a local train operating company only two weeks before the episode, and learned that many drivers and signal operators had only quite recently been recruited, because of the difficulty of recruiting people to these posts in south-east England. Will my right hon. Friend examine the training of new appointees to the train operating companies to ensure first, that there is sufficient expertise and secondly, that sufficient attention is paid to the safety ethos of the railways?

Mr. Prescott: We should not be over-concerned with technology, although it does have a role to play. What we want is an effective rail system. Even with the best technology in the world, we require to take into account human error, caused either in servicing or working the system. Indeed, in a perfect world, the automatic warning system on a train would stop that train, because the warning has to be cancelled and if it is not cancelled within a few seconds, it will stop it. However, incidents still occur when drivers cancel it and there is a collision—for whatever reason. There are various systems that, if implemented, could actually stop the train itself—that is why we talk about automatic train protection systems.

However, my hon. Friend makes a very sound point about the training and recruitment of drivers. She will be aware that, when the industry was first privatised, an awful lot of drivers were taken out of the industry and there were considerable redundancies—largely because it was thought that there would be a decline in the rail system for one reason or another, but the opposite occurred. Now, there is a desperate need to increase the number of drivers—indeed, we came to an agreement with the industry on getting 800 new drivers this year.

The time it takes to train a driver is also an important question: under British Rail, there was a single training period, but now there are varying training periods and different systems used throughout the industry. Those factors cause me concern, although I make no judgment about their safety, and it is an issue that I shall take up with the industry on Monday.

Mr. Norman Baker (Lewes): I am sure that the Deputy Prime Minister will join me in thanking the emergency services for their speed and efficiency in attending the incident in Lewes. I am relieved that, unlike the horrific accident at Paddington, no one was killed in last night's incident. However, the fact is that two trains crashed at Lewes, and my constituents will be horrified to learn that there have been 643 incidents of trains passing a red signal—almost two such incidents a day—in the past year. My constituents in Lewes and elsewhere expect a safe train system, but they do not believe that they have one.

When will measures be in place to ensure that no train anywhere on the British network will be able to pass a red light, as happened in Lewes last night and on many other occasions over the past year in this country? According to the press release issued this afternoon by Connex, the train operating company that runs trains through Lewes, not only did a driver pass a danger signal, but

"a safety device to remind the driver to check the signals was not used."

What steps will the Deputy Prime Minister take to ensure that, once the necessary safety systems to make drivers aware of red signals have been implemented, drivers cannot override or cancel those systems and that the systems will be fail safe? We cannot have drivers cancelling signals that are there to protect them and the public at large.

Mr. Prescott: I am sure that the whole House identifies with the hon. Gentleman and his constituents in Lewes, and wishes to express great appreciation of the emergency services. From speaking to people involved in such accidents, I have learned that, terrible though the circumstances are, the one comfort is the knowledge that the emergency services will be there quickly to help. That does real credit to those services and I am delighted to have another opportunity to express our appreciation. The circumstances in Lewes were difficult, and we are all pleased that no one was injured there.

The 643 so-called SPAD incidents are a source of great concern, and it is no comfort to know that that total has come down from more than 900 incidents. We must do all we can to reduce that number. I shall place a report on the incidence of SPADs in the House of Commons Library, but it must be seen in perspective. Approximately 70 per cent. of incidents involve distances of less than 50 yd, and sometimes the train has gone over by only one, two or 10 yd, whereas the safety margin built into the system is something like 150 yd. I want to give the House a precise picture of the seriousness of the problem.

I want to prevent every such incident from occurring, and I am sure the House does as well. That is why we paid such close attention to the Health and Safety Commission's

[Mr. Prescott]

report, which contains 22 recommendations to Railtrack and the train operating companies on ways in which to improve the record. On Monday I shall discuss with the industry how those recommendations can be implemented and how we can get something done.

During my inquiries into automatic train systems, I have been told that if the signal has gone red—even if that is a failure of the signal—the train cannot be moved if the automatic train system is on; therefore, sometimes such systems have to be isolated to enable the train to be moved. There are circumstances when technology fails, but the train has to be moved. We have to avoid the easy option of simply cancelling a warning system and getting into the habit of thinking, "It's yellow, it's yellow, so it's bound to be green." Sometimes, the signal is yellow, yellow and then red, and that is when problems arise. We have to do all we can to avoid such difficulties.

Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours (Workington): I have only a brief question, unlike many of those asked today. When will we stop the system of penalties and fines that operates between the train operating companies and Railtrack, which clearly has implications for safety?

Mr. Prescott: We are reviewing several penalties and fines, and the new franchise negotiations are seeking to find a better way of dealing with those kinds of problems. The shadow Strategic Rail Authority has been appointed to provide an overall system that meets the requirements of a better railway rather than simply talking about sanctions, fines and penalties. However, make no mistake, any breach of safety will be met with heavy fines for companies. If companies are not operating proper rail safety systems, they must face the possibility of losing their licences.

Mr. David Rendel (Newbury): The Deputy Prime Minister said that drivers may occasionally override and pass through a series of yellow signals before coming to a red signal and overriding it also. Is that scenario not made more likely because the warning that the driver receives in his cab at a red signal is precisely the same, both audibly and visually, as the warning for a yellow signal? If the warning given to the driver for a red signal were made different from that for a yellow signal, it would surely make the sorts of accidents to which the Deputy Prime Minister refers much less likely.

Mr. Prescott: I thank the hon. Gentleman for repeating what he said to me a week ago. I promised then that I would report his comments to the authorities and I have discussed the matter with the Health and Safety Executive, which had considered it from time to time. There is a different warning sound for green, but the same warning for yellow and red signals. That can create a great deal of confusion in the cab, with all kinds of sounds and signals. The Health and Safety Executive has promised to consider the issue, which we shall certainly put before the Cullen inquiry.

Business of the House

5.11 pm

The President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons (Mrs. Margaret Beckett): Madam Speaker, with permission, I would like to make a short business statement as an addition to my pre-recess business statement—in other words, it is not a substitution for the normal weekly business statement.

The business for Thursday 21 October will now include, at the beginning, a motion to approve the 10th and 11th reports of the Committee on Standards and Privileges. The business for the remainder of that day will follow as announced previously.

Sir George Young (North-West Hampshire): The Opposition are content with the proposed change to business on Thursday. On that day, we would like raise the more substantive issue of the future business of the House.

NEW MEMBERS

The following Members took and subscribed the Oath or made the Affirmation required by law:

Bill Tynan Esq., for Hamilton, South

Neil Turner Esq., for Wigan

Military Expenditure (Conscientious Objection)

5.14 pm

Mr. John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to give taxpayers the right to direct that proportion of their income tax which would otherwise be spent on military purposes to a fund for international aid.

I come to the House directly from the funeral of my constituent, Brian Cooper, the driver of the Great Western train in the Paddington rail disaster. I take this opportunity to send the condolences and the sympathy of the whole House to his family.

The central purpose of the Bill is to give taxpayers who have a conscientious objection to war the right to direct to the Department for International Development or to a non-military security fund the proportion of their income tax that would otherwise be spent on military purposes.

I shall briefly explain the detail of the Bill, and then set out the rationale for its enactment. The Bill would give all taxpayers the opportunity to express on their tax return their conscientious objection to the expenditure of their taxes on preparations for war or the prosecution of war. Taxpayers would be able to express their desire for that proportion of their income tax that would otherwise be spent on military purposes to be spent instead on the prevention of war—to be invested in the search for peace rather than the pursuit of war.

Tax revenues would be diverted either to the Department for International Development, to assist areas of the world deemed at risk of conflict, or to a non-military security fund. The fund, which would be established by the Bill, would have three purposes. First, it would support research into non-military conflict resolution and peace building. Secondly, it would establish a United Kingdom mediation and arbitration service, for use at an early stage in areas of potential conflict. Thirdly, it would support international peace-building organisations, including the United Nations. The fund would be managed by trustees, appointed by the Government, with experience of non-military security, who would report annually to Parliament on the disbursement of the moneys allocated to the fund. I envisage that the simplicity of those measures would enable the scheme to be introduced as early as the tax year 2001-02.

The rationale behind the Bill is as follows. The right of conscientious objection has been acknowledged in this country for centuries. In the late 17th century, the Government sought to induce Quakers to engage in military activities. They refused, and went to prison in a body. Subsequently, in the Militia Ballot Act, Quakers as a body were excluded from military service.

The general right to refuse on the grounds of conscience to participate as a combatant in military service was included in the Military Service (No.2) Act 1916, which introduced conscription for the first world war. Bonar Law said in the Chamber that conscientious objectors were no less filled with patriotism than others fighting in the trenches, and the legislation provided alternative ways in which individuals opposed on religious or ethical grounds to fighting could serve their country in a pacific rather than an aggressive way.

The right to conscientious objection has also been recognised in the United Nations declaration on human rights and the European Union convention on human rights. More recently, the legal right to act in accordance with one's conscience has been placed firmly on the statute book by the Government through the Human Rights Act 1998.

My Bill seeks to give meaningful recognition to the right of conscientious objection and to bring the practical exercise of that right up to date. Modern wars are no longer fought with conscript armies in which a conscientious objector can refuse to serve; they are fought with high-tech weapons paid for with our taxes. Today we are not conscripted to fight; instead, our taxes are conscripted to pay for the high-tech weapons of modern warfare and the trained professionals who fire them.

For those who object to war, there is little moral difference between actually firing lethal weapons and paying for someone else to do so. The Bill gives meaning to the right of freedom of conscience in the modern world. If the right of conscientious objection is to have any real meaning today, it must be the right not to support the pursuit of war with our taxes. We must allow those who object to war the right to have their taxes used for the prevention of war.

Bonar Law acknowledged the heroic humanitarian contribution made by many conscientious objectors during wartime, and modern conscientious objectors should be allowed to make their contribution to society by investing their taxes in the peaceful service of our community.

The Bill is not an attempt to allow people to avoid paying taxes, or to reduce anyone's tax burden. Any taxpayer who wished to exercise the right under the proposed legislation would pay the same amount of tax. The only difference would be that the proportion of their tax that would have been spent on military purposes would be diverted from waging war to waging peace by developing non-military security initiatives.

Organisations such as the United Nations and the European Union already invest in non-military security work, but that is undermined by the lack of funding and a lack of political support. The Bill could release additional resources to enhance peace building and conflict resolution, thus preventing potential conflicts and addressing their root causes without resorting to military force.

In recent years, there has been a tragic failure to invest in conflict resolution at an early enough stage, and that has resulted in bitter and bloody wars, with all the resultant human suffering. Ireland, Palestine, Somalia, Rwanda, Bosnia, Kosovo, East Timor and now Kashmir represent a litany of failures of the civilised world to invest its resources in preventing conflict. They reflect our disastrous propensity to watch disputes fester and grow, only to intervene belatedly and militarily.

Non-military security involves a flexible, imaginative, interventionist approach to securing peace. It is based on prioritising mediation and other peace-building techniques as a way of avoiding armed conflict. It requires resources and the development of an independent arbitration service ready for use at the earliest possible stage of any potential conflict. It includes the monitoring of the implementation of agreements between parties to a potential conflict, which necessitates the creation of an independent

[Mr. John McDonnell]

peace-monitoring service. It involves the stabilising of areas of potential conflict by promoting the establishment of democratic structures, civil authorities and an independent media structure to protect human rights and build social cohesion.

Where conflicts have occurred, the Bill would enable the release of resources to invest in the rebuilding of the social and economic infrastructure of a conflict zone, including the clearing of landmines and the rebuilding of homes, hospitals, schools, workshops and factories. Those resources could also support the conversion of industry from military to civil production, and could be used to retrain people in the skills needed to rebuild their communities and their economy so as to secure long-term peace.

Various arguments have been used against the measures proposed in the Bill, and some have expressed opposition to the principle of the Bill, but the right of conscientious objection has been accepted in principle in Britain for a considerable period. The Bill does nothing more than put that principle in a modern setting.

The Treasury initially raised some practical objections to the operation of the Bill's proposals, and argued that it broke the Treasury's sacred rule of opposing hypothecation of taxation. With the introduction of the system of self-assessment for individual taxation, there are no practical hurdles left. As for the alleged offence of hypothecation, the Government have introduced hypothecation of taxation in their congestion charging proposals.

Another charge is that the Bill would set a precedent for others to direct their taxes, thus opening the floodgates to other objections to Government expenditure programmes. Although many may wish to divert their taxes for political reasons, the right to refuse to kill or to pay others to kill on our behalf uniquely rests on a basic human right that is recognised in domestic and international law.

Last year, this country budgeted for more than £21 billion of military expenditure. That represents about 8.5 per cent. of the Government's total expenditure and an annual contribution of roughly £500 per taxpayer for military programmes. With such large sums, a relatively small number of taxpayers opting to exercise their rights under the Bill would result in a major investment of resources in preventing conflicts in the world by promoting peace-building measures.

The campaign to extend the right of conscientious objection to taxation has been waged across Europe and the United States. By enacting the Bill, the Government, who have been elected on a commitment to an ethical foreign policy and to putting human rights at the heart of government, could establish themselves as a world leader for peace.

In 10 weeks' time, we shall celebrate the 2000th anniversary of the birth of Jesus Christ and the start of a new millennium. It may be worth reminding ourselves of Christ's words in the sermon on the mount. He said:

"Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God."

The Bill could assist us all in becoming peacemakers, and would make a small contribution to ensuring that the next millennium is a millennium of peace.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill ordered to be brought in by Mr. John McDonnell, Mr. Harry Cohen, Mr. Jeremy Corbyn, Audrey Wise, Mr. Neil Gerrard, Mr. Tony Benn, Dr. Rudi Vis, Ms Jenny Jones, Mr. Alan Simpson and Mr. Cynog Dafis.

MILITARY EXPENDITURE (CONSCIENTIOUS OBJECTION)

Mr. John McDonnell accordingly presented a Bill to give taxpayers the right to direct that proportion of their income tax which would otherwise be spent on military purposes to a fund for international aid: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time on Friday 5 November, and to be printed [Bill 151].

Office for National Statistics

[Relevant document: First Report from the Treasury Committee, Session 1998–99, Office for National Statistics (HC 43), and the Government's response thereto (HC 267).]

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Pope.]*

5.25 pm

Mr. Giles Radice (North Durham): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Economic Secretary on her appointment. I am sure that she will do very well indeed. I also congratulate the Treasury Sub-Committee on its excellent report on the Office for National Statistics. I am glad to see that the right hon. Member for Fareham (Sir P. Lloyd) is present, because he and his colleagues have done an excellent job. The present Chairman of the Sub-Committee, the hon. Member for West Worcestershire (Sir M. Spicer), has taken over the right hon. Gentleman's work very ably.

There is no doubt that the report has made the Sub-Committee a significant player in the debate. The Sub-Committee's remit is to scrutinise the Departments and agencies for which the Chancellor is responsible. It has a big programme, and it has done very well so far. It has produced reports on the Office for National Statistics and the Inland Revenue; a report on the Valuation Office Agency is expected, and a report on Customs and Excise is in progress. There are also to be hearings on the management of the Government's cash and debt. I believe that only three bodies remain uninvestigated, and they will certainly have been investigated by the end of the current Parliament. The Sub-Committee is making an important contribution to the Committee's work, and, indeed, to parliamentary accountability generally.

The first reaction of most Members to the word "statistics" is probably "very boring", but statistics are also very important. They are certainly key to the running of modern Government, a modern economy and a modern society. In paragraph 8 of the report, the Sub-Committee says—rightly, in my view—

> "There are three key uses for statistics: forming and implementing policies and targets, providing information to enable Parliament and the public to assess the actions of Government, and contributing to efficient resource allocation and improved competitiveness of the economy as a whole."

Not only Government use statistics. At the back of the report is a list of witnesses, including a business user group, a health statistics user group and an education statistics user group. A host of bodies needs to be certain that the Government are producing statistics of integrity.

Statistics need first to be technically accurate, and secondly to be produced in an independent way. People should be able to rely on their integrity. In particular, they should be free from political interference. Let me give an example of technical accuracy. Last year, there was a major problem involving the average earnings index. The index was clearly of great importance to the running of the economy, for the Monetary Policy Committee used it as one of its key indicators. Although the committee never said so specifically, there is no doubt that its decision to raise interest rates last June—or, rather, the June before that—was influenced by the rise in average earnings. It is true that no one quite knew what would have happened otherwise; the MPC might have made the same decision in any event. If it is to do its job properly, however, it must have proper statistics in order to run the economy.

Perhaps more controversial is the question of political interference, Conservative Members may have their own examples, but I remember that, in 1992, there was some controversy about whether the then Chancellor of the Exchequer, Norman Lamont, had massaged the public sector borrowing requirement figures just before the 1992 election. That was a key issue. The then Treasury Committee, asked questions about that. Again, it is important that statistics should be politically independent. We should have faith—trust, as the slogan says—in our statistical system.

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East): I am sure that the recommendation to which the right hon. Gentleman refers is recommendation (d) of the Select Committee report, which says:

> "For 'National Statistics', where integrity is of the utmost importance, we recommend that the ONS take responsibility rather than home Departments."

Does he agree that, in the light of the controversy over the Home Secretary's remarks to the Labour party conference about 5,000 non-existent new police officers, it is disappointing that the White Paper makes no suggestion of reforms relating to the Home Office?

Mr. Radice: I said that each side would have its own versions. I repeat: it is important that statistics should be free from political interference.

When the Sub-Committee looked at the whole issue of statistics, it had in front of it the Government's Green Paper and it wanted to influence what came out of the White Paper. It therefore laid down certain criteria in its recommendations: that there should be more effective, more accurate statistics; that national statistics, the concept of which we welcome, should be authoritative; that the head of the statistics department or body should have real authority, including access to the Prime Minister to discuss not just integrity but resources; and that the whole system should be underpinned by legislation.

No doubt, the right hon. Member for Fareham will correct me if I have paraphrased his suggestions and proposals inaccurately, but that is what the Sub-Committee said in broad principle. This is not the occasion for me to speak at length, except in praise of the Sub-Committee.

We have to test the White Paper by comparing it with the Sub-Committee's proposals. I am delighted that the White Paper was published in advance of the debate. Perhaps that is one argument for having such debates. It is no criticism of the present Minister, I hasten to add, but some might think that it would have been good if the White Paper had been published a bit earlier. I am pleased that it has been published, so I will not be curmudgeonly about it. We have the document in front of us, so we can read it. Some of us received it yesterday, when it was published, and have read it. My overall judgment on it is that it is a good start, but that there is some room for improvement.

I propose to refer to three or four themes. I welcome the post of national statistician. It is a good idea to have an important figure in charge of national statistics. It is important that we choose a top-rate person to do the job.

[Mr. Radice]

We have to ask: has he or she sufficient authority to do the job properly? In relation to the national statistics, I would say yes, because his or her professional responsibility for national statistics will be separate from that of Ministers, and that seems to me to be an important step forward.

In relation to departmental statistics, the situation is more ambiguous. What should we deem to be national statistics, and how might we resolve the argument? The White Paper is ambivalent on that point. Although the national statistician will necessarily be involved in resolving that argument, I should like to know how we are to do so in relation to national crime and health statistics, for example. If Ministers are sensible, they will realise that they will have far greater authority if they can say, "I can cite national statistics on crime and health, which state the following."

The people chosen for the statistics commission must be highly distinguished. However, I have no quarrel with the idea that not every commission member should be a professional statistician, as one or two non-statisticians may be able to bring other qualities to bear. Nevertheless, the majority of commission members should be professional statisticians. Members of the Monetary Policy Committee—to use that model—are appointed because they are highly qualified in monetary policy.

We have to ask whether statistics commission members will be independent and sufficiently competent and authoritative for their pronouncements to carry weight. I welcome the Government's commitment to the commission's independence—of which Ministers are making much—and welcome the commission's ability to make not only spot-checks on quality, but an annual report to Parliament. Any body that can make an annual report to Parliament is starting out on the road to independence. Once a body is able to make an annual report to Parliament, it can make statements independently of Government, which is an important development.

I agree with the Sub-Committee that we should enshrine in legislation the statistics commission's independence, as we did for the Monetary Policy Committee. Although there is pressure on legislative time, I am glad that Ministers are at least keeping an open mind, and that the statistics commission has been given the task of reviewing the issue.

I welcome the statement in the White Paper that national statistics should be scrutinised by Parliament. Although the commission's report to Parliament will provide a focus for such scrutiny, I hope that Select Committees—particularly the Treasury Committee—will continue to have a role. The Select Committee has already shown that we can do a job of scrutiny, and we should continue doing so.

On national statistics and the Government's new model, the proof of the pudding will certainly be in the eating. The choice of national statistician will be very important. If a really impressive person is chosen, it will send a signal to those who understand about statistics. Moreover, if potential national statisticians think that they will not be overruled by Ministers, they will go forward for the job. There may also be a role for confirmation hearings, which the Treasury Committee has pioneered, in ensuring that those who are chosen for the statistics commission are impressive people.

The White Paper contains only very broad outlines, and we shall need to see some of the detail. The framework for national statistics will be very important. Treasury Committee and Treasury Sub-Committee members will be watching developments with great interest.

5.40 pm

Sir Peter Lloyd (Fareham): I am grateful to the right hon. Member for North Durham (Mr. Radice) for his kind words about the Sub-Committee report, and for selecting some of the most significant points.

Although, alas, I am no longer a member of the Select Committee on the Treasury—which the right hon. Gentleman chairs with tolerance and skill—I was lucky enough to be the Chairman of the Sub-Committee which produced the report on the Office for National Statistics. I am sure that I speak for my erstwhile colleagues in expressing gratitude for the help that we received from the expert individuals and organisations that gave us written and oral evidence, and in saying a word in appreciation of our astute and immensely energetic Clerk, Jennifer Long. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."] I thought that members of the Committee would want to cheer that.

I welcome the Economic Secretary to the Treasury to her post, and I wish her well. Although I shall be critical of the Government, I realise that she arrived well after the die had been cast, and that the Government's shortcomings are not hers. I hope that she will be able to remedy some of them in the months ahead.

It was no accident that the Sub-Committee, which was set up last year to look in turn at all the Departments and agencies for which the Treasury is responsible, made the ONS the subject of its first inquiry. It was plain to us that sound, comprehensive statistical data which everyone could understand and rely on were increasingly essential for good government, and that the services provided by the ONS and the Government's statistical service were central to effective policy formation by Ministers, and to the ability of the public at large—as well as Ministers themselves—to judge their success.

It seems that the Green Paper, "Statistics: A Matter of Trust" reflected the same view, and that the Government were determined to make a fundamental change in the structure of statistical services. We hastened our inquiry in the summer of 1998 with the intention not of pre-empting the Government's Green Paper consultation but—having listened to our expert witnesses—of providing a set of criteria which we felt the new arrangements that were to be produced by the Government last autumn should satisfy.

We need not have hurried. The White Paper was finally published only yesterday—a year later, on the last day of the recess and one day before the debate, making it certain that most Members will not have had a chance to read it and that none will have had the opportunity to study it. It is deplorable that the Government should have contrived to ensure that Members had the minimum of opportunity to reflect on the White Paper before the one day of debate on the subject. The timing of the publication, and of the debate, is effectively in the

Government's hands. It is as if the Government are ashamed of their White Paper and do not want it talked about.

Having read the White Paper, I am not clear why it should have taken so long to produce. It sticks more closely to the status quo than the Green Paper appeared to presage. Perhaps the delay and the disappointing content are both explained by the difficulty of finding agreement within Government for the more thoroughgoing change that is required. At this point—time to study it apart—it is difficult to know, as the right hon. Member for North Durham said, what to make of the contents, as much waits to be spelt out in another paper, "The Framework for National Statistics".

A number of major points need to be made now in the light of the Sub-Committee's recommendations and the existing White Paper. The proposal for an independent statistics commission is certainly welcome, as far as it goes. It makes sense that such a commission should be comparatively small and coherent but—apart from the important task of monitoring the methodology and standards of ONS outputs—its role appears to be solely advisory. It may be more wieldy, but it seems to be little different from the advisory committee which the Government have recently disbanded. Perhaps the Minister will tell the House why the Government disbanded the advisory committee when they did. Would it not have been valuable to have the informed comment of that committee on the White Paper? At a time when the Government needed the committee's advice, they got rid of it.

The Sub-Committee set much store by the recommendation that the commission, rather than Minsters, should decide what statistics should be included in the scope of national statistics if the desired level of integrity—real and perceived—for important statistical series is to be achieved. Hospital waiting lists and school league tables are obvious candidates, as so much store is set by them in terms of policy formation and the public's judgment of the Government. The White Paper makes it plain that Ministers will continue to have the last word.

Mr. Oliver Heald (North-East Hertfordshire): Does my right hon. Friend agree that what he says is relevant to issues such as police numbers? The integrity of the statistics is vital and there is a huge cloud over the Home Secretary's recent speech.

Sir Peter Lloyd: I agree with my hon. Friend that all Government statistics should be absolutely reliable, although however reliable they are—even if they are produced entirely honestly and clearly and launched in that way by the ONS—politicians on both sides will cherry-pick them to bolster their argument. One sees that at party conferences sometimes, and my hon. Friend has picked a good example.

We recommended in particular that, because it is of such central significance, the retail prices index should cease to be the sole responsibility of the Chancellor and should be a candidate for ONS management. However, the Government made it clear in an earlier response that the RPI was too important and too widely used for the Chancellor to let it go. That reply makes nonsense of pious rhetoric to the effect that key national statistics should be seen to be expertly and independently produced. The RPI is apparently too key. If it needs the Chancellor's protection, why is not the earnings index, which is so significant for the Bank of England when it sets interest rates? The Chancellor was rightly bold when he passed responsibility for interest rates to the Bank of England. He should show the same qualities by passing responsibility for the RPI to the ONS in due course.

Mr. Oliver Letwin (West Dorset): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the situation is slightly worse than that? If the Chancellor can manipulate the inflation figures that underlie his target, that target is in his own hands, so he is making nonsense of his policy of delegating monetary control to the Monetary Policy Committee.

Sir Peter Lloyd: My hon. Friend makes an extraordinarily good point, with which I entirely agree. He will understand that I am trying to be as cross-party as possible and am sticking to supporting the recommendations of the Sub-Committee rather than laying on with a trowel the reasons why they are even better than some of us thought when we made them.

During its inquiries, the Sub-Committee became very aware that the director of the ONS and his senior colleagues had had a difficult task in building an effective organisation following the merger in 1996 of the Central Statistical Office, the Office of Population Censuses and Surveys and a range of responsibilities and statistical outputs from a number of Government Departments. We felt that the ONS had made commendable progress, but I should like to quote recommendation 48, which puts the issue in the proper context:

"We recognise that Dr Holt"—

the director—

"faces many difficulties arising from the newness of the organisation, the problems it has inherited and the limitations of the present governance structure. We believe that the combination of roles and responsibilities which the ONS Director is required to fulfil are, as presently constituted, more of a hindrance than a help in dealing with these problems. We recommend that the Government accord a high priority to ensuring that the 'Head of National Statistics'"—

the national statistician, as he will now be called—

"role is managerially workable and supported by sufficient powers to co-ordinate the production of official statistics as well as ensuring that the Head has the required freedom from political interference."

Alas, there is little sign in the White Paper that the Government have fully comprehended that problem. It looks increasingly as though the national statistician, like the director before him, will sit at the top of the ONS with the commission, to whom he is not directly responsible, looking over his shoulder. The ill-defined responsibility for the standards of statistical work done in Departments will continue, without the national statistician having the authority to act if and when necessary.

The Sub-Committee also expressed concern at the lack of strategic vision across the range of official statistics, which we mostly attribute to the organisational structure of the ONS. We feared that the White Paper might not deal with that issue, and our fears appear to be confirmed by yesterday's publication. That issue may be covered in the framework document, but the White Paper gives no grounds for optimism; nor does it encourage us to believe that we are moving beyond the Rayner view that official statistics should be provided primarily to meet the management needs of Government. The needs of local government and business are compelling and should be

[Sir Peter Lloyd]

far better served, not least by better coverage of the vast and growing service area. We recommended that the ONS should publish a document setting out the criteria that it will use to assess the competing demands of Government, local government and business. The Government may have it in mind to do that, and I hope that the Minister will confirm that point later.

As part of KPMG's efficiency review, it was commissioned to make a report. It recommended that great savings would be made by contracting out much of the collection of raw statistical data, releasing resources to improve the service generally and—importantly—releasing the demands on top management time which could then be devoted to strategic and customer concerns, both of which need more attention than they receive at present. Why did the Government not take KPMG's advice?

The Sub-Committee's most important and difficult recommendation is in paragraph 10. I shall read it in full so that its meaning is clear:

"Canadian Statistician Ivan Fellegi has argued that 'A key end objective is to help the public policy process to discern the relevant "policy levers" that are likely to be most effective in moving us toward the achievement of desirable social and economic objectives' and cautioned that 'We cannot assume that the traditional policy levers are necessarily the most important ones.' For example, he suggested that life expectancy might be affected as much by family income as by medical intervention. We asked Dr Holt, the Director of the ONS, about its role in identifying statistics which would improve understanding of a particular policy area. He replied that 'It is a perception that this aspect of Government statistics is not well developed' and that he expected the issue to be raised in the Green Paper consultation. We recommend that in its response to the Green Paper the Government shows how the independent expertise of the GSS and ONS can be better used to translate politically determined objectives into meaningful targets and indicators."

Everybody can think of examples of that. For example, the reliance on waiting list statistics which, even if accurate, may help to distort rather than improve the provision of health care, and the reliance on class sizes, in statistical form, as a key measure when evidence suggests that others are probably more relevant to raising educational standards and ensuring that educational budgets are spent most effectively.

Elected Ministers must of course set policy, but it is in their interests—and certainly in the electorate's interest—that they have the best statistical assessments to help them find the ways to achieve policy goals. Those ways will not necessarily be the obvious ones, those most readily to hand or those to which Ministers committed themselves in opposition.

I am in good company in being critical of the White Paper. The Royal Statistical Society was extremely disappointed with it, and I suspect that few will give it many cheers. If the Government had been less inconsiderate in the timing of its publication—if I had had the opportunity to study more closely its every detail—I might have found cause to welcome at greater length its promise of higher standards of methodology and more coherent and user-friendly forms of publication. I note, too, that the Sub-Committee was grateful that the Government promptly published the reports that they commissioned during the examination of the Green Paper, although it would have just cause for complaint if the Government had not published them.

It is disappointing that the Government have not yet given any sign that they have the courage and wisdom to recognise that they would help themselves if they created a competent structure and handed to it the responsibility to perform a thorough, independent and professional job on all the main statistics that they use and by which the public judge them. However, I draw encouragement from the fact that the commission will be in a position to report publicly on those matters and that the Government have committed themselves to review the case for legislation should the commission recommend it in two years' time. I hope that the commission will use its opportunity well and that more of the Sub-Committee's recommendations will be put into practice than the White Paper portends.

5.57 pm

Mr. Jim Cousins (Newcastle upon Tyne, Central): I join my right hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Mr. Radice) in congratulating my hon. Friend the Economic Secretary on her promotion. I also congratulate her on her wisdom in producing the White Paper the day before our debate. I do not wish to be churlish, and I recognise that this is the first day back for Parliament. It is welcome that the White Paper has been published, albeit that we have not had time to study it in as much detail as we would have liked.

I also add my thanks to the former Chairman of the Sub-Committee, the right hon. Member for Fareham (Sir P. Lloyd), for his leadership. I suspect that he will know that that is not an empty courtesy from the other side of the House, but is said with genuine affection and respect. I identify myself with many—I can probably statistically say most, though sadly not quite all—of the remarks that he made about the White Paper.

We should acknowledge that the Government have taken other steps besides the White Paper to improve the quality of national statistics. The White Paper is entitled "Building Trust in Statistics". It is unfortunate that that title was necessary. We have to rebuild confidence in Government statistics because some notable failures, especially the collapse of the earnings index, have gone to the heart of policy making. That could have—in some ways, it already has had—an effect on the decisions of the Bank of England Monetary Policy Committee and it might have brought those decisions into technical disrepute. I think that it is extremely unfortunate that that episode occurred. One of the aims of this debate, and of the Sub-Committee's recommendations, is that there should be no repetition of that event. The Government are clearly set on correcting those difficulties.

I welcome the fact that, over the summer, the Government appointed two new directors of the Office for National Statistics. I especially welcome the appointment of Mr. Pullinger, with his expertise in census and small-area statistics. That will be warmly welcomed by many of our colleagues in local government. I welcome also the appointment of Mr. Goldsmith, with his extensive commercial background. As the whole House recognises, and as the Sub-Committee's recommendations make clear, there need to be considerable improvements in the quality of British commercial and economic statistics. For example, we are engaged in a major endeavour to raise the level of productivity in this country, but we simply do not know enough about it.

In that connection, I welcome also the Government's decision to produce an index on services and distribution. That will go some way towards filling another gap in statistics that the Sub-Committee discovered and listed in its recommendations. I regret that it will be some time before the series of statistics on services will be robust enough to provide a solid basis for making policy. However, it is important that we know more about the service sector of the economy, and about the banking and financial services on which so much of this country's expertise and wealth now depend.

I do not wish to introduce a sour note into the proceedings but, although I acknowledge the very important role played by Dr. Holt in creating the Office for National Statistics in 1996—a not inconsiderable task, to which the House ought to pay tribute—I believe that he could and should have used his right of access to the Prime Minister as soon as he became aware of the deficiencies in the earnings statistics inherited from the former Department of Employment. It is important to make that clear, as future Government national statisticians must regard their right of access to the Prime Minister as an important right in the defence of the public interest. It is not simply an icon to be kept in the cupboard.

Dr. Holt became aware of the deficiencies early in 1996. If he had gone to the Prime Minister at that time, or a little later to the present Prime Minister, we might have avoided the collapse of the average earnings index in 1998, in what were difficult and potentially troubling circumstances. I hope that future holders of the position will bear in mind what I have said, and that they will use their right of access to the Prime Minister in a solid, proactive and meaningful way, on behalf of Parliament and the British public as a whole.

I turn now to the White Paper's proposals to create a statistical commission, which will have clear duties to defend the public interest and patrol the integrity of Government statistics. Clearly, those proposals are to be welcomed, as they represent a considerable step forward. However, I hope that my hon. Friend the Economic Secretary will say how some of the potential difficulties will be resolved.

The White Paper states that Ministers will be able to block the access of the statistical commission and the national statistician to the work of their Departments. The House is entitled to seek an assurance from my hon. Friend the Economic Secretary that that blocking ability will be used sparingly, that its use will be reported to Parliament—not least in the annual report of the statistical commission—and that, if right of access is blocked, a full, serious and comprehensive explanation will be given to Parliament. We must operate on the basis that the ability of Ministers to block access by the national statistician and the statistical commission to statistics being prepared in Departments will be used only in the most exceptional and unusual circumstances.

Mr. Letwin: I subscribe entirely to the hon. Gentleman's view, as far as it goes, but can he imagine any circumstances under which it would be legitimate to block the access of the national statistician?

Mr. Cousins: It is unwise in debates such as this to engage in flights of fancy or to exercise one's imagination, but I can envisage circumstances in which Ministers might wish to block that access. However, as a Select Committee member of long standing, I am not sure that I should endorse or register approval of the possible exercise of that power to block access.

We are all conscious that this is a new Government, who have embarked on some serious and new projects that will require much stronger statistics than were inherited from the previous Government. We will require much more solid information to guide us in tackling matters such as health improvement and health inequality. We will require better small-area statistics to guide our colleagues in local government and enable them monitor their work.

The Government, too, will require better statistics to determine what really can be made of employment zones, health action zones, education action zones, the sure start initiative, and the like. It is important that the right statistical basis to support such policy initiatives and to measure their achievements is available. Sadly, that is not the case at present, and we look to the statistical commission to help bring it about.

It is extremely important that the Government consider again the need for legislation that would defend and entrench the rights of the Office for National Statistics, and of the proposed statistical commission and office of the national statistician. It is absurd that the quality of small-area statistics in this country depends on a curious quirk of the Census Act 1920, which says that there must be full cost recovery. It is ridiculous that that ancient provision should impede the development of proper small-area statistics, given that the House, local government and the devolved Parliaments all need them in their work. I hope that the Government will reconsider that matter.

It is important that the code of practice in national statistics, which is what we shall have to rely on for the integrity of Government information, should be entrenched and defined in law. It is important that the right of access to information—by Members of Parliament and by our fellow citizens—should also be entrenched in law. Parliament will soon consider freedom of information legislation, so it is important that that concept be brought to bear on the information and statistical work of the Government. I hope that my hon. Friend the Economic Secretary will look at that matter again.

In addition, I hope that my hon. Friend will assure the House that the statistical commission and the Government national statistician will have right of access to the service agreements between the Bank of England and the Office for National Statistics that underpin much of the work of the Bank of England's Monetary Policy Committee. Parliament should be aware of the dialogue between the Bank of England and the Government in that respect. It should know of any exchange of information between the Bank and the Government, and of any anxieties that may exist about the quality of the economic information being dealt with.

I share some of the anxieties expressed by other hon. Members about the fact that responsibility for the retail prices index will remain with the Chancellor of the Exchequer. I believe that the Chancellor would be far more comfortable if responsibility for the RPI were passed to the statistical commission and the national statistician. My right hon. Friend would benefit from

[Mr. Cousins]

passing over that responsibility and would find that remarks—such as those he apparently intends to make tonight about average earnings—would be reinforced if he operated against a background in which no one could dispute the independence or integrity of the information that he intended to deploy.

There is current and active concern in the House over whether the RPI properly reflects the needs and conditions of pensioners. That cannot be dealt with in a political way as it requires independent and robust investigation. I ask the Minister to consider these matters. We, and the Government, might be better served by legislation that entrenched the right to independence of the statistical commission and the national statistician.

Finally, we have to deal with the devolved Parliaments. The Government address the Parliaments in the White Paper and have also produced within the past few weeks a memorandum of understanding on statistics between the devolved Parliaments and the UK Parliament and Government. The devolved Parliaments clearly have their own duties and their own understandings of priorities. No one wants to stand in the way of that.

However, it is of fundamental importance to citizens of the UK that on some basic measures of public information—waiting lists or economic information such as measurements of productivity—statistical unity should remain. There must be a common base for statistics. The UK must not be prised apart by a growing disconnection between statistical bases deployed for policy making in the devolved Parliaments and the Westminster Parliament. I hope that the Economic Secretary will address that point, and I know that the Government would wish to ensure that statistical unity was maintained.

Our debate is informed by a Select Committee report on an important matter of public interest. We acknowledge the serious consideration and importance that the Government accorded to their response and the position that they have taken in the debate. We welcome publication of the White Paper, which in many ways goes towards meeting the anxieties and recommendations of the Treasury Committee. However, the White Paper remains deficient in some vital respects. We invite the Economic Secretary to consider views expressed across the House about those deficiencies. I am sure that she will at some time and in some form consider those matters again.

6.14 pm

Mr. Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton): I, too, welcome the Minister to the Treasury Bench. I look forward to our debate today and debates over next year's Finance Bill. I am sure that she looks forward to that as much as I do.

I congratulate the Treasury Committee on its work and its report. I also congratulate the right hon. Member for Fareham (Sir P. Lloyd) and the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne, Central (Mr. Cousins) on their speeches, although I felt that they did not do full justice to their report. In many ways, I felt, they hid their feelings of disappointment about the White Paper. They were critical of it, but pulled their punches.

I had the privilege of speaking today to the president of the Royal Statistical Society, which is incredibly disappointed by the White Paper. The society was encouraged by the Green Paper and the Government's consultation process. It agreed with many of the Treasury Committee's recommendations. However, it feels that the Government have let the side down in the White Paper, the last-minute publication of which seems to reflect a new Government attitude. The society fears that the Government will not be as open and transparent as they had implied during consultation and that they will not deliver on their promises.

We have seen the same happen before under the present Government. They promise a sea change and a modernisation of the whole approach to the government of the country. However, when they try to deliver, they fail significantly to do so. The White Paper is another example of that.

The society would make two major points if it could speak to the House. First, it is concerned about the scope of statistics that will fall to the statistics commission. The commission is to be given control of national statistics, but not of other statistics produced by Departments. Decisions about whether the commission should have access to information will, as the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne, Central said, be taken by Ministers. He called that a right to block, and I believe that that position is unfortunate.

The second key weakness of the White Paper is that there will be no legislative framework. The hon. Gentleman said that the Government remained open-minded about that, but it is noticeable that they will remain open-minded until after the next general election as they do not promise legislation before it. It would be nice to have an independent statistics commission before then to judge the Government on their election pledges last time round. We could see whether the statistics that the Government are producing on hospital waiting lists and class sizes are correct, and judge whether the pledges have been kept. The House and the country would feel more confident about all the statistics the Government publish if the figures came from a statistics commission. The failure to legislate is a great weakness.

I want to link those two points to the Government's failure on freedom of information. Citizens and Parliament will not know what statistics and what factual information lie behind the Government's policies. They will have no access to that information under the draft Freedom of Information Bill, even after the changes announced during the summer recess. The blanket exemption will apply to statistics, and that is much to be regretted.

On the detail on the scope of statistics to come under the commission, the Treasury Committee's first report stated, at paragraph 13, that

"in order to achieve the desired levels of integrity, real and perceived, it will be crucial that the Head of National Statistics or of any statistical commission decides which statistics are included within the scope of National Statistics rather than Ministers, and for the distinction to be strongly enforced."

However, the White Paper, written on the basis of the Committee's recommendations, states at paragraph 4.5 that Ministers will decide whether any changes to the scope of national statistics are appropriate, publishing their response. That has caused consternation among the country's top statisticians.

The Royal Statistical Society, in a press release yesterday,

"expressed its extreme disappointment at the very limited scope of the Government's proposals to guarantee the future integrity of National Statistics. Only the statistics currently produced by the Office for National Statistics will automatically come under the new arrangements."

The society adds:

"National Statistics has been defined much too narrowly."

During my conversation with the president of the society, she said that the narrow definition went against all the soundings that the Government had given during the consultation period. It is her belief that the vast majority of respondents favoured a much broader definition of the statistics that the commission is to control. The Government have not delivered on what they were promising the respondents to that consultation process.

Other models were debated during the process, such as the Select Committee model, whereby it would be up to the commission to decide what statistics it should have access to. One might have considered a purchaser-provider split, with Government Departments purchasing statistics from a commission that was in charge of all national statistics, which were defined as covering everything. The Government should study those models. I hope that the Economic Secretary will tell us that this is not the last shot and that the Government will reconsider whether they are prepared to widen the scope of the statistics that will come under the new commission.

The importance of statistics in public policy debate cannot be underestimated. In the Select Committee report, we see how they can be used to make decisions about the allocation of resources and to measure the Government's performance so that we can scrutinise Government properly. In recent years, they have been used to measure the objectives and targets of Government, which is relevant to the debate about waiting lists.

Unless the Government are prepared to ensure in legislation that such statistics, which are crucial to public policy, are made available independently, they will not rebuild the confidence of the British people in the statistics that we debate. Under the previous Government, we had an annual discussion about the unemployment statistics and whether the various definitions were correct, which brought the whole process into disrepute. Many people did not believe that Government when they said that unemployment was coming down. There was a huge argument about which way it was going and about what the real level was. On the one hand, the right hon. Member for Chesterfield (Mr. Benn) might have put it at 3 million, 4 million or even 5 million, while other politicians put it much lower even than the Government. That brought the whole debate into disrepute and made it rather sterile.

It is so important for the Government to get this matter right. The hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne, Central talked about pensions. He is right; that is a topical debate. As we know, the retail prices index figure for September was low at 1.1 per cent., which means that pensioners who rely on the basic state pension are looking forward to an increase of only 75p a week next April. The important question is whether that is the right inflation measure. Should we use the underlying rate, or should we consider a special pensioner RPI? Those statistics could be made available by a statistics commission. It could give Parliament public advice about the most appropriate RPI. Pensioners in my constituency will not be terribly happy if the current RPI is used to make the decision.

Deciding the right statistic is also important. We note that the Government have ensured that they will keep total control over such decisions. One might argue that subjectivity is involved when one is commenting on and deciding between different statistics—that that is always subjective and should therefore be a political decision. I believe that if such a decision is based on authoritative advice, the Government can be held far more accountable for it.

When the Government present their information, in particular when it relates to election pledges and key political targets, they are always likely to try to manipulate the figures. I do not think that any of us could say hand on heart that if our party were in government, we would not be up to the same tricks. Of course we would and that is why the Government must try to ensure that independence is enshrined in the system.

Debating statistics in the House is always difficult; the truth is often complex. One isolated statistic can give one picture, but when others relating to it are considered, one can draw a completely different picture. That is why we need the statistics commission to give that sort of high-level advice—commentary, if one likes—when it provides statistics for the Government. Judging from the White Paper, I do not see that sort of role being given to the commission.

There are many other problems, but because of lack of time, I will mention only three. The first is that so much is resting on the document, "The Framework for National Statistics", as the right hon. Member for Fareham pointed out. I have it on authority that the Royal Statistical Society would like to be consulted on that framework document. I hope that the Government will not publish it as soon as possible, as they state in the White Paper. Before it is published, many people, including in the House, should have a chance to have an input. If the Government fail to do that, they will be breaking faith with their previous excellent consultation process.

The second problem is that the accountability proposals in the White Paper should be reviewed. The Government seem to want to ensure that the statistics commission reports to the Treasury. They want to maintain that structure. As the right hon. Member for North Durham (Mr. Radice) said, it is time that we ensured that such bodies report to the House—to Select Committees. If we could develop the informal process of confirmatory systems into a statutorily based system of confirmatory hearings, we could ensure accountability and strengthen the integrity and independence of such commissions.

The third and final problem is that the commission is being given the huge task of auditing, collecting and presenting. According to the White Paper, the commission will be relatively small. Unless it is given serious backing, in terms of both resources and support, it will find that too hard a task. As we approach the census, that is extremely worrying.

The Government started on this process with the best of intentions. They talked about ensuring independence, rebuilding trust, maintaining and developing integrity and improving quality. Although some of the recommendations of the White Paper go that way, by ducking out and not ensuring that an independent statistics

[Mr. Edward Davey]

commission can comment on and be involved in all statistics if it so chooses, and by failing to ensure that its independence is enshrined in law, I am afraid that the Government will fail to meet their own objectives.

6.28 pm

Mr. David Kidney (Stafford): I was pleased to serve on the Treasury Sub-Committee under the leadership of the right hon. Member for Fareham (Sir P. Lloyd), who was always a wise and good-humoured guide in our deliberations. What he omitted to say about our choice of the Office for National Statistics as the subject for our first inquiry is that the members of the Committee suspected that it would be a fairly straightforward issue—a gentle dipping of our toes into the water. Little did we suspect that there would be the great national explosion of the failure of the average earnings index in October, which would concentrate the attention, seemingly, of the world on the work of the investigation and of the ONS itself.

In defence of the Government—I ask myself why I should defend them, but I choose to do so—and as regards the timing of the publication of the White Paper, following what happened with the average earnings index we had two investigations into the index, a further review of the efficiencies of the ONS and the deliberations of our Sub-Committee report—all of which feature strongly in the White Paper, which is good to see, as matters that have been taken into account. Those also include the work of the Select Committee. That is all pleasing and a reasonable defence of the timing of the production of the White Paper.

Information is power, and statistics are a component of that for policy advisers or makers in the public, private or voluntary sectors and for the public at large. Everyone is interested in possessing accurate statistics and information. I shall use the story of the average earnings index to show what happens when official statistics are compromised and what the possible causes of that might be. The story of the AEI shows two pressing needs for the work of the Office for National Statistics. First, there should be strong management capable of clear strategic thinking. Secondly, the management must have robust independence from political interference.

The right place to start the story of the AEI is in the spring of 1998. The earnings growth figures that spring were worrying. The Monetary Policy Committee had delivered itself of the opinion that average earnings growth in excess of about 4.5 per cent. would be inconsistent with meeting its inflation target without having to raise interest rates. That spring, earnings growth was about that figure. Everyone knew that bonuses influenced the figures but people wanted to know whether they represented one-off payments as a reward for the past 12 months' performance, in which case they could largely be discounted as an inflationary pressure, or whether there was something more to them. In spring 1998, the Bank of England asked the ONS to work on analysing the bonus-related element. In April and May that year, the ONS did some work on that and passed its findings to the MPC.

In June 1998, the MPC announced another rise of a quarter of a percentage point in the base rate, to 7.5 per cent. That decision surprised forecasters and, in explaining its decision, the MPC said that it had had regard to the average earnings growth figures. The figure available was that from the ONS for March 1998, which had risen to 4.9 per cent., clearly above the 4.5 per cent. that the MPC had stated was consistent with not raising interest rates. Given the MPC's thinking, it was no surprise that it raised interest rates at that months' meeting. The MPC was heavily criticised at the time for that rate rise, for giving too much emphasis to only one economic indicator. In defence of the MPC, although the indicator that it was relying on was earnings growth, it did not rely only on the figures from the ONS. It had access to other information such as that produced by the Reward Group, business surveys and its contacts with the business community. Nevertheless, that was its decision.

We returned to the average earnings index in October 1998. The public's attention was attracted to the index by two sets of startling revisions in a short space of time. First, on 6 October, the earnings figures for May, June and July were slightly revised. There were no great shocks there, but on 14 October, the whole back-run of data was heavily revised without any warning to the markets interested in the statistics. It was a stunning event and everyone was shocked. There was huge criticism of the MPC's decision back in June because the revised data suggested that the peak in earnings growth in spring and summer had not been as high as the MPC had been led to believe. One national newspaper carried a banner headline saying that the MPC's blunder had cost the country 10,000 jobs. Little wonder that the Chancellor was described as being incandescent with rage.

The director of the ONS, Tim Holt, announced that he was suspending the index forthwith and that an independent inquiry was to be undertaken by Southampton university into what had gone wrong. He said that it was right to suspend the index from publication because everyone had lost trust in the statistics. At the same time, the Chancellor announced a separate inquiry into what had gone wrong with the index, led by Andrew Turnbull from the Treasury and Mervyn King from the Bank of England. They directed Martin Weale of the National Institute of Economic and Social Research to conduct a second inquiry especially for the Chancellor. Both inquiries produced reports this March, when the average earnings index was rehabilitated and reinstated.

It is interesting now to look back at what the reviews concluded was the state of earnings growth back in spring and summer of 1998. The reviews showed that the original figures, prior to any revisions, were about correct; if anything, they were slightly overstated. It was a case of "as you were". It could be argued that the MPC had been vindicated but, alas, there were no banner headlines to that effect.

During the furore of the reviews, the Treasury also announced a new efficiency review of the ONS. KPMG was to report to a Treasury-appointed steering group with recommendations for making further efficiency savings in the costs of the ONS. That review led to several recommendations, three of which I shall cite as examples. It said that the number of ONS offices could be reduced, that more support services could be outsourced and that there should be changes at the top of the management. The collective result of the recommendations would eventually be annual savings of £20 million. In announcing that it accepted most of the report's recommendations, the Treasury said that the £20 million would be recycled into improving the rest of the ONS's services.

I fear that all this demonstrates the potential for political control of statistics. The Government set the ONS's budget and are its major customer. On this occasion, the Government appointed their own review into what had happened with a particular set of statistics and put in train their own efficiency review. Those are the sort of things that we as politicians should guard against in protecting national statistics. As the Green Paper said, it is a matter of trust.

As the right hon. Member for Fareham said, the ONS has many other customers, not only the Government of the day. As my example showed, the Bank of England is an important customer. The nations and regions of the United Kingdom, local government, business and the public at large also all want accurate statistics.

When the Government responded to the Treasury Select Committee report, it seemed that there was agreement between the Committee and Government on two things that should be improved in the ONS: improving the statistical base and capacity, and prioritising services to users of the ONS. That offers some encouragement as to how we go from here.

I want to consider the White Paper. No one has mentioned that our report draws attention to the international comparison of the costs of the ONS with those of similar bodies in other countries. We get our statistics remarkably cheaply. Who am I to say whether those countries are spending too much on the provision of statistics or we too little?

Despite several speeches this evening which showed ways in which doubt could be cast on statistics, the people producing them or the Government standing behind them, it has to be said that the evidence received by the Select Committee was that by and large the statistics produced by the ONS are among the best in the world in terms of their reliability and the processes by which they are produced. It is important to make that point to redress the balance of the tone of the debate so far. There is no reason why we should not have it as our ambition, White Paper or not, to make the statistics produced in this country world leaders. Indeed, that phrase appears in the foreword to the White Paper.

Some of the vital issues to be discussed as a result of the White Paper have already been mentioned by other hon. Members. In deciding what statistics are national and what are not, I stand by the recommendation of the Select Committee. It ought to be the job of the national statistician, the statistics commission or a combination of the two. It is not the job of Ministers who want to defend their departmental interests. So in that area, the White Paper needs further development.

Mention has also been made of the right of the director of national statistics to go to the top—to the Prime Minister of the day—to complain about any infringement of the integrity of national statistics. As two hon. Members have mentioned already, the Select Committee recommended that in addition to being able to go to the Prime Minister about the integrity of national statistics, the director ought to be able to go to the Prime Minister on the question of resources. Resources are the Achilles heel of the White Paper. There is no explicit mention of the mechanisms by which anyone can decide whether we are spending the right or the wrong amount on producing national statistics. That needs to be corrected.

Four components are essential to our future statistical service. The first is quality management. That is dealt with in the White Paper. The second is political accountability—not interference in management. To some extent, that is dealt with in the White Paper, but not to my satisfaction. I make it clear that that is my own opinion. The third is adequate resources, which I have now mentioned twice. It is important to stress a third time that, when used by some people such as exporters, accurate and timely statistics may have an influence on the wealth of the country. So if we need to spend more money to produce greater wealth, that is a consideration to which we ought to have regard. The fourth component is customer involvement. It is important for the commission to take on the role of ensuring that the views of those who want good statistics are heard right at the top of the tree.

I said at the beginning of my speech that information is power. I hope that what we are about tonight is helping to form a view on how to create a statistical commission and national statistician that produce statistics that contribute to the power and wealth of our country. I suggest that statistics ought to be impartial, reliable, accessible, timely and economic to produce. When right hon. and hon. Members read *Hansard* tomorrow, they will see that the first letters of those words spell irate. I suggest that Members of this House will be very angry indeed if we do not produce a statistical service of which we can all be proud.

6.44 pm

Mr. Oliver Letwin (West Dorset): I begin by echoing the welcome given to the Economic Secretary in her new post by hon. Members on both sides of the House. I also welcome the debate. In many ways, it shows the House at its best. We have heard measured comments from hon. Members of all parties. We are debating a Select Committee report that firmly shows the House of Commons trying to fulfil its age-old task of holding Governments to account and insisting, in the terms used by the hon. Member for Stafford (Mr. Kidney), that the public, experts and democracy as a whole have the power to understand what is being done to them and on their behalf. Statistics, therefore, are not a byway. They are one of the centrepieces of democratic society. Without faith in accurate statistics, we stand in imminent danger of beginning at any time on the slippery slope to totalitarian rule. I do not mean that we are anywhere near it today or have been at any time in our history, but it behoves us, and it is right that we take the responsibility seriously, to concentrate without the slightest complacency on whether our statistics are accurate and our systems for making sure robust. Otherwise, the threat to our democratic liberty will be very great.

I welcome the Select Committee report. As several hon. Members have mentioned, there is no doubt that recommendation (b) goes to the heart of the matter. It has been quoted already. I merely remind the House that it states clearly that it should be the head of national statistics or any statistical commission who decides what is included in the national statistics and hence what is subject to the rigours of the new commission.

The White Paper has been much discussed in the debate so far. It is headed "Building Trust in Statistics". It was introduced with great acclaim by the Government.

[Mr. Oliver Letwin]

The Economic Secretary told the world in her press release:

"This White Paper marks a new era for official statistics."

I am bound to say that I am not a great believer in Government hype, whatever Government are in power. I am afraid to say that this Government have been rather better at Government hype than most in our history, but hype is least appropriate when it is least true. I accept the infinite delicacy of the comments of Government Members in attacking the White Paper. Labour Members have been careful to avoid outright attack, and I understand entirely that I should do the same in their position. But the mood of the House this evening has shown clearly that the Royal Statistical Society, to which the hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Mr. Davey) referred, was right.

The White Paper does not mark a new era for official statistics. It is perhaps at best the beginning of an idea of what, later, if put in legislative form and much enhanced in various ways, might be a somewhat better way of arranging official statistics. I admit that that does not quite carry the same soundbite characteristics as

"a new era for official statistics",

but it is alas the truth. It is the truth not least because, as various hon. Members, including my right hon. Friend the Member for Fareham (Sir P. Lloyd), have said, the crucial recommendation (b)—that the decision about what goes into national statistics should be independently made—is precisely the one that is by implication turned down in the White Paper.

We have to attend to just how much of a problem there is here. The Chairman of the Select Committee, who carries some weight in the matter, said that there was some ambiguity about who would decide what went in and what stayed out. I rather agree with the hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton. I do not think that there is any ambiguity. The Select Committee talked in terms of decision, but section 2.10 of the White Paper on page 5 makes it clear that the new commission will

"advise on the scope of National Statistics".

As if that left any ambiguity—I suppose that it might be argued that the phrase by itself was ambiguous—the White Paper says in section 4.5 on page 13:

"The Government will ask the Statistics Commission to keep under review the scope of national statistics and make periodic recommendations"—

again, in advisory mode—and

" . . . Ministers will decide".

I think that it is pretty clear that we are dealing not with an independent body that will decide what things it vets but with a wonderful combination of Ministers. The Minister is undoubtedly a human being and hence probably prey to the temptations to which we are all subject. That certainly applies to all of us on the Opposition Front Bench. How convenient not to admit into the fold of national statistics any series of statistics that may be dubious because of the character of the collection.

Collection is a difficult matter. Economic judgments, as many hon. Members have said, often depend on judgments about how accurate statistics really are. However, any Minister may also wish to conceal a series that is politically embarrassing.

I wish I could say that, from my own experience of working in a bureaucracy, I had any confidence that our civil service would always provide a bastion sufficient against that temptation. However, I fear that the structure of our government makes it systematically unlikely that the civil service will do so. On the whole, civil servants are entirely decent people trying to do a good job, but the job that they are asked to do is to serve the Government of the day—not Parliament and not the electorate. It becomes extraordinarily difficult for them to resist a Minister who finds it inconvenient to have a particular piece of information released.

Hon. Members on both sides of the House who have any experience of government—most of them have vastly more such experience than I have—will know what I am talking about when I say that one cannot rely on the home Departments to vet their own statistics. That was the conclusion reached by the Sub-Committee and that was very clear and right. It is extremely to be deplored that the White Paper says nothing as to how we can avoid that problem in the future. That is what the Royal Statistical Society is on about.

It is also relevant to remind ourselves of which sort of statistics are involved. Some of them have already been mentioned this evening: waiting lists and crime statistics—and police numbers, which are so topical. However, the most interesting question of all relates to those statistics that never appear. I feel morally confident—I am absolutely sure that the right hon. Member for North Durham (Mr. Radice), the Chairman of the Treasury Select Committee, who, in a previous incarnation, played a distinguished role as the Opposition spokesman on education, would echo what I say—that buried somewhere in the Department for Education and Employment are fairly large numbers of surveys and a fair number of statistics as to how effective or ineffective the new deal is turning out, and that they have not been revealed. I say that because it was always the practice of the DfEE and its predecessors not to reveal surveys and statistics that they did not find convenient. I am sure that Ministers have sought to inform themselves as to those matters and have revealed—perfectly honestly—those things that they think are convenient, and have concealed those things that they think are inconvenient. That is not the way to convey to an electorate or to Parliament a proper picture. It is not special to this Government; it has been true of Governments for ages past. Now there is an opportunity to change it by consensus. The Select Committee has given us that opportunity; the White Paper should be rewritten to give it to us properly.

We turn to the home Department that is the most important; that is what I want to add to the debate. That Department is of course the Treasury—Her Majesty's Treasury—the august body that is the subject of the Select Committee's whole endeavour and which produced this splendid, or not so splendid, White Paper, and which is responsible for enormously important statistics.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Fareham has already referred to the inflation figures. I restate the point that I made in an intervention to him; if there is a single set of exogenous statistics that matter most, it is the inflation statistics. Those statistics are not merely a piece of information; they are an operator. As the Chancellor has chosen to set the targets of the Monetary Policy Committee in a series of statistics, the choice of the series itself and the governing of the way in which that series is

compiled are matters that quite directly affect policy as well as information. Clearly, that is intolerable. It is not possible for a Chancellor of the Exchequer honestly to claim that he has subcontracted the control of monetary policy to another body under a clear and transparent target, if the target is in fact not clear and transparent, but opaque, and run by his own officials in ways that he does not declare.

I admit that, in principle, the national statistician could come along and say, "But Chancellor, I do not really believe you, I should like to see exactly how this is made up". Earlier, we heard an exchange on that matter. However, the poor old national statistician—be he ever so distinguished a statistician, as I hope and believe that he will be—will not stand much chance against a Chancellor of the Exchequer, a Chief Secretary, a Financial Secretary, an Economic Secretary, a Paymaster General, a Permanent Secretary and a head of the economic service, all of whom tell him, "We don't really think you ought to have this".

I do not speculate in this matter—or if I do so, it is based on recent experience—because, in dealing with certain matters to which I am about to turn, I asked whether I could go to see Professor Likierman, the head of the financial management, reporting and audit service to ask him some questions. First, a record of my telephoned request was lost. Secondly, it transpired that we had to send a request by fax, so I did so. It then transpired that my request could not be answered, but had to be referred to the office of the Chancellor of the Exchequer. It was referred to that office and a long delay ensued. We were then informed that I could not see Professor Likierman about the national accounts, because I could only do so if a Minister was present and it was not felt that a Minister should be present.

Mr. Radice: I can remember a similar occasion when the hon. Gentleman's party was in power and I wanted to see the chief inspector of the then HMI. I was told that I could not do so unless the Secretary of State for Education was also present—he was Sir Keith Joseph. I thought that that was not appropriate, so I arranged to meet the chief inspector at a party.

Mr. Letwin: I admire the right hon. Gentleman's ingenuity. I may adopt the same tactic, although my social sphere is not yet as elevated as his. Indeed, my point is not about the Government; it is not a party political point. The truth is that all Governments have an institutional tendency to conceal. I fear that there will not be much chance for that ever-so-distinguished chap to break through that veil.

Mr. Cousins: I have already expressed myself on the substance of the point that the hon. Gentleman makes; I agree with him. None the less, we should record that neither the Sub-Committee in its investigations of the Office for National Statistics, nor the main Committee, when it considered resource accounting and budgeting—we shall come back to that—found a shred of evidence that the Chancellor and the Government had exercised the kind of influence to which the hon. Gentleman refers and which he rightly fears.

Mr. Letwin: I am terribly grateful to the hon. Gentleman because he moves me on to precisely the topic that I now address: the belief—at least on our part—that there is some evidence of that problem, in respect not of exogenous statistics, but of the most important statistics of all, which are those under the Government's operational control. I refer to the national accounts.

If there is one set of statistics that matters most, it is those that relate to the fiscal balance. Alas, that is also the area in which there is the greatest scope for any Government to engage in subterfuge. I have to say that the present Chancellor and his colleagues have raised that subterfuge to a fine art. We are dealing with a sort of Mr. Mephistopheles, who has managed to conjure the most extraordinary results from the brilliantly illuminating 189-page document that is the Red Book. One of the nation's leading experts told me that for years he had felt that he knew little about life, but he knew one thing: how to make sense of the national accounts at last—until the Red Book and its predecessor of the previous year appeared on the scene. At that point he more or less gave up.

Why is that? Some of those matters must be conscious, because the Chancellor of the Exchequer is an extremely intelligent man, with a bright set of officials and colleagues who work with him. It cannot be an unconscious act that the working families tax credit—billions of pounds of public expenditure on any normal definition—has famously disappeared into an accounting adjustment. If it is unconscious, I suppose that is a resigning matter, but I do not believe that for a moment. It was a conscious adjustment—an adjustment of an adjustment, so to speak—in order to make us wholly unaware of what was going on, except that it was so obvious that most people caught up with it eventually. It did take a couple of days after the production of the Red Book, but eventually people caught up with it.

Alas, as one goes through the whole document, one finds dizzyingly many minor examples of misleading or ambiguous arrangements of statistics, which make it extraordinarily difficult for someone trained in ordinary accounts or finance to penetrate the document. Some of those may be the result of error, some may be unconscious and some may be conscious—I genuinely do not know which is which. We struggled mightily to find out but, not least because of our failure to meet Professor Likierman, we have been unable to do so.

Mr. Cousins: Does the hon. Gentleman accept that how to present the working families tax credit is an interesting problem: should it be presented as expenditure, or in some other way? He should give the Government some credit. The way in which the presentation used was arrived at is comprehensively set out in the Red Book, and further documents were produced to reinforce the presentation in that document. The hon. Gentleman is perfectly entitled to disagree with that presentation, but it is undeniable that the Government have made it entirely clear how the presentation of the working families tax credit in the national accounts was arrived at.

Mr. Letwin: In a way, I agree with the hon. Gentleman, in that if one reads all the fine print, one can eventually work out what has happened. I also agree that how to deal with the tax credit—indeed, with tax credits in general—is an interesting question: are they expenditure or negative income? There is no case for calling them an accounting adjustment; the only reason

[Mr. Letwin]

for doing so was to ensure that we did not notice for a little while. That is not a good way to present such matters.

Let me move on to some other examples. Table B27 in the Red Book registers the current budget surplus as 0.5 per cent. of gross domestic product. Yet, in table B25, something ostensibly similar called surplus on current budget is labelled as £6.2 billion. Those are both 1998–99 figures. With GDP at rather less than £900 billion, it is extraordinary difficult for the ordinary man to make those two figures match. There might be a perfectly good explanation for that, but as the Red Book does not provide it and one cannot meet the man who drew up the figures, it is difficult to tell what it is, which is probably why the press does not have the slightest idea what has happened. I rang a couple of expert commentators, who told me that I had a good point and that they could not work it out either.

The question is not merely one of figures and principles of accounting; we are dealing with a sort of definitional glory. I have never seen so many definitions as have been produced, changed and reproduced over the past couple of years. We have current expenditure, net capital expenditure—although of what it is net is an interesting question in itself—and general Government expenditure. Then, we have total managed expenditure, which is not to be confused with annually managed expenditure or with net departmental outlays, which a common man might have thought bore some relationship to it. We have net borrowing, which is quite different from net cash requirement and from the surplus or deficit on the current budget. Most mysterious of all, we have other financial transactions, which are wholly different from miscellaneous financial transactions.

I could bore the House by going on for another 20 minutes with other definitions, but I shall please the House by not doing so. The fact is that it would all be a joke—if it were not so serious. What makes it serious is that a 189-page document—which is 186 pages longer than a set of company accounts, containing straightforward profit and loss, balance sheet and cashflow figures—has been produced, partly in an effort to inform and partly in an effort to conceal and obfuscate. Nobody has the slightest idea which component of the item in question is generated by which of the two motives, and I strongly believe that it will not be long before the Treasury itself loses sight of the distinction.

In the end, it will be the Government—and, of course, those who elected them—who will suffer from not understanding their own rhetoric expressed in their own statistics. That is the very fate that befell regime after regime in circumstances in which there was not the same degree of public accountability as we in a democracy are used to. It became genuinely impossible for decent people trying to run a country such as Czechoslovakia to understand their own accounts, because they had been so concocted that those who concocted them had lost sight of the motives and techniques of concoction. That is a fate to which we have not yet succumbed, and we must never succumb to it.

Mr. Cousins: We have been having a most interesting debate within the debate. The hon. Gentleman offers the example of Czechoslovakia—I do not know whether that is intended to upset us. One of the interesting features of the former communist regimes in eastern Europe is that they drew no distinction between capital and revenue, but neither did British public sector accounts until the innovations made by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor. Those are the very innovations which the hon. Gentleman criticises, and he makes heavy weather of the resulting difficulty in presentational terms. However, does he disagree that the current Government were entirely right to bring about a long overdue revolution in British public accounts by introducing a distinction between capital and revenue, which all of us—every enterprise, company and household—make as a matter of daily routine?

Mr. Letwin: No, I do not disagree at all. It is entirely right that the resource accounting process, which began under the previous Government and has admirably been continued under the current Government, along with the national asset register, the effort to create some principles, including the fundamental underlying principles of the golden rule, and the distinction between capital and current, are all common currency—I should not say that—and are all commonly accepted on both sides of the House. That is not the issue. The issue is whether the methods of presentation are such as to make matters clear, or to keep matters obscure. I maintain that they are not such as to make matters clear.

The remedy is to have an independent body, statutorily established, that creates firm and clear definitions, just as the accountancy profession has, for hundreds of years—since the 13th century—in one way or another established definitions for private sector business. That is the appropriate way to set the standards for fiscal accounting. I do not claim perfection for previous Governments of either party. The situation is not unique—we have merely reached a pinnacle of obfuscations during the current Government's tenure—but there has been a lacuna for many years and it needs to be resolved.

Alas, the concern of the Sub-Committee was not with that matter. Even more regrettable is the fact that the White Paper says nothing about it. I hope that the Select Committee will continue its good work—*[Interruption.]* Notwithstanding the sedentary remarks of the right hon. Member for North Durham, I have read what the Committee has so far produced and I accept that it is moving in the right direction. However, I do not accept for a moment that the Government have shown the least sign of moving in the right direction.

The Government should strengthen the statistics commission and the role of the national statistician and increase the rights and powers of those bodies to ensure that matters that they think should be documented in certain ways, not things which Ministers think should be documented, are so documented. The Government should also establish an independent commission that will govern the definitions and principles of national accounting, so that we are never again faced with an incomprehensible 189-page set of statistics that diminish democracy and the ability of Government to govern.

7.8 pm

Sir Michael Spicer (West Worcestershire): I think that it was Disraeli who coined the aphorism:

"lies, damned lies and statistics."

Much of today's debate has underscored the political warning implicit in that statement. Disraeli would have enjoyed the fact that the first subject debated in the

spillover Session is statistics, although that probably has more to do with lack of demand from other quarters than with any obsession with statistics on the part of the business managers. However, there is no doubt that statistics deserve Parliament's close attention, for at least two reasons that have already been touched on.

First, statistics are often—not always—useful props to Government propaganda, and sometimes they are of critical importance. Examples have been quoted by hon. Members on both sides of the House of the way in which unemployment, health and education statistics have been presented. Such statistics have formed part of the propaganda of Governments from both sides. Secondly, statistics sometimes—but not always—play a vital role in the formation of policy. Some examples have been given this evening, the most obvious current example being the retail prices index and the average wages index and their effect on the interest rate policy of the Bank of England Monetary Policy Committee. I shall come in a moment to other examples, including European trade statistics and statistical decisions that might or might not be made about the single currency, which can have policy implications.

As has been said, a national statistical service has two requirements. First, it should be independent and, secondly, it should be open—especially when matters are subjective and when the methodology upon which the statistics are based is changing.

The report of the Treasury Sub-Committee—I also congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Fareham (Sir P. Lloyd) and his colleagues on their achievements—states clearly that neither independence nor openness apply fully to national statistics in general or to the Office for National Statistics in particular. Several relevant examples have been given in this debate.

On the question of independence, the RPI—which is crucial to policy determination and propaganda—remains within the power and gift of the Chancellor of the Exchequer. The report's recommendation (b) addresses that issue in particular.

As to openness, the report documents fully the average earnings debacle. It is a nice coincidence that we are debating this issue on the day that the average earnings index has apparently reached 4.9 per cent., which was the same figure cited in June 1998. That was an overstatement and the real figure was apparently much lower. The report states clearly that there has been no openness in describing national statistics in a way that the public can understand.

The real question that we are debating tonight is what will happen as a result of the Treasury Committee report, the publication of the White Paper and this debate. The omens are not good. The White Paper—which is, perhaps significantly, black rather than white—was produced yesterday without any real notice. I am told that Treasury Committee staff did not know about the imminent publication of the paper until fairly late on Friday. That is quite extraordinary, especially given that my right hon. Friend and his colleagues had worked on the paper for a year. I am told that the document was produced at a press conference at which journalists were controlled unusually tightly: only six journalists were permitted to attend and they were allowed to ask questions for only 10 minutes. So much for open government and so much for the aspirations of the black paper.

At the beginning of the paper, the Prime Minister says:

"In the consultation document '*Statistics: A Matter of Trust*', the Government emphasised its intention to seek a new relationship with citizens based on openness and trust. I believe that having access to official statistics which we can all trust is essential in any healthy society."

On the facing page, the Economic Secretary begins her contribution by saying:

"The Government is committed to establishing public confidence in official statistics."

A nice photograph of the hon. Lady accompanies those comments. She may not have had much of a chance to influence policy decisions, but there was obviously time to print her picture—which is rather better than the slightly indifferent photograph of the Prime Minister that appears on the other page. The aspirations in the Economic Secretary's comments and throughout the black paper do not square with the way in which the paper was produced.

As to openness, the fundamental point that has been made in this debate is that vital statistics—the RPI and information about hospital waiting lists and educational performance, for instance—remain under direct ministerial control. That is contrary to the basic proposition advanced by the Treasury Committee. My hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Mr. Letwin) pointed out clearly that the pivotal point in the Select Committee's recommendations has been refused. Therefore, there is no question—as the Liberal Democrat spokesman, the hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Mr. Davey), said—that the White Paper flies in the face of the Select Committee's recommendations. Not only was it produced at the last moment in a manner that was pretty discourteous to all those involved, but, in essence, it contradicts the main recommendations of the Select Committee.

As to the future of the ONS and the way in which it operates, nothing seems to have changed since the average earnings debacle. My hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset said that he was tossing a new thought into the proceedings and I shall toss a new piece of information to the House about openness and the way in which the ONS explains its statistics. I refer to correspondence initiated by my noble friend Lord Pearson of Rannoch this summer on the question of European trade statistics. He wrote to Dr. Holt about those trade statistics on 14 September and, in essence, said:

"When . . . the 1999 Pink Book is compared with . . . *Economic Trends* in December 1998, it becomes apparent that very substantial re-allocations have been made between countries."

He then instances this case and states:

"Income in respect of EU '14': it appears that Credits have been increased (compared with the figure given in December 1998 *Economic Trends*); while Debits have been decreased, resulting in a 'swing' in aggregated Balances over that period of £37.6 billion . . . In other words, the 'picture' suggested in the December 1998 *Economic Trends* breakdown, of the UK having a more-or-less structural 'Income' deficit with the rest of the EU . . . now turns out . . . not to have been the case. The new *Pink Book* appears to indicate the opposite: that the UK has an on-going 'Income' surplus with the EU".

That is quite important information. Dr. Holt replied to that letter on 4 October, and said:

"Dear Lord Pearson"—

[Sir Michael Spicer]

I shall quote key extracts from the letter—

"First, let me say that estimating portfolio investment and associated income flows across international boundaries is one of the most difficult parts of national accounting statistics . . . The statistics we publish are therefore subject to wider margins of error than most of our other statistics.

This problem is not confined to the UK. Other countries face the same difficulties. Indeed, it has been a matter for international discussion for many years. In 1992, a committee under the auspices of the IMF felt that to address the problem there should be a survey . . . The results of this survey, although only partial thus far, are the cause of much of the revision you refer to in your letter."

The fact that the IMF has sponsored an international survey on those statistics is revealed, and some rather complicated arguments ensue. That disclosure was prompted by a letter; none of the information was forthcoming when the statistics were produced—even though they are profoundly important when making policy decisions.

For instance, policies towards monetary union and the single currency may hang to some extent on such trade statistics. To come out blandly with figures on trade flows for one year that say the opposite to what was shown for the previous year, and then—only when prompted—to add that all the statistics are very subjective and difficult, and moreover are subject to international surveys, IMF reports and so on, does not square with the objective of openness.

The Committee has been nosing around those matters for a whole year now, and the ONS and its head must have known that questions would be asked about openness, and about describing what the methodologies were, and when they were required. There have certainly been definitive questions about subjective judgments. All those ideas have been floating around, and have been the subject of intense questioning by my right hon. Friend the Member for Fareham, and his colleagues on the Committee. What is so difficult to understand is that, even this summer—this month, indeed—we have still heard examples of bland assurances and remarks that prove that the need of people outside to know and understand why statistics have been produced in a particular form is not taken seriously. All that seems to continue, despite the work that my right hon. Friend and others have done.

The obscurantism is profound; the latest information that one can glean suggests that it is still there. The problem needs to be addressed, yet I understand that Dr. Holt is to leave his job before Christmas, and no replacement has yet been made.

The White Paper says that there will be a statistics commission. I hope that colleagues both on the Committee as a whole and on the Sub-Committee will take a strong interest in that prospect, because this cannot be the end of the matter. We now have the White Paper, but it has denied the essence of what the Committee wanted. It would seem that the people producing the statistics are still carrying on with their bad old ways. For all the reasons that have been given in the debate, we must continue to watch the matter carefully, and I hope that we shall do so.

7.23 pm

Mrs. Caroline Spelman (Meriden): I add my congratulations to those of my colleagues to the new Economic Secretary to the Treasury. May I reassure her that we are in no doubt that she is a human being? I also congratulate the Committee on its excellent report, which recognises the growing role of statistics in the political process.

Nowhere is that more true than in health, the subject on which I speak, and which I would like to draw into the debate. Statistics are critical in measuring performance, determining the allocation of resources and setting policy targets—all uses of statistics that were singled out by the Select Committee.

A Government's performance on health is seen as a barometer of their overall success or failure, so the use of statistics to demonstrate relative success or failure will have an important effect on the future electoral chances of any Government. I therefore argue strongly the case for health statistics to be taken into the ambit of the Office for National Statistics.

As we know, the ONS does not collect centrally data on health or expenditure on health. As a relatively new politician, I say that there is a need for independent collation of statistics, so as to allow more objective assessment. There are many areas in which the Department of Health does not publish national data, despite the fact that we are talking about a national health service. As a former member of the Select Committee on Science and Technology, I inquired about the booking system for the maternity services required at the time of the new millennium, and the crisis that we may face at the end of the year. When I asked about the additional number of bookings for women due to have babies at the time of the date change, I was told that the information was not available centrally.

I found that frustrating in my work, because I was trying to assess whether there had been a rapid increase in demand for maternity services at that time, and to assess the sort of provision that had been made in our national health service.

Many other important health statistics are not collected centrally. So as to be even-handed, and in case my point about the lack of centrally collected data might appear partisan, I did a little research on questions asked by Members from other parties.

The hon. Member for Newport, West (Mr. Flynn) asked a question about MRSA. I shall not attempt to pronounce the full version of that term, but it is a drug-resistant infection by the staphylococcus bacterium. When the hon. Gentleman asked for the basic statistical information about the number of infections by that bacterium, the response was:

"there are no centrally held statistics on deaths from this cause."—[*Official Report*, 5 May 1998; Vol. 311, c. 352.]

That would have frustrated him in his work as a Member of the House in trying to get to the bottom of the subject.

Another important national issue is the high rate of abortions in this country, about which questions have been asked by Members in all parts of the House. Specifically, the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Dr. Tonge) wanted to know the cost to the national health service of abortions carried out in the first trimester. She received the same sort of reply—that the information requested was not centrally collected. That is another example of an important area of the national health service's responsibility in which it is difficult for Members of Parliament to carry out their work and make assessments based on nationally collected data.

Another important question—indeed, it was raised by the Opposition during Health questions today—is the rise in the instance of autism, and whether there is any correlation between that and the introduction of the triple vaccine for mumps, measles and rubella. The hon. Member for Warrington, South (Ms Southworth) once asked how many health authorities held a database with detailed information about how many people had autism. Again, she received the dry reply:

"The information requested is not held centrally."—[*Official Report*, 9 June 1998; Vol. 313, c. 539.]

All those examples show how difficult it is for Parliament and parliamentarians, whether they are on the Government or the Opposition side, to carry out their work when data concerning our national health service are not centrally collected.

As several hon. Members have said, statistics about patients waiting for treatment in the national health service have become something of a political football. In that regard, the trust in statistical information that has been mentioned has been called into question. There is a huge temptation for Governments to manipulate statistics to meet political targets.

In closely examining the use of waiting lists, we have discovered that not a little use of smoke and mirrors is being practised. It transpires that there are main waiting lists, subsidiary waiting lists and lists of people who are not on any lists at all. Only the main list counts, and it concerns the time that somebody waits between seeing a specialist and getting treatment.

The officially collected statistics on the waiting list of patients in the national health service take no account of the number of people who are waiting to get on the waiting list. According to the Government's own statistics, that number is about 190,000, which is an increase of 140,000 since they came to power. That staggering increase in the number of out-patients who are waiting to get on to the list has arisen as a direct result of the Government's attempts to reduce the main waiting list. It creates great confusion for people who are waiting for treatment and whose experience does not match the vaunted claims about falling waiting lists.

There has been a policy of removing certain patients from the list, and that has been done by creating a subsidiary list. There are several examples of that practice around the country, but I shall just use one of them, which is sufficient to make my point. A memorandum from the Bradford Hospitals NHS trust states:

"Following new NHS guidelines, patients on waiting lists for operations to remove metalwork are not to be included in the monthly returns. To enable us to identify patients more easily, a new list '05' has been set up."

One wonders what list 05 is. One thing is for certain, it does not appear in the headline figure for the waiting list of patients by which the Government invite the electorate to judge their performance. That causes me considerable disquiet as a parliamentarian, because the people on the 05 list have disappeared from the national statistics that we have received from the Government and that have been used as a measure of their performance.

Certain operations are being collated on an alternative list, which does not count in the overall tally. It is significant that this ruse started in June 1998, which was the month when the numbers on the main list supposedly began to fall.

We are also beginning to see the use of time-efficient operations—as opposed to more complex operations—to manipulate the figures. The trouble is that, if the target is to reduce statistically the number of patients on the list, that will have a huge impact on clinical priorities. It is a fact that to reduce the numbers on the main waiting list, there has had to be an increase in the number of minor conditions that are treated. If all cases of in-growing toenails are treated quickly, that will reduce the size of the list, whereas if the operations that are carried out are for cardiac by-passes, which take longer, are more expensive and reduce the budget, the wait will be much longer. My right hon. Friend the Member for Fareham (Sir P. Lloyd) pointed out that this use of statistics distorts priorities for health care. Not only do we deplore that, but, in the decision of the new Secretary of State for Health to have what he called a change of tack and to put fresh emphasis on the treatment of cancer and heart disease, we detect a recognition on his part that clinical priorities have been distorted by attempts to reduce the waiting list statistically.

Mr. Desmond Swayne (New Forest, West): Does my hon. Friend agree that it is not only clinical priorities that have been distorted, but the figures for NHS personnel? Will she comment on the British Medical Association's discovery yesterday that the announced additional 400 consultants are already in the system?

Mrs. Spelman: I was going to come to that, because it is another example of the "Jack Straw style of creative accounting" to show the number of people working in a public service.

The statistical debate on waiting lists has obscured the facts about how long people are actually waiting. That is all that matters to a patient. They do not want to know how many people are in front of them or behind them on the waiting list: they want to know how long it will take. It is hard for an ordinary person to get that information. That is yet another case for having health data collected, collated and published through the Office for National Statistics.

There has been a large increase in the number of people waiting more than a year to be seen. The figure is up from 30,000 to 48,300 since the election, which is an increase of 61 per cent. in two years. During the past two years, the number of patients waiting to be seen after being referred to a specialist has also increased.

MPs have recourse to the House of Commons Library and, if requested by our constituents, we can obtain information. In March 1999, in response to a request from a constituent, I asked the Library about the number of people waiting more than 13 weeks for treatment. The figure given to me was 248,000. By June 1999, that figure had risen to 485,000, so between March 1999 and June 1999 there was an increase of 84 per cent. That statistic shows what happens when clinical priorities are distorted so as to produce a reduction in the headline figure for the main waiting list.

The House of Commons Library has also given me the figure for the number of patients still waiting for more than 13 weeks. The number of people who have waited 13 weeks or more has increased by 115 per cent. The average waiting time is a more useful statistical measure of the performance of the national health service,

[Mrs. Spelman]

and closer to people's experience of treatment under the NHS. The average waiting time between being referred to, and being seen by, a specialist has gone up from six to seven weeks. Without an independent official statistical source, it is difficult to get such information into the public domain.

Although the Government have said today that, with only 30,000 to go, they are on target to meet their promised reduction in the in-patient waiting list, the number of people on the out-patient waiting list is steadily increasing. It will be easy for the Government to achieve their target and to pronounce that their early election pledge has been fulfilled, but it will not reflect the true position or people's real experience of having to wait longer to be seen and, on average, to be treated.

Other statistics for the health service have been quoted, such as the 400 extra specialists. The new Secretary of State was quoted in *The Guardian* as saying that they were extra resources, but only a day later that was denied by the BMA. In fact, those specialists are already training in the system. The correction of such information by the profession concerned does nothing to build trust in the use of statistics by Departments.

The use of statistics in a misleading way can undermine trust. The new Secretary of State announced that the £15 million was new money, but it is not new money: it is part of the £21 billion allocated to the health service in the spending review that was announced by his predecessor. The money is new only in the sense that it will not be borrowed from other NHS departments. That nuance is lost on the public. When it becomes the subject of a debate about the truth of the matter, public confidence in the initial statements is undermined.

I want to make a strong case for the inclusion of health statistics in the remit of a reformed Office for National Statistics, rather than leaving their publication to the Home Department. The right hon. Member for North Durham (Mr. Radice) said that the collection of statistics should be free from political interference. Nowhere is that more true than in the health service.

I could not agree more with the recommendation that the decision about which data the ONS ought to publish should lie with a statistician outside Government. A cursory reading of the White—or black—Paper led me to identify only one item that troubled me greatly. I read very clearly that it was the Minister who would decide, and that leaves me dissatisfied. I fear that insufficient independence will be involved in the remit for data collection—in decisions about what should be collected, and about how it should be published—if the final decision rests with the Minister. I fear that the temptation will be too great for the Home Department to restrict access to information which, as my hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Mr. Letwin) pointed out, could prove inconvenient to Government if it came out.

For that reason, although we wholly endorse the Government's pursuit of a method of collecting statistical information that will build trust, we are anxious to hear the Minister's latest thinking, in the hope that it will give us a degree more assurance than the White Paper gives us that the long arm of Government can be kept well clear of the collection of information that must be accurate, accessible and reliable if ordinary people are to be able to assess properly the performance of a Government and the public services within their care.

7.42 pm

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Miss Melanie Johnson): I thank all right hon. and hon. Members on both sides of the House who have welcomed me to my new post and given me their kind good wishes. I also thank the hon. Member for West Dorset (Mr. Letwin) for his hesitation on the question of my humanity, which was welcome. I note that he did not agree with the hon. Member for Meriden (Mrs. Spelman), who clearly thinks that I am human—another example of the Opposition's failure to arrive at a common policy.

Mr. Letwin: I am sorry to interrupt, but I do not want anyone who was not present earlier to be in the slightest doubt when they read *Hansard*. I fully recognise the Minister's humanity.

Miss Johnson: I am disappointed by the hon. Gentleman's response, but I realise that he had to make up for his earlier comments about a common currency, and that he is very much on message now.

I thank the Treasury Committee and its Chairman, and the Sub-Committee and its Chairman, for producing the report and providing the subject of today's debate. I am delighted to be able to announce that yesterday we published a White Paper entitled "Building Trust in Statistics", although I am sorry that the timing has caused consternation to some. We can now deliver—and are delivering—on yet another of the Government's manifesto commitments: the transparency of the arrangements included in the White Paper will further our aim of making government more open.

The then Economic Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Mrs. Liddell), launched the process at the beginning of last year, when we published our Green Paper "Statistics: A Matter of Trust". The Green Paper stimulated a wide-ranging debate about how we should proceed, and the White Paper is very much a result of that. Following our consultations, we have decided that the best way in which to secure the independence of the statistical service is to create a statistics commission, which will be independent of the users and the producers of statistics. It is worth noting that that is what 70 per cent. or more of respondents to the consultation requested, in the context of independence and accountability. A number of Members on both sides of the House asked about that.

The commission will report to Parliament annually, if that is Parliament's wish, which will create a very different environment. It will play a key role in strengthening quality control of official statistics, ensuring that they are trustworthy and that they respond to users' needs. The overriding aim is to establish public confidence in official statistics. Not all members of the commission will necessarily be statisticians; users may also be represented.

A good deal of time was rightly spent on the question of appointing a national statistician. My right hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Mr. Radice) spoke of the importance of the calibre and authority of such an individual—and, indeed, we want to appoint someone of

international calibre, given that that person will bring about a key development in terms of the transparency and accountability of national statistics in the future. We see that as a major professional responsibility.

The White Paper also sets out the roles and responsibilities of Ministers, of the commission and of the national statistician, and—as I have said—suggests that Parliament may wish to consider how it deals with questions relating to national statistics in the future. In response to comments made by the right hon. Member for Fareham (Sir P. Lloyd), let me also say that we consider this to be one of the ways in which we can involve leadership in the process.

The Office for National Statistics is and always will be at the heart of national statistics in this country. Today's debate has raised many of the points discussed in the recommendations of the Sub-Committee's report; the White Paper meets those recommendations, and goes even further by providing a sound base for the delivery of public confidence in our official statistics.

Mr. Letwin: I thank the Minister for giving way again. She said that the White Paper had "met the recommendations" of the Select Committee. Is she asserting that recommendation (b)—that the national statistician, rather than the Government, should decide which statistics are governed by the new commission—has been met by her White Paper?

Miss Johnson: I would prefer to come on to my answers to that point later. I am trying to weave into my speech the many points that have been made during the debate, as well as addressing other points that remain to be addressed.

The new arrangements reflect the strong consensus that emerged from the consultation exercise. Those arrangements will deliver quality-assured statistics of integrity and relevance. They will be implemented on a non-statutory basis to secure the benefits as soon as possible. It is important for me to emphasise that that is one of the reasons for implementing them on a non-statutory basis at this stage. As is clearly explained in the White Paper, however, that matter will be the subject of further consideration by the new statistics commission. We do not rule out legislation, but we hope that it will not prove necessary.

I am conscious that the debate was probably prompted in part by the average earnings index scrutinies which exposed some shortcomings on the part of the ONS. Several lessons can be learned from the scrutinies, and I assure hon. Members that they have, indeed, been learned. Indeed, they can go a long way to promoting future success and countering complacency. A major lesson is that, no matter how highly its products are regarded, there will always be room for the ONS to improve, to innovate and to examine its statistical procedures. It is doing just that, and some of the procedures that are now in place result from the average earnings index scrutinies.

The ONS has a long-standing continuous programme of improvement, and is now doing, and will continue to do, even more. For example, many changes were made to the AEI before its relaunch. Many of the issues that were raised in the Turnbull and King report were addressed before the relaunch of the index. Those changes are critical as they will deliver quality more widely across Government statistics.

To my grief, several hon. Members have given the impression that there is something suspect about some ONS statistics. Statistics that are produced by the ONS are already of high quality. We aspire to even greater quality, but the ONS already offers a sound base for many of the decisions that are made in government.

We have published the efficiency review—of which many hon. Members are aware—and both reviews of AEI in response to the Committee's recommendations. Last December, my immediate predecessor as Economic Secretary wrote to the Committee to give details of the timing and responsibility of the AEI work. That is all in the public domain.

As I have said, the ONS is well regarded internationally. It produces timely, relevant data of high quality: the national accounts that it produces are equal to the best produced by our European partners. For a long time, the ONS has been regarded as an inward-looking organisation. That is all changing: today the ONS makes more extensive use of external expertise from universities and elsewhere. That will ensure that any improvements include best practice methodology.

To respond to user needs, which are continuously changing, an organisation needs to be flexible and attuned to those needs. It needs to prioritise continually. Therefore, the ONS is developing a comprehensive system to assess the views of users; the value of statistics in policy making; and the contribution of statistics to the economy and society. That addresses generally some of the points that the hon. Member for Meriden made. It will ensure that the ONS gets its priorities right, and that they stay right.

As I said, in terms of legislation, we took the view that implementing the new arrangements was the priority, but it is worth pointing out that several concordats and service-level agreements are already in place with regard to the future work of the ONS. The service-level agreement with the Bank of England has already been completed and signed.

Mr. Cousins: Can the Minister confirm that the statistical commission will have full access to those service-level agreements and concordats with the devolved Parliaments, and that it will review them, maintain their integrity and report on their significance, unencumbered by any difficulty in getting Treasury Ministers' approval to do so?

Miss Johnson: The arrangements on devolution are that we have service-level agreements with the devolved Administrations. The ONS in any case has direct responsibility for Wales. However, as envisaged by the working party and in the memorandum of understanding to which my hon. Friend referred, we anticipate that arrangements will be made to protect the integrity of national statistics and to enable the devolved Administrations to receive the figures that they require to work on a devolved basis. The ONS hopes that, as a result of all that, customers and users will be able to be involved in prioritising and in the quality-assurance process.

We share the Committee's view that high-quality official statistics would be improved by increased timeliness and accessibility. It is widely accepted that the vast range of statistics produced by the ONS is extensively used by Government and the public alike: indeed, it is important that there should be a wide range of users.

[Miss Johnson]

Statistics give us a picture of the fabric of the nation, and inform policy decisions both inside and outside Government. That is one reason why a review of release practices is under way at the ONS. and will be published shortly, but the ONS has already made much progress in getting its first releases available on the world wide web. All first releases appear on the ONS website within five minutes of release, and the office is looking to improve the arrangements for the remaining releases.

Several of the Committee's recommendations proposed changes in ONS's internal arrangements to improve management and research capabilities, and the White Paper addresses the workability of ONS management arrangements to secure those objectives; the lack of strategic vision in some aspects of past ONS work; and the need for strong leadership. In particular, the White Paper stresses the need to strengthen management at the ONS to give much greater emphasis to quality issues. Several hon. Members have recognised the importance of that particular dimension of change. Following the efficiency review and scrutiny of the average earnings index, the Government have accepted proposals from the ONS director to strengthen the senior management structure.

The new management includes new directors of economic and social statistics, who will promote a more coherent set of national statistics not just within the ONS but across national statistics generally. That will help to plug gaps in coherence and coverage across government as a whole.

Quality control of national statistics and the research capabilities of the Government statistical service in general need to be beefed up. That was clear from the AEI review and the Committee's recommendations, so we are creating a new director of methodology and quality post at a senior level.

The right hon. Member for Fareham referred to the way in which the ONS considered criteria for determining priorities. I should make it clear that the plan is that a guide should be developed that explains the process and the factors involved in the consideration of priorities. That will build on the existing method, whereby pressures—for example, from new users—are balanced against resources for planning. That is an important element of the way in which we proceed in deciding which statistics are to be developed and paid for, and which we regard as not important in terms of overall information.

The hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Mr. Davey) asked for a commitment that there would be consultation on the framework document. We have had a long consultation period and the whole process, including publication of the White Paper yesterday and the debate today, has been long drawn out, as hon. Members have commented. We now want to move forward as quickly as we can. The hon. Gentleman's wishes might be reasonable in an ideal world, but at this point we want to get on and implement the new system.

Mr. Edward Davey: Does the Minister realise that I was passing on a question to the Government from the president of the Royal Statistical Society? Is she not disturbed that the president is disappointed at the Government's White Paper and believes that they should accept the Select Committee's recommendation (b) that the statistics commission, not Ministers, should decide on the scope of the statistics to be covered?

Miss Johnson: I assure the hon. Gentleman that I will come shortly to the question of the scope of the statistics, but if we go through a further consultation, which—with all due respect to the Royal Statistical Society—would have to include other organisations, we will have a much more elongated process. In that case, I imagine that hon. Members would wish to grill me at some future date about why we had not made more progress.

On the point that was made by my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne, Central (Mr. Cousins) on access by the director, or the national statistician, to the Prime Minister, the Government agree that access to the Prime Minister on integrity matters is important. That is why we have maintained it in the White Paper.

The ONS is responsible for statistics arising from the registration of births and deaths. Those statistics result in the calculation of death and infant mortality rates, which are used to monitor policy and to allocate resources. The statistics also include the cause of death—such as cancer or heart disease—the number of abortions and teenage pregnancies, and cancer rates and survival rates.

Mrs. Spelman: As I said in my question on MRSA, data collection methods do not recognise the category of death. Therefore, although the number of deaths may be collated, the statistics will tell us nothing about the trend in different categories of death.

Miss Johnson: Perhaps I can best deal with the hon. Lady's point by elaborating on some of the other points that I should like to make.

Currently, there is not a very clear distinction between national, Government statistical service and departmental statistics. Let me give a couple of current examples of the confusion surrounding types of statistics which should be dealt with in discussions on scope and framework.

Some major statistical surveys, and particularly one-off surveys, are not published under the ONS logo. Currently, even the annual Department of Health survey for England is not published under the Government statistical service logo. Moreover, as Northern Ireland has its own civil service, statisticians in Northern Ireland are not part of the Government statistical service and, consequently, their output does not appear under its logo.

We have a patchwork of arrangements. The source of statistics and the methodology used to produce them are not always obvious from the statistics themselves or from the credibility that they are accorded. However, the statistics commission, and the preceding discussions on the framework, should help us to strike the best balance.

I appreciate the frustrations expressed by the hon. Member for Meriden, but longer-serving Members experienced the same frustrations when the previous Government were in office. Labour Members have a long history of being in opposition, although we have no intention of returning to it. All the problems cannot be blamed on the Office for National Statistics.

We believe that the issues of who will bear the cost of producing statistics and who will categorise them will not only be addressed in the framework discussions but will become major features of the commission's work.

The hon. Member for Meriden asked which statistics will be collected, and how they will be collected. As I said, the current system is a patchwork, and the priorities will have to be discussed with the commission, with Departments and with the House. One matter that will have to be dealt with is the fact that, in many cases, Departments pay for the statistics that they collect. The statistics that the hon. Lady would like us to collect would also involve a cost.

Sir Michael Spicer: The Minister is obviously reaching the end of her speech. Will she confirm that the statistics that are currently controlled by Ministers—statistics, for example, on the RPI, waiting lists and education performance—will still be controlled by Ministers? If that is the case, what is the Minister's comment?

Miss Johnson: I shall address all those issues. This has been a very useful and good debate, with many worthwhile speeches and thoughtful comments. We believe that the scope will be dealt with in the discussions on the framework, and by the new commission.

My hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne, Central asked about the commission's work. The key words in our proposals are transparency and openness. Those words are not said lightly, and they will be backed by our actions. The commission will have full powers to comment on, and even to criticise in public, any proposals. It will also be able to decide on its programme and to make proposals of its own. We envisage that there will be an annual debate on the commission's report.

My right hon. Friend the Member for North Durham asked about Ministers' role. There will be a public debate on ministerial views on statistics, and Ministers will be entirely accountable for their decisions. That is a vast improvement on the situation that pertained when the previous Government were in office—and, indeed, has pertained hitherto—in which all those decisions were made in private.

Mr. Letwin: If the hon. Lady is about to answer this question, I apologise for asking it once again. Has she not just admitted that Ministers will decide—that the crucial recommendation, recommendation (b), is not being fulfilled and that Ministers will continue to control most of the essential statistics?

Miss Johnson: The commission will be able publicly to say what it wants to say about any proposals or set of statistics. Ministers will be able to say whether they would like something to be included. Nevertheless, the matter will be for the commission, since if statistics are to qualify as national statistics, the way in which they are collected and audited will have to meet all the criteria established by the commission. The quality of statistics produced will have to be decided on the basis of the criteria for national statistics. If a Minister and the commission disagree on statistics, there will be a debate about what should be done with those statistics.

Mr. Letwin: I am very grateful to the hon. Lady, who is being most courteous, but I really do want to press the point. If the commission believes that it, rather than the Treasury, should control the definition and collection of data on the RPI, will its view or the Chancellor's prevail?

Miss Johnson: I shall deal with the RPI in a moment.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Mr. Kidney) made a very interesting speech on all the central issues surrounding the average earnings index. He made the point that international cost comparisons are fraught with difficulty. It is clear, however, that United Kingdom statistics are among the most highly regarded internationally and in Europe. Nevertheless, we must strive for further improvements. I have noted my hon. Friend's remarks. He also mentioned what he regarded as the lack of a mechanism for determining ONS resources. On the contrary, the White Paper makes it clear that Ministers will determine resources. That will be done publicly, following advice provided publicly by the statistics commission, which will be more accountable for decisions.

The right hon. Member for Fareham asked why the advisory committee had been disbanded. I am told that that was done on the advice of the director of the ONS, in anticipation of the statistics commission being set up.

My hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne, Central referred to the development of a monthly index of services, which is an exciting and important development. Services represent over 70 per cent. of the UK's gross domestic product and it is right that we have frequent and up-to-date information on this key sector. The UK will be one of the first industrial nations to achieve the compilation of that statistical series. That confirms our interest in the matter and our ability to be ahead of the game.

A number of hon. Members referred to the RPI, which is of special importance to the UK economy—as no hon. Member would dispute. It is worth while explaining how it is produced. The ONS is responsible for the compilation, presentation and publication of the index, its sub-groups and subsections. To listen to the hon. Member for West Dorset, one might imagine that it is produced by the Chancellor in a matter of moments. I can assure the hon. Gentleman that the ONS is responsible for producing the RPI. That is a long-standing arrangement, as is the arrangement that the RPI remains ultimately under the authority of the Chancellor.

The detail is produced by the ONS, and any changes to be made to the RPI would have to be announced to Parliament. The Chancellor is answerable to Parliament for those changes, and that is the most direct form of accountability for something of major statistical importance.

Mr. Letwin: Does that not amount to saying that, although the technicians are provided by the ONS, all the critical decisions about the compilation of the index are made by the Chancellor of the Exchequer? Can she genuinely maintain that that is in any sense a fulfilment of recommendation (b)?

Miss Johnson: The Chancellor remains directly accountable to Parliament for what is done with the RPI. There is no evidence—nor has there been any suggestion—of any political interference. If the hon. Gentleman wishes to egg me on, I can contrast the present situation with what happened to the claimant count under the previous Government: over 18 years it was amended 30 times. Strangely, the vast majority of those amendments led to a large drop in the claimant count. I do not recall the Conservatives objecting to that.

Mr. Edward Davey: Why should the RPI be treated differently from every other statistic? The whole purpose

[Mr. Edward Davey]

of having an independent statistics commission is to get reliability and integrity back into statistics for the reason to which she referred—the abuse of unemployment statistics by the previous Government. Why should the RPI still be under political control?

Miss Johnson: The RPI is of special importance to the UK economy and, for that reason, is directly—and under long-standing arrangements—under the authority of the Chancellor, who is accountable to this House.

Sir Michael Spicer: Will the Minister give way?

Miss Johnson: No, I will not give way. I have given way plenty of times.

The Government attach great importance to high-quality national statistics that command public confidence. At the heart of the production of those statistics will remain the ONS, both in its role as the major statistics organisation in the country and in its role in enhancing statistics across government.

I am confident that the processes and structures that we have put in place through the White Paper will ensure that, in future, the Office for National Statistics will be an outward-looking and innovative organisation, producing statistics to the highest standards of quality and integrity, and responsive to user needs.

We have great aspirations for the future work of the commission and the national statistician. We believe that we will end up with national statistics of greater transparency, and with more accountability built into the system, than anything we have seen in the UK. This will provide what so many hon. Members have supported—a recognition that we cannot have good government without good information. We believe that the changes we are making in the White Paper will lead to the good information on which even better government can be based.

Parliamentary Ombudsmen

[Relevant documents: The First Report from the Select Committee on Public Administration, Session 1998–99, Report of the Parliamentary Ombudsman for 1997–98 (HC 136); the Second Report from the Select Committee on Public Administration, Session 1998–99, Annual Report of the Health Service Ombudsman for 1997–98 (HC 54); the Second Report from the Select Committee on Public Administration, Session 1997–98, Report of the Health Service Ombudsman for 1996-97 (HC 352), and the Government's response thereto (HC 1055 of Session 1997–98).]

8.16 pm

Dr. Tony Wright (Cannock Chase): While listening to the previous debate—and to other exchanges across the Floor of the House—it occurred to me that there might be a case for having a statistical ombudsman to test some of the claims that are made. Perhaps the new statistics commission could spawn an ombudsman's arm to which we could send some of the disputed figures. However, I doubt whether we shall see that.

It is a great pleasure to introduce these reports from the Select Committee on Public Administration. The House will be aware that these are not the reports that have been wholly taking the Committee's attention recently, as much of its recent work has been concerned with looking at the draft Freedom of Information Bill. I am told that the Government are tomorrow to give their response to our deliberations, and we will look with interest at what they say following our extensive labours on that front.

It is a pleasure to introduce the reports and to invite the House to consider—albeit for a short time—the work of the ombudsmen and the work of the Select Committee in relation to them. However, it is also a source of regret—even shame—for the House that there has been no debate on the work of the ombudsmen in this Parliament; indeed, there has been no such debate since 1994. That is a source of shame, because I am referring to an institution or instrument devised by Parliament; I am talking about Parliament's instrument to hold the Executive to administrative account. Because of that, an analysis of and debate on the work of the ombudsmen through the Select Committee would give the House an opportunity to engage in some serious scrutiny of the work of Departments as monitored by the complaints that have come the way of the ombudsmen, and then been reported to the Select Committee.

It strikes me as ironic—even tragic—that the only people who come to these debates are my esteemed colleagues on the Committee. The people who should come are those who want to use the reports of the ombudsmen and of the Select Committee to interrogate Departments, which is what those reports enable them to do.

It is a source of great regret that the House does not have even an annual debate on the work of its own instrument. We should have an annual opportunity to engage in such interrogation. The House has an annual debate on the work of the Public Accounts Committee. It would be right and proper for us to have a similar annual debate on the work of the ombudsmen, as reported through the Public Administration Committee.

When my hon. Friend the Minister replies to the debate, he will be in the fortunate position of being able to tell us that there is a review of the work of the ombudsmen and

another on how the new NHS complaints system is working. It is a good pitch for a Minister to be on, because he can call in aid at least two reviews.

The Parliamentary Secretary, Privy Council Office (Mr. Paddy Tipping): For the sake of correctness, we are conducting an evaluation rather than a review of the NHS complaints procedure. We want to look at what is happening, build on success and identify the difficulties.

Dr. Wright: I was fearful for a moment that my hon. Friend's intervention was going to be rather more serious. However, I am glad to accept that we should be talking about an evaluation of the NHS complaints system, which has serious problems, as evidenced by an initial study. Hon. Members may want to say more about that later.

My serious point was that, although my hon. Friend can rightly call in aid the review and evaluation, it goes closer to his responsibility to say something to the House about why there is no annual opportunity to consider the work of the ombudsmen—an institution that was created by the House to do a particular job.

When I was thinking about the debate, I had a slight flight of fancy. Would it not be extraordinary if this year, with the Queen's Speech coming in a few weeks, the Government decided not to do the usual thing of announcing a raft of new legislation, but to spend the year trying to evaluate how well existing laws were working?

Sir Patrick Cormack (South Staffordshire): Marvellous idea.

Dr. Wright: I know that it is an outrageously splendid idea. The House is extraordinarily good at processing legislation. We assume that, as one year follows the last, another raft of new legislation will be processed. However, the House is very bad at evaluating—to use the Minister's word—how well the legislation and the administration of it is working. Through the ombudsmen and our audit and inspection regimes, the House could begin to look seriously at how the Government are working and how well existing legislation is being implemented, rather than always taking the more exciting course of introducing more. That is a deficiency in the operation of the House. The ombudsmen and the Select Committee give the House an opportunity to engage in that.

The ombudsman is a peculiarly British invention, although it is not a British word. There are more ombudsmen in this country than anywhere else. We may have borrowed the idea initially, but my goodness, we have run with it, developed it and proved its worth. We do not have a system of administrative courts. The ombudsman is a peculiarly British way of handling redress in relation to the state and public services.

Thirty years ago, there were great doubts about whether Parliament should set up the institution. The Conservative Opposition of the day, led in splendid form by Quintin Hogg, were very much against it. They argued that it would undermine Parliament, whose job it was to engage in redress of grievance, and that it would be improper for another institution to take on that role. That sounds quaint in the era of citizens charters and all the rest. It may just mean that it takes the Conservatives 30 years to catch up with developments. Who knows, perhaps they will be raving Euro-fanatics in 30 years. It was a curious and revealing argument at the time, because although it was a proper constitutional point, it was nonsense and would have deprived the citizen of the opportunity to acquire a new device for seeking redress against administrative actions.

The system was set up in an interesting and distinctively British way, with odd terms that no one understood, such as maladministration. The ombudsmen were supposed to seek out injustices consequent on maladministration. They worked away at the framework that Parliament had given them to produce a highly effective instrument on behalf of the citizen. It bedded down and has been extended over the years. In the early 1970s, it was extended into the health service ombudsman scheme. In 1994, the ombudsman was given responsibility for the operation of the code of practice and access to Government information. In 1996 clinical complaints in the health service as well as the family health service were added to the health service commissioner's responsibilities.

The story is one of growth and development—and success. Thousands of citizens have had redress for maladministration because of the ombudsman scheme. They would not have had the opportunity otherwise, and the House should celebrate that.

The other feature of the scheme is that it has been a means whereby administration has been tested, and has had to account for itself and hopefully improve itself, too. There are administrative audit and performance monitoring functions as well. The ombudsman's activities in relation to disability living allowance some years ago, and more recently in relation to the Child Support Agency, were celebrated because they exposed the deficiency of the regimes, enabling people to secure justice and reforming the systems because of what the complaints had highlighted.

Mr. Brian White (Milton Keynes, North–East): Does my hon. Friend agree that great as those successes have been, they have not affected enough people? Many people's experience of ombudsmen is rejection at the first hurdle, and they could have been a far greater success had they taken on more cases.

Dr. Wright: I shall mention one or two of the problems, and my colleagues on the Committee will probably also wish to address those points. For the moment, I wish to emphasise the positive side of the story. To illustrate that in easy and personal terms, I have a constituent who took a complaint to the health service ombudsman. I noticed that the complaint was being examined by the Committee—I was not a member at the time—and asked my constituent if he wished to come here for the day to witness the Committee interrogating the health trust and health authority which were the origin of his complaint. He did so, and came out blinking in disbelief that his small, individual complaint had resulted in a Committee of Members of Parliament grilling health chiefs about how it could have happened. His regard for this institution increased immeasurably because of what he saw those Members of Parliament doing on that occasion.

Ms Margaret Moran (Luton, South): We celebrate the achievements of the ombudsmen as a

"sharp and piercing instrument of investigation",

[Ms Margaret Moran]

as Richard Crossman called them in 1976, and which he bequeathed to us. However, does my hon. Friend agree that one problem of the current system is its complexity and the number of ombudsmen who exist? That militates against citizens understanding the system, leading to fewer referrals, especially to the parliamentary ombudsman. Is not that a cause for concern?

Dr. Wright: My hon. Friend's point about complexity and how many ombudsmen we now have gives me an opportunity to advertise my book. When I tried a few years ago to put together a little guide to the various complaints mechanisms that existed, I thought I would produce—at first for my own benefit—a modest little booklet. It ended up as a 400-page book—unavailable, I might say, from all good bookshops—about how complaints could be made. In the past year, the National Consumer Council produced an A to Z of ombudsmen and it described more than 20 schemes in the public and private sectors, all described as ombudsmen schemes. My hon. Friend is right to question whether that explosion of such schemes, or ombudsmania as it is sometimes called, produces its own difficulties.

Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (Cotswold): I have listened to the hon. Gentleman's cogent speech with great interest. He is obviously very knowledgeable on the subject. Has his Committee considered the inconsistency between the positions of the local government ombudsman and the parliamentary ombudsman? Any citizen can complain to the local government ombudsman directly, but complaints to the parliamentary ombudsman have to be made through a Member of Parliament. Individual Members of Parliament will have different standards about which complaints are referred and, for a vast chunk of Government policy, the individual citizen cannot be sure whether his complaint will be referred.

Dr. Wright: That is a fascinating question to which I could give a long and fascinating answer. Perhaps other hon. Members will wish to contribute on that point. The short answer is that Parliament was most insistent when it set up this scheme that it wanted to retain control through what is called the filter—the Member of Parliament acting as the gatekeeper of the system. My view has been that it is difficult to sustain that because we have direct access now to the health service ombudsman, let alone the local government ombudsman. That is a real inconsistency and although I can understand Parliament's intention at the time, we have moved on since.

Sir Patrick Cormack: In the debate in December 1994, the hon. Gentleman was forthright in saying that the filter should go. He now seems to be equivocating a little. Has he changed his mind now that he has the chairmanship of the Committee?

Dr. Wright: I confess to my neighbour and friend that I have been waiting for responsibility to change my mind on all kinds of issues, but it has not yet happened. It has not happened on this issue either. I thought that I was making it clear that I considered it impossible to sustain an argument for indirect access when that is contradictory across the ombudsman system. The ombudsmen themselves have expressed the view frequently that such access was no longer applicable, but the House has insisted on it in the past.

Currently, another survey of hon. Members is being held, covering that and other issues. I am sure that the hon. Member for South Staffordshire (Sir P. Cormack) has replied to it. All the replies will soon be collated, and we shall then know whether the present House of Commons believes that the filter should stay or go.

The success of what was seen as an innovation in 1967 has to a great extent turned on the character of the individual occupants of the ombudsman's office. I should like to take to this opportunity to state that I consider that Sir William Reid, who held that office between 1990 and 1996, provided a benchmark for performance in the role. That assessment is widely shared by people who knew him at close quarters, and by people in the outside world who used his services. This House has cause to be extremely grateful for his tenure in office. He set a standard for others to follow.

Given the importance of getting the right person in post, and the moves to extend the role of Parliament, it would be right for Parliament—perhaps through the appropriate Select Committee—to have a direct role in the appointment of a person who is the servant and instrument of the House. I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister will reflect on that and respond at the end of the debate.

Sir Patrick Cormack: Surely there is an inconsistency in the hon. Gentleman's argument. If the filter is to go, the parliamentary part of the ombudsman's title must also go, as must the degree of accountability to Parliament. The hon. Gentleman cannot have it both ways. It is possible to make a perfectly logical case for one alternative or t'other, but it seems to me to be difficult to make an equally logical case for both at the same time.

Dr. Wright: It may be that added responsibility, although it has not changed my views, has added to my store of contradictions. However, we must wrestle with such matters as we consider the review that is now under way.

So successful has the ombudsman system proved that it has been much emulated. There has been a proliferation of complaints bodies and ombudspeople everywhere. Indeed, I think that more are needed. I mentioned a statistics ombudsman, but we also need a rail ombudsman to sort out the fragmentation of redress and complaints machineries in the rail industry. We need, too, a utilities ombudsman to sort out the difficulties encountered in complaining about some of the utilities.

I believe that we have further to go in developing the ombudsman idea. The point about that idea is that it is independent, rigorous and free. It should also be easy to access. Given the worry about the growth of litigation, especially in the health service, we should pay special regard to an institution that has all the merits that I have listed, and none of the deficiencies of systems involving courts and lawyers. That is worth thinking about in connection with the present evaluation of the NHS complaints system.

However, I am sure that some elements of the system will occasion comment today. They include the questions of indirect access that have been raised already, as well

as matters to do with the time taken by investigations, and the need to achieve a balance between finding redress for complainants and achieving an appropriately thorough investigation.

In addition, bodies covered by the ombudsman at present must be explicitly included in the schedules to the relevant legislation. The alternative method would be for the ombudsman service to cover all public bodies except those that are specifically excluded. I have always believed that matters should be arranged that way around. The Government, to their credit, have recently included many more public bodies, but the principle is still wrong.

Even more important issues arise over the connections between the parliamentary ombudsman, the health service ombudsman and all the other ombudsmen and adjudicator schemes that have developed in the public and private sectors. It is time to review what some would call diversity, but what others would call a mess. The review's purpose should be to see how we guarantee the integrity of ombudsman schemes.

If something is called an ombudsman scheme, it must have the characteristics that I have identified. How can we clarify and ease access to schemes, making it easy for citizens to use them? How do we achieve co-ordination between different schemes so that citizens can have complaints pursued, even if they cross boundaries? The example often cited is the boundary between health and social services, but there may be others.

If we must talk about joined-up Government—some people do not like that phrase; I do not much like it either—we must discuss joined-up redress as well. Government and the organisation of government are, for all kinds of reasons—usually good—becoming increasingly fragmented. Contracting out enables authorities to put other people in place to deliver services, for example. Fragmentation makes it more crucial that the means of complaint and redress should be simple and seamless. People should not need to understand the intricacies of boundary disputes to be able to have a complaint followed all the way through the system and to receive redress.

Mr. Clifton-Brown: I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman's courtesy in giving way once again. Does he expect it to be the norm that where the ombudsman makes a recommendation, the Department involved should follow it? If that is not so, there seems little point in having an ombudsman. In a recent constituency case—which I accept is not quite in the same area—Ofwat made a recommendation that Thames Water refused to follow. Would that not make a nonsense of the whole ombudsman system?

Dr. Wright: Almost certainly it would. However, I have said that the ombudsman system is a distinctively British invention. One of the things that makes it distinctive is that the ombudsman does not have the power to command Departments to do what he says they ought to do in redress, but, because this is Britain, Departments always do it. There is a convention that that should happen, and if Departments do not abide by it, they are marched before the Public Administration Committee and given a good talking to. Other people do these things more formally, but that is how we do them.

The Queen's Speech will not, of course, take up my recommendation of a year of rigorous administrative review. However, Parliament can ensure that we use the instrument that we have created both to give redress to citizens and to keep an eye on how government is working. That is what the ombudsman does, and that is what the Public Administration Committee's reports on the work of the ombudsman enable the House to do.

8.44 pm

Mr. Mark Oaten (Winchester): I am delighted to participate in the debate. I am a member of the Public Administration Committee, but was not a member when the proceedings and investigations took place. The hon. Member for Cannock Chase (Dr. Wright), who chairs the Committee, eloquently said that it was right to hold a debate on the ombudsman, and I agree that it is a shame that it has taken five years to get round to it.

The ombudsman clearly has a critical role. Ombudsmen are at the cutting edge when it comes to hearing and understanding the raw concerns of our constituents about the problems and difficulties of services. They provide a link to Westminster by which those issues may be raised. For many constituents, they also provide a final chance, after many other methods have been tried, to raise concerns. People often turn finally to the ombudsman in a great deal of frustration.

Given that the ombudsman has that critical role, it is a pity that many of my colleagues who came here in the 1997 intake have little understanding of that role and the way in which Members of Parliament should work alongside that office. That is one of the concerns that I put before the Minister tonight. When I was elected I certainly did not have a clue about what the ombudsman did—from speaking to colleagues, I know that the same was true of them. I did not know where one could get hold of papers with which to refer cases on to the ombudsman. I did not know that one had a statutory responsibility to sign the document, whatever. I certainly had no idea whether, to sign it, one had to understand and take up the merits of the case. I had little idea of whether the ombudsman had the power to do X, Y or Z.

If we are to deal with some of the issues highlighted by the report, such as the use and take up of the ombudsman, we need more education and information for some of the newer Members. Perhaps some Members who are stuck in their ways also need a little reminding of how the system works.

Mr. White: Does the hon. Gentleman accept that one of the confusions was that one might come across two similar cases, one of which was accepted by the ombudsman and one which was not? How does one judge the right way to put forward a case? That is one of the confusions suffered by the new intake of Members in the early days.

Mr. Oaten: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. For many Members it was trial and error. Someone came to the surgery with a case and I seemed to remember that six months before I had got away with it and the ombudsman had accepted a similar case, so I thought that I might do so again. Having a simple list next to one at surgery, showing which cases can and cannot be referred, would be a starting point.

That brings me to what is being called the Member of Parliament's filter. If Members are not clear how it works, then we must ask serious questions about that filter. I have

[Mr. Oaten]

taken a particular view—I am sure that my colleagues have taken different views. I do not want to act as a filter. I am not going to judge individual cases. A constituent has the right to take a case forward to whatever level he or she chooses. I do not want to have to judge the case. If a Member's filter means making that judgment, I am not interested and I do not want to take part in that process. If we are saying that the filter means that one is advising a constituent whether the case is legitimate and can be taken forward or whether there is a better process, clearly the Member has a role to play there.

Sir Patrick Cormack: As I said earlier, the hon. Gentleman must accept the fact that when the ombudsman was established he was—to use the words of the hon. Member for Cannock Chase (Dr. Wright)—to be a parliamentary instrument. The ombudsman was to be someone who would enable us to do our jobs more effectively. Therefore, if we take out the filter, as it is generally called, we change fundamentally the conception of the job. That may or may not be the right thing to do, but one must accept that it is a fundamental change.

Mr. Oaten: Bluntly, our difficulty with the system is that we cannot do our job effectively because the right number of cases is not getting through to the ombudsman, as the filter is not working. Perversely, a system that we put in place to build in links with Westminster and get information through to the Floor of the House is causing the problem in the first place. The filter is adding a blockage to the system. If we want it to work properly, we need to remove that filter. I see no reason why a strong ombudsman should not be able to bring issues to Select Committees and to the Floor of the House, but without the filter system. That would increase the number of cases that come through.

Helen Jones (Warrington, North): The burden of what the hon. Gentleman seems to be saying is that parliamentary accountability and a Member's filter are not synonymous and that there are many better ways to ensure that ombudsmen are accountable to this House, perhaps through involvement in their appointment, and through regular reports and debates on the Floor of the House, while still giving individual citizens access to the ombudsman as of right and without hindrance. Would the hon. Gentleman agree?

Mr. Oaten: The hon. Lady makes the point that I have been struggling to make for the past minute far better than I could.

The critical issue is that we get the information about what is going wrong with the system. How it comes to us does not matter a great deal. What should matter is that we know that it is coming to us in large amounts in the right areas. The filter has become an irrelevance to making that process work.

My experience as a Member of Parliament has surprised me. I regard myself as a busy MP; I have been accused of spending far too much time in my constituency. Like most colleagues, I get 500 or so letters a week and I am surprised at how few cases come from constituents asking me to refer their cases to the ombudsman. That brings me to my second concern, which is a point that was well made by the hon. Member for Cannock Chase. The lack arises not because people do not have problems but because they do not have a clue about how ombudsmen work. The whole system is a complete confusion to ordinary folk.

There is a maze of different complaint systems and organisations. We have ombudsman fatigue. I was alarmed when the hon. Member for Cannock Chase suggested adding ombudsmen, although he may have been jesting. Beyond that, we have the Audit Commission, district auditors and local government ombudsmen. The citizens charter introduced endless different sorts of ombudsmen. Those are only some of the people and organisations involved: we have Ofthis and Ofthat. On top of that, organisations such as Ofsted, the Highways Agency and—very properly—the Child Support Agency have created their own departments to manage complaints. Devolution in Scotland and Wales has added different tiers. We also have parish, local and county councillors and Members of Parliament. The book by the hon. Member for Cannock Chase may not be available but it should be compulsory reading for constituents.

Sir Patrick Cormack: Has the hon. Gentleman read it?

Mr. Oaten: I have not, but I need a copy. I shall get an unsigned copy because I am sure that they are more valuable.

The systems may well work and have been added to over the years. If we looked at them on paper, I am sure that we would see a great logical interaction but they do not work in the real world for real people. I am pleased that the Government are considering reviewing the ombudsman system, but I hope that they will be ambitious and go beyond ombudsmen to consider the whole range of other organisations to which people can complain.

Another problem is the terms that we use. The ombudsman is a very British thing that was created years ago but it is a title that means little to people these days. In reality, people see things such as "Watchdog" on television. I do not suggest that we call everything "The Roger Cook Team", but these days people are much more engaged in complaining to television programmes. That is the way things are moving. I suggest that we consider the names of such organisations and try to get user-friendly names that mean something to people.

I used to advise the Audit Commission on public relations. When we talked to the press or anyone else, people would glaze over when we said that our client was the Audit Commission for Local Authorities and the National Health Service in England and Wales. If we described it as the watchdog for the NHS and councils, people would come to life and understand what it did. We need to look again at these issues because our various ombudsmen are our national watchdogs. We need to start thinking in that sort of language.

Perhaps we need one big watchdog that can really bite. Imagine one organisation that led on all these issues so that the problem of to whom people should write and whether they had got the right watchdog or ombudsman was an issue not for the complainant but for the large organisation: a one-stop shop ombudsman or watchdog. That is the language that we need to use if we are to gain people's trust and make the link with Parliament. Ombudsmen and the

present structures are not the way forward. There is no doubt that we also need good practice, proper public accountability and audit trails. Perhaps we need to split those functions off and have clear watchdogs with a much freer rein to act in the way I suggest.

None of that would be needed if things never went wrong in the first place. We have not yet had a chance to focus on the systems that we need to consider and the recommendations from some of the ombudsmen's reports on putting structures in place to ensure that complaints do not arise.

The findings of the health ombudsman's report certainly give cause for concern. It suggests a patchy service in key areas. Politically, it would suit me to say that, according to the ombudsman, complaints in the NHS have increased by 8 per cent. That would be a cheap and rather crude political jibe and it would not be accurate. I accept that complaints are not an accurate measurement of how a public service is going. One could argue that a large number of complaints is a good thing. It suggests that people feel able to complain about the service and that the ombudsman is doing his job. I am convinced that if we shifted to a system of watchdogs, we would have hundreds more complaints. Opposition Members would no doubt say that that proved that there had been underinvestment in health and local government. The reality would be that the public felt engaged in the process.

There are lessons in the reports for the Government and I hope that the Minister will touch briefly on them. The power that the ombudsman now has to report on clinical judgments in the NHS has taught us some interesting lessons. When the ombudsman looked into issues of administration, he found that the key problems that caused difficulties were poor keeping of medical records and lack of communication within the NHS. When he gained powers to look into clinical judgments, he found that the same two issues caused problems time and time again.

The ombudsman said that lack of record keeping not only got in the way of his job but jeopardised patient care. Time and time again, we have seen—the point was raised in the debate five years ago—that poor communications in hospitals can have a serious medical outcome. The Audit Commission—another plug for it—produced a serious report on communications in hospitals. I hope that the Minister will reflect on some of its findings. We hear much about money being pumped into the health service, but some low-cost ways of improving performance could, if we are to believe the reports, have significant outcomes in medical terms.

Mr. Simon Hughes (Southwark, North and Bermondsey): I rushed in as soon as my hon. Friend started speaking, so I am grateful to him for giving way. Does he accept that the experience in the health service is that it is often far better if people can complain immediately to someone very close by who can deal with their anger, frustration or dissatisfaction? If they have to leave the complaint until later and go through some bureaucratic procedure, it is often too late.

If every bit of the health service had a structure within which people received information saying, "Unhappy? Talk to person X. Ring this number now", so that they could talk there and then to someone who was not directly managing their mother, sister or child in the bed—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael J. Martin): Order. The hon. Gentleman should not be making a speech. I call Mr. Oaten.

Mr. Oaten: My hon. Friend is absolutely accurate. The first principle must be ensuring that mistakes do not happen in the first place. The second principle must be providing a local system for complaints. The third or fourth tier should be the ombudsman.

There is a good illustration of why complaints procedures will become critical. The ombudsman's report refers to litigation in the NHS. There is certainly a fear that we are turning into an American-style culture and that in future instead of going to the ombudsman, people will go to their lawyer as the first port of call. There is concern that litigation is getting out of control. I hear that the Government are looking into the question of litigation. I welcome that, but the estimates of £235 million seem set to grow in the future. I wonder whether the Minister will expand on or write to me later about how hospitals are managing that process.

I understand that hospitals make contributions to funds managed by the NHS for internal insurance against complaints and litigation. Are those funds adequate? How much does the NHS have to set aside for litigation? Is there a role for the private sector to step in and provide cheaper insurance?

I want to conclude by saying a little about the Parliamentary Commissioner for Administration—another complicated title. It essentially means the ombudsman who does the stuff that the health ombudsman does not do. Concerns are expressed in the report about the length of time that it takes to deal with complaints. Some of the reports say that the average time taken to deal with cases last year was 91 weeks. That is clearly unacceptable. It is good that the time is down from 100 weeks the year before, but clearly a lot more work needs to be done. The delay is of particular concern when we realise that sometimes the complaints are about the length of time that it took another organisation to help someone. It almost seems as though the ombudsman is rubbing salt into the wound by delaying that process. It greatly undermines the confidence of individuals if the people to whom they complain perform in the same poor way in relation to the problem. I am concerned that that should be looked into and that improvements should be sought.

I want to pick up on the point made by the Chairman of the Select Committee, the hon. Member for Cannock Chase, concerning those organisations that have not been brought within the remit of the ombudsman. One that especially stands out is the Student Loan Company. I have received complaints about that company and, although a vast amount of its work might not fall within the remit of the ombudsman, some administration elements would benefit from having recourse to the ombudsman.

I have focused on the negative parts of the work of the ombudsmen. They do a great deal of work, but there is frustration that that work is only the tip of the iceberg. The potential to do much more is enormous—to bring

[Mr. Oaten]

many more cases to the Floor of the House and to the Select Committee. However, we must be ambitious in developing the role of watchdogs in future. I hope that, when the review takes place, the Government will think creatively about a modern way in which we can engage with our citizens and give them confidence that, here in Westminster, we have the right systems to hear their concerns properly and democratically.

9.1 pm

Mr. Desmond Browne (Kilmarnock and Loudoun): I too welcome the opportunity to hold the debate this evening. It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Winchester (Mr. Oaten), my colleague on the Select Committee. Having heard what he did in a previous life, and the communication difficulties that he doubtless faced at that time, it is no wonder that, in a relatively short time, he is able to put to the House a quite fluent and coherent argument. I share the hon. Gentleman's desire for a greater awareness of the ombudsman's jurisdiction and of the role of Members of Parliament therein; I shall deal with that in more detail in a few moments.

Despite my membership of the legal profession—a qualification that I share with at least one other member of the Select Committee—I share the desire of the hon. Member for Winchester for clarity, and his concern about the growth in medical negligence litigation and the drain that that causes both on financial and on other resources of the national health service. I have some first-hand knowledge of that matter. I also share the craving for the demystification of jargon of which he spoke.

It is also a privilege to serve under the chairmanship of my hon. Friend the Member for Cannock Chase (Dr. Wright) and to follow him in the debate. I have been a member of the Select Committee on Public Administration for only a few months. In common with the hon. Member for Winchester, my membership postdates the reports that we are debating—indeed, it postdates the chairmanship of my hon. Friend the Member for Cannock Chase. However, in that short time, I have come to realise why my hon. Friend has such a reputation in these matters. I shall say no more—*[Interruption.]* Shall we just call it an enviable reputation? I am in danger of talking myself into having to buy his book. Thanks to his chairmanship, to the prodigious output and the obvious skill and learning of our Clerk, and to the help of my Committee colleagues, I have learned much during the short time that I have been a member of the Select Committee. However, I take personal responsibility for the words that I shall utter tonight—they are all mine.

In 1966, Richard Crossman said that the Parliamentary Commissioner for Administration was established to provide the Back-Bench Member of Parliament with

"an extremely sharp and piercing instrument of investigation."

Unfortunately, the parliamentary ombudsman scheme got off to an inauspicious start and attracted much criticism for its timidity. Over the subsequent 30 years, its reputation has been enhanced, to the point where it occupies

"a part of the fabric of the UK's unwritten constitution."

The quotation is taken from the first report of the Select Committee in 1990.

However, despite the undoubted success of the scheme in providing a weapon of parliamentary control over the administration of government—in the words of my hon. Friend the Member for Cannock Chase, "a highly effective instrument"—it does that only for a complainant who is able to seek the assistance of the ombudsman through a Member of Parliament.

Last year—30 years after that

"sharp and piercing instrument of investigation"

was created—20 per cent. of Members of Parliament found no use for it. The 550 Members who did refer cases referred, on average, only three cases each. Consequently, from a high watermark of 1,933 cases in 1996, the number of new referrals to the ombudsman has steadily decreased to an annual total of about 1,650.

Were the bald referral statistics the whole story, they would provide evidence equally for arguments that the ombudsman system was being appropriately used and for arguments that the system was being underused. However, Members of Parliament are clearly not referring to the ombudsman's office only such cases as they have reason to believe fall within his jurisdiction and they are unable to resolve themselves—the dual role that it was intended that Members of Parliament should play as gatekeepers to the system.

The ombudsman himself has advised Members that, in doubtful cases, they should not try to fathom the complexities of his jurisdiction, but should simply refer the cases to him. Hon. Members appear to have taken him at his word: as the ombudsman's reports down to the most recent one confirm, about 70 per cent. of cases referred to him have a subject of complaint that is not within his jurisdiction.

I would argue that, although the parliamentary ombudsman system has been an undoubted success and has provided a Rolls-Royce service in those 30 per cent. of cases that are either fully investigated or resolved informally, it has not been a success in respect of that countless unknown number of complainants who are potential clients of the service but who, for one reason or another, never get their cases to the ombudsman. We ought to address that problem, which has arisen as a consequence of several coincidental factors. I propose to draw the House's attention to some of those factors and to suggest some solutions.

The first element in my argument is that the House of Commons has paid insufficient regard to the work of the ombudsman in the past, so we should not be surprised by the lack of awareness among the general public and newly elected Members of Parliament. It is widely recognised that, among other functions, debates in the Chamber serve to enhance parliamentary awareness of issues. It is now almost five years since the last debate on the work of the ombudsman, and I share other hon. Members' dismay at that delay.

In opening the last debate on the Parliamentary Commissioner for Administration, Mr. James Pawsey, then Chairman of the Select Committee, said:

"I welcome this debate; the first since 1991. Clearly that is far too long an interval and the House should be given greater opportunity to consider the work of the Parliamentary and National Health Service Commissioners."—[*Official Report*, 15 December 1994; Vol. 251, c. 1125.]

When responding to that debate, the then Parliamentary Secretary, Office of Public Service and Science could give neither Mr. Pawsey nor other hon. Members who had

raised the same point any assurance that there would be any more regular debates on the issue. However, I am sure that, were the former Minister still a Member of Parliament, he would be asking himself these questions: why is it now almost five years since the last debate on the work of the ombudsman, and how seriously does the House of Commons take that work, given that such irregular debates take place?

I recognise that, to an increasing extent, much of the valuable work carried out by and in the House of Commons is done outside the Chamber. However, given the nature of the service provided by the parliamentary ombudsman to Members of Parliament, one would have thought that a rare debate on the report of the Select Committee on the ombudsman's reports to the House would have attracted an audience and participation significantly wider than the members of the Select Committee itself.

I do not want to be misunderstood or misinterpreted—I am not arguing for the cancellation of debates if they do not attract the attention of many hon. Members besides the members of a specific Committee, supported by a few others with special interests or Front-Bench responsibilities. Debates such as today's—sparsely attended or not—at least have the intrinsic merit that they attract to the Dispatch Box a Minister who is briefed on the issues of the day.

When the Select Committee structure was established in 1979, the new Government at least appeared determined to give Parliament the teeth to monitor the work of Government Departments. The Procedure Committee that initiated the changes argued that a new balance had to be struck with the central aim of allowing the whole House to exercise effective control and stewardship over Ministers and the expanding bureaucracy of the modern state.

In introducing the proposals, the then Leader of the House referred to revolutionary changes that marked a crucial day in the life of the House of Commons. He said:

"we are embarking upon a series of changes that could constitute the most important parliamentary reforms of the century."—[*Official Report*, 25 June 1979; Vol. 969, c. 35.]

That historic perspective on the establishment of Select Committees was not shared by everyone—certainly not by all Members of the House. At the time of the debate on the substantive motion setting up the Committees, the then Member of Parliament, Willie Hamilton, contended that the whole process was

"the status quo in a different wrapping."

He continued:

"The Government are making these proposals precisely because they know they are cosmetic and will not change anything much."—[*Official Report*, 25 June 1979; Vol. 969, c. 98-99.]

Viewed from today's perspective, it would appear that the arguments for a new system advanced by the Procedure Committee then could be asserted with equal strength today. The Committee's report said:

"surveillance of the Executive will not be substantially improved unless other reforms take place, such as . . . among other things . . . more access to the Floor of the House of Commons."

There can be no criticism to the effect that the Select Committee on Public Administration or its predecessor, the Select Committee on the Parliamentary Commissioner for Administration, have failed to devote sufficient time to considering the work of, and reports from, the ombudsman: on the contrary.

Indeed, when the Parliamentary Commissioner for Administration and the Health Service Ombudsman were appointed in 1967 and 1974 respectively, it is undoubtedly true that the Committee gave the ombudsmen backbone. The danger then was that the first Parliamentary Commissioner for Administration, as a former civil servant, might bow to pressure from former departmental colleagues and, to coin a phrase, "stay native". The Committee encouraged him to think more confrontationally and, at least in important cases, to conduct individual investigations.

I argue that there was then creative tension between the ombudsman and the Committee. However, now that the system is fairly well established, the Committee has a close relationship with the ombudsman. It is a settled relationship that no longer appears to generate much creative tension, apart from the Committee's interest in the throughput time of investigations. The Committee appears to walk in stride with the commissioner, which has some benefits. However, when the relationship between the Committee and the ombudsman was at its most creative, the Committee was snapping at his heels.

The argument that the ombudsman and the Select Committee are a powerful combination for securing remedial action is a separate issue. Undoubtedly, nothing concentrates the mind of a reluctant Department better than the threat of a grilling before the Select Committee. There is no doubt that recalcitrant Departments threatened with this big step find it easier to come up with rather than refuse a remedy. However, that productive dynamic would not be undermined in any way if the Committee presented a more challenging and questioning face to the parliamentary ombudsman. I would argue that the Committee no longer does that, apart from on one or two minor issues.

I turn to the question of the Member of Parliament filter, and in this part of my contribution I hope to address the points made earlier by way of intervention by the hon. Member for South Staffordshire (Sir P. Cormack)—I am sure that, if I fail now, he will give me an opportunity to do so later.

I believe that a central reason for the underuse of the Parliamentary Commissioner can be found in the Member of Parliament filter. By putting in place the hurdle of the Member of Parliament filter in 1966, the House accepted three arguments. First, there was the practical reason that, without it, the parliamentary ombudsman would be inundated with complaints. The filter would keep such complaints at bay and within manageable limits. Those who now argue for the retention of the filter often say that the number of complaints to the ombudsman has reduced because of the increased number of alternative complaints procedures provided within Departments or organisations.

If that argument is true, the siphoning off of complaints to intradepartmental complaints procedures would help to stem the expected flood were the filter to be removed. As a member of the legal profession, I was never impressed by the floodgates argument when it was put to me from the Bench in connection with any decision.

Those of us who believe that the existence of the filter and the requirement for the intervention of a Member of Parliament—not the filtering provided by the Member, but simply the requirement for the intervention—have a stifling effect on potential claims, must accept that their removal would have serious resource implications.

[Mr. Desmond Browne]

However, we accept the commitment of additional resources to the identification of maladministration and the resolution of complaints as an appropriate expenditure which will lead to cost savings in the long run.

The filter may control the quantity of complaints received, but it does nothing to ensure equality of justice for all complainants, and generates a fundamental flaw increasingly out of kilter with modern thinking about access to justice for all. It is also out of kilter with the Government's ambitions for public services as set out in chapter 3 of the White Paper, "Modernising government". Paragraph 6 of that chapter says that the Government want public services that, among other things,

"make it easy to complain and get a result when things go wrong."

Secondly, the House accepted the argument that a filter would make the establishment of the ombudsman's office more acceptable to Members of Parliament who might otherwise have seen it as a rival to their grievance-handling activities. In 1999, do we really believe that a system that absorbs about 1,500 complaints a year, and rejects 70 per cent. of them, is a rival to Members of Parliament in their "ombudsman" and advocacy roles?

In 1997, communications from Members of Parliament to Ministers were estimated to amount to 200,000—the equivalent of about 300 per year per Member. If we compare that with the 1960s, when research shows that Members of Parliament were generating only about 20,000 letters a year, we get a flavour of how little threat an unfiltered ombudsman system would be to Members of Parliament in their exercise of that role.

In 1999, it is not the fear of a constitutional rival that threatens Members' parliamentary lives, but the increasing demands made of them to help their constituents. The number of people seeking the help of their Members of Parliament has increased dramatically. In the early 1960s, the total mailbag for Parliament consisted of 10,000 letters a week. By 1997, that figure had increased to 70,000 letters, 40,000 of which were incoming mail. What does the arithmetic show? Do Members of Parliament answer 10,000 letters a week? That would be slightly disturbing—*[Interruption.]* No, they do not all come to me. There can hardly be a Member of Parliament who would not welcome some relief from that increasing burden.

Next, the House accepted what was described as the ground of the high constitutional principle—that the ombudsman should be an additional weapon in a Member of Parliament's armoury rather than a freestanding institution undermining Ministers' and Departments' accountability to Parliament. It is a good job that the frequency of, and the participation in, debates about the ombudsman's work are not the only measure of how highly Members have regarded that "high constitutional principle" since 1967.

How could an ombudsman who has no power to institute his own departmental audit, and whose annual reports merit pathetically few column inches in our national newspapers and almost no electronic media coverage, present any alternative to the constitutional position adopted by the House as a safeguard of ministerial responsibility?

In addition, possibly because of the complexities of the ombudsman's jurisdiction and remit, Members of Parliament apparently find it difficult to decide whether complaints should be investigated by his office. As I have said, in most years 70 per cent. of the complaints sent to the ombudsman are outwith his jurisdiction. The modern Member of Parliament, whatever the historical precedent may suggest, seems content with the principle that cases may be referred to the ombudsman whether they would be more appropriately dealt with elsewhere or not.

To those reasons, I could add a lack of public awareness, which the hon. Member for Winchester spoke about. I throw one more statistic into the debate. The parliamentary ombudsman estimates that only 14 per cent. of the public know anything about him, never mind know and understand why he is there. I have no doubt that other hon. Members have their own reasons for their underuse of the parliamentary ombudsman, and they could add to the list to which I have treated the House in the past 15 minutes.

Sir Patrick Cormack: Twenty minutes.

Mr. Browne: I was careful to refer only to the part of my speech in which I set out those reasons: the other part was an introduction.

I have given sufficient evidence of the need for change. That said, I believe that it is time we had this debate, for several reasons. A new ombudsman has been appointed since the previous debate. In January 1997, when Mr. Michael Buckley was appointed, he brought a different approach to the office on a number of issues. It is clear from the marked improvement in throughput times and the efficient clearance of all cases that his approach is paying off.

On 30 March this year, the Minister for the Cabinet Office announced a review of the public sector ombudsman in England. That review is taking place in a post-citizens-charter age and at a time of modernisation. If the ombudsman's deliberations are to reflect that agenda, it is appropriate that the House put down some contemporary markers.

There has also been devolution in Scotland and Wales. Scotland and Wales have their own parliamentary commissioner or equivalent. It is interesting to note that, despite the constitutional difficulties that this may present, there is direct access to the Welsh ombudsman.

Finally, it is appropriate to remind my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Secretary that many of the undertakings made by the then Government in response to the 1994 review have been awaiting legislative time since then. I am sure that those undertakings will be considered under the current review.

I said that was my final point, but there is one other factor that makes it apposite to have a review. Lest it should have escaped the attention of hon. Members, I might point out that there has been a radical change in the party composition of the House of Commons since the previous debate, and my impression is that at that time it was older Members and Conservative Members who favoured the MP filter.

In conclusion, I offer three thoughts for consideration by the Parliamentary Secretary, by the Government's review and by the Select Committee. First, are the arguments for the MP filter still compelling? Secondly, does the ombudsman system provide value for money? Between them, the parliamentary ombudsman and the health

service ombudsman cost about £15 million, receive about 5,000 referrals and fully investigate about 450 of them. I suspect that there is a long-term disadvantage in owning a Rolls-Royce, and that is its mileage per gallon. Thirdly, is it time to amend the existing legislation to simplify the ombudsman's jurisdiction? On that I concur with my hon. Friend the Member for Cannock Chase. We should amend the 1967 legislation to show what is not within his jurisdiction, as opposed to listing what is.

9.24 pm

Helen Jones (Warrington, North): In view of the time, I shall make only a few brief remarks as a contribution to the debate. Through our deliberations in the Select Committee, we have clearly learned that the office of the ombudsman is important as an instrument for individual citizens to exercise their democratic rights and to assert those rights against the state and against other institutions. It is a major instrument of democracy if it is used properly. As my hon. Friend the Member for Cannock Chase (Dr. Wright) said, it has been a great success over the years.

If, in the few minutes available to me, I concentrate on what I believe are the shortcomings of the system, it is not to underrate those successes, but to consider how we can improve the office. We should examine whether the institution that we have established is serving its purpose, whether it is accessible to the individual citizen and whether it resolves complaints speedily.

I agree with many who have spoken today that one of the real drawbacks of the ombudsman system is the fact that many ordinary citizens do not understand how it works or how to approach it. We must consider how it works against the background of an increase in the number of institutions that deal with complaints. Indeed, many institutions have set up their own procedures to resolve complaints. In particular, we should consider the system against the background of increasing litigation to which some have referred today—particularly litigation involving the NHS.

As a lawyer—like my hon. Friend the Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Mr. Browne)—I suppose that I should be in the business of encouraging people to go to law. However, I have to say that, particularly when dealing with medical negligence cases, I have observed that what often motivates people is not a desire to have their day in court, but simply a desire to find out what has gone wrong and to secure an apology. If we establish a system that allows them to do that, we can drastically reduce the amount of litigation against, in particular, the national health service.

The question we must then ask is whether the system does that. I would argue that, at present, it does not. When we considered the Select Committee's report, it was interesting to discover that, although previously the number of cases referred to the ombudsman had risen each year, by 1997 it was falling. That may be partly due to the introduction of other systems of redress, but I am convinced by my own experience that it is also partly due to the difficulties that people have in gaining access to this system. There is a lack of knowledge out there. As the hon. Member for Winchester (Mr. Oaten) pointed out, the very title of the ombudsman—the Parliamentary Commissioner for Administration—often puts people off. What does it mean to the ordinary citizen? Very little, I think.

There is also a problem in regard to the ability of the ombudsman system, as we have it, to resolve cases speedily. In the last year that we looked at, 1997-98, it was taking an average of 100 weeks to resolve cases. Although some of that was certainly due to the tackling of a backlog of old cases, even in 1992 the average time was 52 weeks. In my view—especially in cases involving the health service, when people will be under a severe strain already—that is far too long to have to wait.

Many hon. Members have mentioned that we have different ombudsmen dealing with different parts of the public sector. That is confusing for the public. Surely it is time for the House to consider setting up a single office, so that a single ombudsman could deal with all cases across the public sector. It is also time to consider the issue of the ombudsman's jurisdiction. As has been said, there is a case for amending the Parliamentary Commissioner Act 1967 to specify which bodies are excluded from the ombudsman's jurisdiction, rather than those that are included.

The real problem, however, is that many non-departmental public bodies are not within the jurisdiction, and they have spread into many areas of our lives. The same is true of many bodies that now work in community care, or provide services for our citizens. It is time that we seriously considered how those bodies can be made accountable, and how an individual citizen can gain redress in that sector. That was brought home to me forcefully by a recent case in my constituency involving a charitable institution—in this instance, a charity almost wholly funded by public money through a section 64 grant.

We have to start asking ourselves: how is public accountability best served in those cases? How can an individual gain redress if something goes wrong? Those institutions often provide services to vulnerable groups and cover major areas of people's lives. It is not good enough for hon. Members simply to close their eyes to that situation, however difficult it might be to resolve, and to leave individual citizens without redress.

I agree with what has been said about the problems with the Member of Parliament filter. It is now illogical and unsustainable. As I said in an intervention, the issue for us should be how to make the ombudsman accountable to the House, rather than how to filter individual cases.

The issue of discretion needs to be tackled. I have personal experience of referring a number of cases to the ombudsman, who has then declined to investigate. Often, the individual who goes to the Member of Parliament has reached the end of the line in pursuing a case. That is a cause for concern. Where does the individual go in that situaton? Often, we leave him or her with nowhere to go.

Our challenge is to ensure that we have a much more accessible, simplified and proactive ombudsman service, which individuals can understand and to which they have easy access. A presumption should be built into the system in favour of investigation, rather than non-investigation. If we do that, we shall offer to individual citizens a major extension of their democratic rights and a major safeguard against an overmighty state. With that, I draw my remarks to a close as I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes, North East (Mr. White) is waiting to speak.

9.32 pm

Mr. Brian White (Milton Keynes, North-East): I am particularly happy to participate in the debate, although the comments of the hon. Member for Winchester (Mr. Oaten) about what something is called brought to mind that a friend of mine could never pronounce "ombudsman" and always referred to him as the omnibus man. It was in relation to the local government ombudsman, an office that used to be a filter through local councillors, but which no longer is. That has not brought the end of democracy as we know it. Instead, it has enhanced the local government ombudsman.

The hon. Member for South Staffordshire (Sir P. Cormack) said that the relationship would change if the Member of Parliament filter were removed. I accept that, but change will be necessary if we are to champion people's rights. When the system was set up, the culture was that the state knew best and people were subjects of the state. In the 1990s, there is more a culture of people exercising their rights. If the ombudsman is to move to the culture of exercising people's rights, the relationship between the ombudsman, parliamentary Committees and Parliament itself will have to change. That change is to be encouraged.

Another problem is the initial review. One of the key grounds for refusal is the time limit. I have a case where a Department has refused to accept that there was a problem because the person complained outside the time limit. The ombudsman refused to take on the case because it was outside the time limit for investigation. As my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington, North (Helen Jones) has said, where does a person go then?

We keep going back to the ombudsman to try to persuade him to take on the investigation. If the case were investigated, he would find the department guilty of maladministration, and learn that it should have informed the person at the time and did not. It would be clear that there had been maladministration and she would receive the entitlement that she has been denied. There is the whole question of denial of justice because of the way in which the ombudsman system rejects series of investigations.

The issue is less about the number of complaints than about how those complaints are handled. Individuals' rights are critical. We should also bear in mind the changing nature of the state.

I am dealing with a planning dispute case that has been taken to the ombudsman. The case involves the former Department of the Environment, English Partnerships, the former Commission for New Towns, the local authority, the parish council and a developer. However, the Parliamentary Commissioner for Administration has power to deal with only a part of the case—as some of the parties are public, whereas others are only partly public—and the parties have had to go to the local government ombudsman to resolve other parts of the case. The problem is the boundary between the two ombudsmen, both of whom are saying, "It's the other ombudsman's responsibility to sort it out."

As we move towards more joined-up government—something that I fully support—including task forces, a social exclusion unit and a new way of working to end a silo mentality, how are we to hold to account those engaged in cross-departmental working? The ombudsman's role will have to evolve to address that issue. The Government should have a holistic approach, but the ombudsman's role also will have to be brought up to date.

I do not know of many private-sector complaints procedures that are the same today as they were in the 1960s. I do not think that the public service should be denied similar modernisation in its complaints procedures.

The ombudsman's relationship to regulators, such as Ofwat, has already been mentioned in the debate. However, how is the ombudsman to deal with the current plethora of regulators? I hope that the Government's review will address that issue.

The draft Freedom of Information Bill is raising issues about the role of the information commissioner, and the fact that the information commissioner will have responsibility for the denial of information. As was stated in evidence to the Committee, there is a clear relationship between the denial of information and maladministration. Although it was acknowledged that the issue will have to be addressed, the situation emphasises the plethora of regulatory bodies.

When other countries appoint ombudsmen, those ombudsmen are responsible to the legislature and not to the Executive. I strongly argue that the ombudsman appointment process should involve the Select Committee, which should have a role in interviewing, if not in appointing, ombudsmen. The role between the Executive and the legislature in appointing ombudsmen will have to develop over the years. As joined-up Government and modernising government proceed apace, the relationship of this place to the Executive also will have to develop.

The hon. Member for Winchester (Mr. Oaten) raised the issue of consumer protection—which my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington, North also dealt with, but in relation to the health service. The Government have published a White Paper on consumer protection—on rip-off Britain—and are taking action to protect consumers. However, the Government's action should have an effect on how ombudsmen operate.

Currently, ombudsmen deal only with individual cases, not with institutional maladministration in which departmental procedures, rather than individual decisions, are causing the problems. As more individual cases are resolved by recourse to consumer legislation, ombudsmen will have to devote greater effort to examining institutional and information technology failures. Dealing with institutional failure and with how Departments are structured, and not with individual failures—although the United Kingdom is particularly bad at project management—has bogged down various Governments. I believe that the ombudsman has various skills that would be beneficial in addressing those issues.

9.40 pm

Sir Patrick Cormack (South Staffordshire): I pay tribute to my neighbour and friend, the hon. Member for Cannock Chase (Dr. Wright), for the way in which he introduced the debate and for his service as Chairman of the Committee. I thank also someone who has not been mentioned tonight, the hon. Member for Cardiff, West (Mr. Morgan), for his leadership and chairmanship of the Committee, until he was called to higher and wester things earlier this year.

I do not wish to sound churlish, but this has been in many ways an unsatisfactory debate. I am the first Member to speak who is not a member of the Select Committee, and the Minister shares that distinction with me. This is a subject of central importance to Members, but it has been a poorly attended debate on a day when one would have hoped that there would have been rather more in the Chamber. I do not subscribe to the ridiculous notion that the long recess is a long holiday, because clearly it is not. However, it would be nice to see more Members from both sides in the Chamber for a debate on a matter of central importance.

What we have had is a number of Select Committee members airing their views to the Chamber, and explaining why most of them think that what we need is a national complaints investigation bureau, rather than the system that we have at the moment.

Mr. White: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Sir Patrick Cormack: No, I cannot, as I have such a short time.

That is the logic of much of what has been said by the hon. Members for Milton Keynes, North-East (Mr. White), for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Mr. Browne) and for Warrington, North (Helen Jones), and—to some degree—by the hon. Member for Cannock Chase himself.

I agree with those who do not like the title of ombudsman, which is rather daunting and off-putting and difficult for people readily to understand. I much prefer the title "Parliamentary Commissioner for Administration", but that, too, is a mouthful. I would rather he had been called the public referee or investigator, or the parliamentary examiner—something that was more clearly explicit of the duties that he had to do.

When the instrument—as the hon. Member for Cannock Chase described it—was established, it was to be an instrument to assist Members of Parliament in their duties of scrutinising, probing and holding the Executive to account. Here, I ally myself entirely with the general substance of the remarks of the hon. Member for Milton Keynes, North–East.

On 18 October 1966—33 years and one day ago—Richard Crossman sought to describe to the House what he meant by maladministration. He said that it included

"bias, neglect, inattention, delay, incompetence, ineptitude, perversity, turpitude, arbitrariness and so on."—[*Official Report*, 18 October 1966; Vol. 734, c. 51.]

We could all go "and so on". Tempting though it is, I will not score points against the Government in illustrating each of those defects. However, we should remember that the instrument was established to assist the Member of Parliament, and that it was an instrument of last resort.

It was expected that the Member of Parliament would be able, properly and adequately, to follow through most of the things that a constituent took to him. We must remember that the ombudsman was established in the days before Members of Parliament had free postage, even, and when surgeries were not common practice for all Members of Parliament. When I entered the House nearly 30 years ago, there were Members who had been here before the war and who regaled us in the Dining Room with tales of the "annual visit" to the constituency. The whole thing has changed beyond recall. In those days, the pressures on Members were much fewer. The system was an instrument of last resort and it worked very well.

We have to address whether we should maintain the parliamentary filter and whether the official in question should remain a parliamentary appointment. I agree that, if it is to be a parliamentary appointment, it should be a parliamentary appointment. I find it difficult to listen to people talk about Government review. The Government should not be reviewing the adequacy and efficacy of those set up to monitor and—if we like—police the effectiveness of their Departments. That is the duty of the House. It is a pity that there are not more of us here this evening and we do not have longer to discuss the issue. We have to decide whether we want a cohesive instrument or set of instruments that can assist us in our duties or whether we want to set up a public complaints investigation procedure that might work side-by-side with us in some respects but would be separate from us. The House cannot have it both ways. We have to examine the issues in more careful detail than perhaps we have hitherto.

I take the point of the hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun about the figure of 14 per cent. That survey was taken as recently as 1996. At that time, only 14 per cent. of the public understood that there was such a creature as the ombudsman, yet there has been a proliferation of ombudsmen in recent years—enough to fill several double decker omnibuses. How far should we seek to contain and direct their activities from this House? How far should we reserve to ourselves the function of one of them? How far should we move in a different direction? We have to address those issues.

I take the point made by the hon. Member for Cannock Chase and others about the need for an annual debate. That is a difficult point to sustain when we see that, in the Chamber this evening, we have had some—not all—members of the Select Committee debating the issue with no help or audience from parliamentary colleagues. Of course I absolve the Minister of State, Home Office, the right hon. Member for Brent, South (Mr. Boateng), who has come in specifically to listen to my speech. I am deeply flattered that he should be here. I hold him in fond affection.

The House must address the issues. I had some reservations about the establishment of the so-called second Chamber that is to sit in Westminster Hall at the beginning of the new Session, but I hope that it will give an opportunity for a series of more penetrating, longer debates on what Members of Parliament need to assist them in holding the Government to account. We are not as successful at that as we should be. I am not making a party point. I made the same point when I sat on the other side of the Chamber. The Government need to be held to account. They are not being held to account and they are getting away with far too much. Parliament needs to reassert itself. We all have a duty to take a part in that reassertion.

The ombudsman could have a critical role to play in that process. If he is to have that role, it is essential that access to him should be via, and with the assistance of, the Member of Parliament, but that means more resources for him and a greater awareness on the part of Members of Parliament of what the office was established for. The House must address those issues in some form here or in Westminster Hall. It is for the House to address those issues rather than the Select Committee, which is answerable to us and reports to us.

[Sir Patrick Cormack]

We all owe a debt of gratitude to the hon. Member for Cannock Chase and his colleagues for the assiduity of their work and the excellence of their report. However, we have illustrated tonight that we stand on the verge of a debate that must take place about the central role and function of the ombudsman and how he should perform that role.

9.50 pm

The Parliamentary Secretary, Privy Council Office (Mr. Paddy Tipping): I am grateful for the opportunity to take part in this debate because, as colleagues on both sides of the House have said, they do not happen very often. The hon. Member for South Staffordshire (Sir P. Cormack) said that that was unsatisfactory, but we have had an adult debate with no party politicking. Several big issues have been raised and I intend to try to deal with some of those major themes. I will of course write to individual hon. Members about points raised, especially to the hon. Member for Winchester (Mr. Oaten) about the point he made about the cost to the NHS of litigation and possible insurance funds.

I wish to ensure that the tone and themes of the debate are drawn to the attention of Ministers and officials who are involved in the review of the ombudsman schemes and the evaluation of the NHS complaints procedure. Although differences have been expressed, the debate has seen a commonality of view.

I shall say a word about the modernising Government agenda. Several hon. Members talked about how things have changed since the last debate, including the citizens charters and the interest groups that regulate industry and Government and look after consumer interests. Hon. Members mentioned the need for high standards and well-defined recording systems and audit and decision-making trails. The system should be there when people need it and be quick and receptive. It should have common points of entry and, most importantly, put customers and citizens first. That is a big agenda and the present review of the ombudsman system needs to be put in that context.

As parliamentarians and public servants, one contribution that we can make is to praise things when they go well and identify good practice. If I had my way, for example, I would change the name of the Audit Commission to the Quality Commission. It should be a body that not only looks at what goes wrong, but promotes those things that go well. Ofsted could also learn a lesson from that, because it tends to be keen to criticise the negative, not to promote or sing the praises of good practice.

Unfortunately, we have an ombudsman system that, by definition, comes into play when things go wrong. It identifies problems, but it should also help us to learn the lessons and make use of complaints. I am never afraid of complaints, because they can lead to changes in the system.

I was pleased to see that the Select Committee's report contained a section on naming and shaming, which is a topical issue. As I say, I think that we must encourage, praise and reinforce good practice. Paragraph 34 of the Select Committee's report states:

> "It is not and has not been the Committee's intention to 'name and shame'. It is the salutary lessons to be drawn from individual cases that we are interested in."

I think that that is right. Let us praise the positive, but let us learn the lessons when things go wrong. I am not sure that a discussion involving naming and shaming gets the balance right. People who are interested in social policy tend to focus on failure: we do not sell and sing success. There is a lesson for us all there.

I was interested to hear a number of hon. Members mention the way in which problems are dealt with. I agree with those who said that it is vital that there should be an early apology. When things go wrong, we should recognise that people are dissatisfied with the service. A simple acknowledgement of that is often enough.

People tell me that they are not interested in the money that might be paid in compensation and that they do not want to go to court to secure it. What they want is that the appropriate lessons are learned—for example, from the death of a child—so that what went wrong never goes wrong again. There are difficulties to do with legal liability, but practitioners should be aware that a simple understanding of, and willingness to accept, people's unhappiness with the process can save much time later and remove the need for recourse to lawyers.

Complaints were made about the lack of a regular debate on these matters. Again, I am grateful to the hon. Member for South Staffordshire for mentioning the Main Committee. I know that he has doubts about that innovation, which will start soon. However, I believe that it will allow hon. Members to look much more closely at Select Committee reports. There will be more time to debate them, and in a less partisan manner.

My hon. Friend the Member for Cannock Chase (Dr. Wright) was right to say that we have legislation mania. One of this Government's big achievements will be the move to pre-legislative scrutiny. I hope—to put it no higher—that the Main Committee will give us the opportunity to indulge in post-legislative scrutiny. My hon. Friend suggested that it should do so, and such scrutiny would appear to follow on from its pre-legislative counterpart as sensibly and inevitably as night follows day.

I am delighted that the Minister of State, Home Office, my right hon. Friend the Member for Brent, South (Mr. Boateng), is alongside me on the Front Bench at the moment, as I was involved in the debates on the Crime and Disorder Act 1998. We cannot use that Act as a clarion call to action if we do not go back and check that what was intended with the legislation is being achieved in practice. The Main Committee will give us the opportunity to carry out that check.

A number of points were made in the debate about the present parliamentary ombudsman system. It was said that the work load was too great. I should like to put on record my respect and admiration for the work of Sir William Reid, and for the present ombudsman team. I have looked at their work, and it seems to me that a number of administrative steps have been taken to speed up operations. Justice delayed is justice denied in the review system too, and progress is being made there.

A number of hon. Members spoke strongly about the filter system operated by Members of Parliament, and they asked whether it could be justified, given the changes that have taken place. I can tell them that the review is now under way and that the plethora of ombudsmen is one of the matters to be examined. The review will ensure that we achieve value for money, and I hope that we will receive some initial response early next year.

The debate has been helpful and valuable. There is a good deal of consensus around, but I echo the hon. Member for South Staffordshire, who said that the matter is up to us. It is our system; we parliamentarians agreed it, and we must rise to the challenge of change.

Rural Crime

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Dowd.]*

10 pm

Mrs. Gillian Shephard (South-West Norfolk): I am extremely grateful to have been given the first available opportunity after the recess to raise the important issue of rural crime. I am glad to see the Minister of State, Home Office, the right hon. Member for Brent, South (Mr. Boateng) in his place, but disappointed not to see the Minister of State, Home Office, the hon. Member for Norwich, South (Mr. Clarke) who had the courtesy to send me a charming note explaining that his absence from this debate, in which he has taken a great deal of interest, is due to his attendance at, as he put it, an organised crime summit in Moscow.

In August, the community of Emneth in my constituency and the whole of the fenland area were profoundly shaken by an incident that occurred just yards outside my boundary in the constituency of the hon. Member for North–West Norfolk (Dr. Turner). The incident and the circumstances surrounding it are sub judice. The current factual position is that a farmer is on bail, accused of murder and causing grievous bodily harm.

That incident came hot on the heels of a double murder charge—also sub judice—in the adjoining village of Upwell a few months earlier. There had also been a string of armed break-ins—as yet unsolved—in our local rural post offices. I do not intend to rehearse information that is sub judice. In any case, my concerns go wider.

The Emneth incident in particular has resulted in an expression of public concern locally, nationally and internationally. There have been demonstrations, heated meetings, letters, and press and media comment the like of which I have not experienced in my political career. It would be no exaggeration to say that the incident has touched a nerve in rural communities everywhere. People from all over the country and from as far afield as Canada and Australia have written to say that they, in their isolated homesteads, businesses or farms where there is sparse police presence, are living in fear. Those are strong words, but they are the words that people have used.

A constituent who has supplied me her address but who does not wish it to be made public wrote that the fact that there is a slender police presence makes people who live in outlying districts take more draconian measures to protect themselves and their property. That is the key issue facing the Minister, the Government and, ultimately, us all. We cannot afford to allow a situation to develop in which people lose confidence in the power of the police to protect them and their property and in the forces of law and order to administer justice. The Government will wish to avoid that situation, as do we all.

The Minister will be aware of the depth of public concern. The well-respected newspaper the *Eastern Daily Press*, which covers all of Norfolk, has used the incident to launch a public campaign for more resources for rural policing. The *Fenland Citizen*, based in Wisbech, has collected more than 1,200 coupons filled in by its readers and asking for more resources. I have passed those on to the hon. Member for Norwich, South. The right hon. Member for Brent, South will be interested to know that

[Mrs. Gillian Shephard]

a further 130 coupons are in the safe keeping of his officials after I passed them on this evening along with two petitions from people in the fenland area.

The Minister will also know from written answers provided by his Department that, whereas in March 1997, Norfolk police strength was 1,432, it had fallen to 1,409 by September 1998 and to 1,381 by March 1999. As the Minister will also be aware, Norfolk has the lowest number of constables per 100,000 of population of any authority in England. As the chairman of the Norfolk police authority, Brian Landale, said, as reported in the *Eastern Daily Press* on 11 September:

"The outcry following the recent events at Emneth is echoed in other rural areas of the country. Emneth was a time bomb waiting to happen."

Dr. George Turner (North-West Norfolk): Does the right hon. Lady accept that the accuracy of reporting when the press gets involved in such events is illustrated by the fact that the incident to which she is referring happened in Marshland St. James, which is in my constituency? That shows that the press do not get the facts right. The truth is that Norfolk policing is where it is because of the decisions that she and her right hon. Friends made in the past 20 years.

Mrs. Shephard: The hon. Gentleman's last point is not quite accurate. The incident happened at Emneth Hungate, as I think he must be clear. He should also remember that police numbers in Norfolk have fallen by 50-odd since May 1997.

No one would want to argue that crime patterns have suddenly changed in the past two and a half years—I certainly would not wish to do so. Criminals have been becoming more mobile and more technologically sophisticated for a number of years. As the Minister will know, they have well-developed communication systems. People's life styles and working habits in rural areas have changed. Homes are left empty during the working day. Changes in agriculture have meant that the countryside is not as populated as it once was. Paradoxically, the introduction and great success of CCTV systems in cities and market towns, which was pioneered by the previous Government and has been continued by the present Government, have tended to drive the criminal to look further afield for his ill-gotten gains. Obviously, that does not mean that I do not support CCTV. May I make a short plea for the CCTV bid for a rural area based in west Norfolk? I hope that the Minister will look upon it with kindness when it reaches his desk.

The effect of all of that has been to make rural communities feel more exposed to and threatened by crime and to expose the difference in funding allocations between rural and urban areas, of which the Minister will be aware.

Home Office Ministers are to receive a deputation from 12 rural police authorities asking that they accept the findings of independent consultants engaged by their Department to the effect that it costs more to police far-flung rural areas. The chairman of the Norfolk police authority's audit committee, Jim Wilson, was reported in the local press on 11 September as saying:

"We must not allow this report to be shelved by Ministers. The research gives clear evidence that there are significant extra costs in rural areas which are currently not being recognised. Taxpayers in rural areas are paying relatively more through taxes and council tax than residents in urban areas, but for a lesser service."

The chief constable of Norfolk has calculated that to bring his force to the level of effectiveness that he would wish it to achieve, he needs an additional 400 officers. He has also calculated, perhaps more realistically, that, if the Minister accepted sparsity as a factor to be used in the allocation of police funding, it would mean an additional 132 officers for the county.

The Minister will certainly say that effective policing is not merely a matter of police numbers, and I would agree. However, again as reported in the local press, the chief constable of Norfolk puts his dilemma as follows:

"The real difficulty for me is handling the fear of crime issues and confidence in local police. No matter how hard I try to describe how we allocate scarce resources, people are going to be sceptical because all they see are scarce numbers of police officers on the ground."

That is how the chief constable put it.

The issue is partly one of public perception, therefore. The facts may inform us that a well-equipped and technologically advanced police force—mobile and fast moving—is the way to beat crime, and yet the perception of the public is that visible police officers, making their presence felt in the communities, are the only way to prevent and deter crime and to restore confidence in the protection that the police can afford to the citizen. When we consider that, in the western Norfolk police area, which covers an area of 560 square miles, 34 police officers are on duty at any one time when the force is up to strength, which it is not, it is clear that public expectations are not being met.

Mr. Keith Simpson (Mid-Norfolk): In my constituency, in the town of Reepham where I live, I have been burgled twice in two and a half years. My right hon. Friend is no doubt aware that there is no full-time police presence in Reepham—a market town of 4,000 people. She is right that we must overcome the perception that any reaction will come from tens of miles away.

Mrs. Shephard: I agree with my hon. Friend, and so do many of the constituents who wrote to me following this summer's events. Their letters make disturbing reading. It is clear from those communications that people need to be able to feel that the police are not only equipped but willing to protect them and their property; that they can report crime without fear of reprisal or intimidation; and that, if they report crime, action will be taken. If they do not feel protected, they may feel justified in taking the law into their own hands, which is not what we want.

What should be done? First, as an open letter from a police officer to the *Lynn News and Advertiser* stated:

"The place for an operational police officer is out on the streets, policing the community which pays our wages."

Obviously, as I have said, modern policing cannot be only about visible uniformed officers, but police numbers and visibility are key if public confidence is to return.

Secondly, policing methods must be seen and judged to be effective and responsive. People need to know that if they report crimes, action will result. At present, too many do not. A constituent, who supplied his full address, wrote to the Home Secretary on 5 September:

"Much of the crime is not now reported, as the police may not even bother to attend let alone report the outcome, and they are never there to witness it for themselves. It is generally believed that crime figures presented to Chief Constables are those they would prefer, rather than the facts."

Thirdly, people cannot be allowed to live in fear of reprisals and intimidation if they report crimes against themselves or their property. The House will have noted the sad fact that although constituents and other concerned citizens have written to me, and I have quoted from their letters and will pass them to the *Official Report*, they do not wish their names and addresses to be given publicly. The whole incident has revealed that too many people feel like another man who wished to remain anonymous, who wrote:

"I was unable to attend the public meeting for fear of reprisals . . . There were a lot of people who would like to have attended, but were too afraid, because we all fear that the police cannot protect us."

Another woman wishing to remain anonymous wrote:

"Many more people would have attended the public meeting . . . to discuss the incident, but for fear of reprisals. Our home has been targeted often, this year we have had three robberies. It takes so long to get through to a police station that now we don't bother to report it. My two children have never dared to go into the village alone although they went to the village school. Now they have cars and fear that they will be vandalised if left and recognised. We the normal working law abiding people of this village feel victimised."

Farmers feel particularly exposed. In a survey undertaken by the BBC1 programme "Countryfile", 55 per cent. of farmers questioned had suffered burglary. Mr. Hipperson of Shouldham writes:

"I do not believe in taking the law into one's own hands: the police and courts should administer the law, but both organisations are failing the countryside. Rural police are far too thin on the ground. Local police stations are too often shut. As the police are overextended, little or no action is often taken on good information from the public. Difficulties exist near county borders."

Many of the concerns that I have described are operational and a matter for the chief constable, and he is aware of them. The Norfolk police try their utmost to provide an effective service and should be congratulated on their efforts. It is disturbing, none the less, to hear a deputy chief constable say on the local radio that policing in the western division is near crisis point.

I look forward to the Minister's reply. His first step will be, I hope, a recognition that as his own independent consultants have pointed out, it costs more to police rural areas. His colleague the hon. Member for Norwich, South has already said that Norfolk has a strong case.

I had intended to welcome the Home Secretary's recent announcement of 5,000 more police officers for the country as a whole over the next three years. According to *The Sunday Telegraph* of 17 October, that announcement, made at the Labour party conference earlier this month, seems to have hit the buffers of the Treasury. I wonder whether the Minister can clarify the status of the Home Secretary's announcement. Was it conference hype? Did the Home Secretary mean it? He could not have been misleading the country. Did he or did he not have the permission of the Treasury and Cabinet to announce the extra posts?

I feel confident that the Minister will be able to clarify the position tonight and to confirm that when the Home Secretary says that there will be 5,000 more police posts, that is what he means and that is what we will see. In that case, the Minister will be able to tell the House tonight how the Home Secretary proposes to allocate those extra police resources and what account will be taken of rural sparsity in that allocation.

I hope that the Minister will reassure the House and rural people everywhere that he and his Government take their concerns seriously. It will not do for the right hon. Gentleman to exchange statistics, chop logic or blame the whole issue on the previous Government. Of course changing crime patterns and sociological change develop over years rather than months, but it is the task of the Government of the day to respond to such change, and indeed to the profound anxieties that I have described this evening.

I hope that the Minister will give a constructive response. If he does, it will be welcomed by rural communities in the light of the concern that they feel and which I have attempted to describe.

10.17 pm

The Minister of State, Home Office (Mr. Paul Boateng): I should like to thank the right hon. Member for South–West Norfolk (Mrs. Shephard) for raising the issue of crime in rural areas. As she will know, it is an issue dear to my heart and one in which the Minister of State, Home Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich, South (Mr. Clarke), has taken a particular interest. He has asked me to convey to her and the House his apologies for not being with us this evening. He is currently in Moscow at the G8 summit on organised crime. Hon. Members on both sides of the House, but particularly East Anglia Members, as he is and the right hon. Lady is, will be aware that, with the coast of East Anglia being as it is, the threat of organised crime, not least organised crime that has its origins in the east, is one about which we have to be ever vigilant.

Let us deal tonight with the issue of rural crime, on which this House has on occasion had cause to reflect. There are hon. Members in the Chamber who have raised the issue both in Adjournment debates and in debates on crime. We believe—as a Government we have taken measures to ensure this—that the whole community, police and public alike, needs to address crime within the context of an effective partnership. That can mobilise the resources of the community at every level in order to prevent and reduce crime and the impact of offending. Nowhere is that more true than in rural communities, where the Crime and Disorder Act 1998, which this Government introduced, has been particularly welcomed as a focus for effective partnerships on the ground to reduce the impact of crime and, significantly, of the fear of crime.

I am aware from my experience as a former Minister with responsibility for the police of how successful the Crime and Disorder Act has been in East Anglia. A few weeks ago, I attended a meeting in Ipswich where I saw at first hand, on the ground, how the Crime and Disorder Act and the effective community partnerships that have developed in East Anglia—as they have elsewhere—are beginning to bear down on the problem.

However, we need to set the issue of rural crime in a clear context. The situation in Norfolk is worth examination. The latest Audit Commission figures show

[Mr. Paul Boateng]

that there were 67 crimes per thousand people in Norfolk—significantly below the national average of 78 crimes for every thousand people. The number of burglaries per thousand dwellings in Norfolk was almost half the national average: 10.9 against 20.5. As the police authority stated in its annual policing plan for 1999–2000:

"Norfolk remains a relatively safe place to live in."

That is a tribute to the police and to the wider public in Norfolk. It is a sound basis on which we are able to proceed in partnership.

However, that does not mean that we do not have concerns about the fear and apprehension of crime. The right hon. Lady has realised—with the acumen that I would expect of her—that reducing crime levels is not simply a matter that can be linked to police numbers. On the contrary, if we consider crime in Norfolk, it has fallen steadily year on year, as police numbers have fallen year on year. Therefore, we must have an approach that recognises the complexity of the issue that we face and builds a response that is informed by reality.

Members on both sides of the House have a particular duty not to fuel the fear of crime by suggesting that there is a simple equation between police numbers and crime. That is something that the right hon. Lady will be concerned to ensure that she avoids in raising the matter in the way that she has done. I am happy to make it absolutely crystal clear, however, that the Government are indeed addressing the issue of police numbers. We are addressing it within a context—the right hon. Lady must remember this—in which it was the Government of whom she was a member who removed the power of the Home Secretary to set police numbers. It was her Government who, between 1993 and 1998, under budgets in which the right hon. Lady directly had a hand, saw the overall number of police officers fall in England and Wales by almost 1,500, at the same time as they told the country that they would increase overall numbers by 6,000. Those are the facts.

Mr. David Prior (North Norfolk): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Boateng: No.

Those are the facts that the right hon. Lady must bear in mind. Having said that, let us respond to the challenge that she threw down. First, we heard a reasoned approach. Only at the end did she descend into party political acrimony and knockabout. If she expects right hon. and hon. Members on the Labour Benches simply to accept that, she has another think coming. *[Interruption.]*

I am only too happy to return to the pledge made at Bournemouth by my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary earlier this year, and to make it crystal clear that when my right hon. Friend announced a new crime-fighting fund for the police to recruit 5,000 new police officers over the next three years, he meant just that—£35 million, all new money, to be spent in the first year to kick-start the programme. The programme is to be delivered by a challenge fund—the crime-fighting fund which is ring-fenced money. The right hon. Lady knows the meaning of ring-fenced money, because it was something that the Conservative Government, when they had stewardship of police in this country, were never prepared to introduce in respect of support for the police. The money will be ring-fenced money, which all forces— *[Interruption.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael J. Martin): Order. I must ask hon. Members to keep good order—they cannot keep interrupting the Minister.

Mr. Boateng: All forces can bid for a share of the money. Chief constables will not be able to spend the money on other priorities, nor can they use the funds to divert existing money already earmarked for police recruitment to other priorities. That means that there will be 5,000 more police recruits than there would otherwise have been—about that there is no doubt. The money is new money, starting with £35 million next year, to provide 5,000 extra police recruits over three years. I cannot spell it out more simply than that.

It is precisely that approach to the issue that has been warmly welcomed by the police. I am sure that the right hon. Lady will be gracious enough to accept that her local chief constable, Ken Williams, has made it clear, in respect of the very dilemma she has outlined:

"The good thing is that the Government is listening to our dilemma."

Not only are we listening, we are delivering. We are delivering new powers to the police and the courts—

Mr. Keith Simpson: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Boateng: No.

We have delivered new powers through anti-social behaviour orders, which will be of enormous value to rural communities throughout the country. In the Youth Justice and Criminal Evidence Bill, we have given new powers for the protection of witnesses and the victims of crime. That legislation directly addresses the concerns the right hon. Lady has rightly raised about the way in which people are sometimes fearful to come forward and make their complaints. Through the Crime and Disorder Act, we ensure that it is possible to build partnerships between local authorities, the police and the community that will enable communities to fight crime effectively.

Mr. Simpson: Will the right hon. Gentleman tell us how many extra police officers Norfolk will get?

Mr. Boateng: I have made it absolutely crystal clear that it will be for the chief constable and his police authority to make the bid—it is an operational matter. Norfolk has as much chance as any other area to make a bid and to have that bid receive proper consideration. In the meantime, we are ensuring that the police have the necessary powers and resources. More money is being spent on policing in Norfolk this year than was spent last year—above the national average. Above all, the Government are willing to listen.

Dr. George Turner: I understand the problems my right hon. Friend faces. The voice from the past that neglected policing in Norfolk is now at the forefront of making the case for police resources and, in some ways, stirring trouble. Does he accept that, for those living in isolated areas, even if the crime rates are relatively low, the very isolation makes the problems worse? In addition,

there is a real need to ensure that Norfolk constabulary is properly funded in terms of equipment. I have been on operations where it is clear that that is needed.

Mr. Boateng: I accept that it is important to make sure that Norfolk is properly funded in respect of its communications system. That is why my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary announced a £50 million investment toward the cost of a new national communications system for the police. That will benefit rural areas, including Norfolk. We offer practical assistance for rural areas, not cheap rhetoric.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at twenty-nine minutes to Eleven o'clock.

House of Commons

Wednesday 20 October 1999

The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Grammar Schools

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Robert Ainsworth.]*

9.34 am

Mr. Graham Brady (Altrincham and Sale, West): I am delighted to have secured this debate on an important topic for the education of children in many parts of England. The question of the future of the grammar schools, which is sometimes dismissed by some hon. Members as a sideshow or an irrelevance, is deeply important not only for the schools concerned, which are doing an excellent job, but because of what it tells us about the nature of education and how education systems can be run most effectively for the benefit of all our children.

It will come as no surprise to hon. Members to learn that during the Wirral, South by-election—I see the hon. Member for Wirral, South (Mr. Chapman) in his place—the Prime Minister, who was at the time the Leader of the Opposition, told the electorate:

"A Labour Government would not close your grammar schools. That is my personal guarantee. I am not interested in closing good schools."

That may have given heart to parents in Wirral, South and other constituencies, but I am not sure that it is entirely consonant with events since the new Government came to power.

More recently, we have seen the Prime Minister declare to the Labour party conference that the class war is over. In that context, I thought that it might be useful to draw the attention of the House to some comments that have been made by Andrew Adonis, who is now an adviser to the Prime Minister on educational matters. In "A Class Act: the Myth of Britain's Classless Society"—published by Penguin Books in 1998—which Andrew Adonis co-authored with Stephen Pollard, a former research director of the Fabian Society, they state:

"The comprehensive revolution has not removed the link between education and class, but strengthened it."

They continue:

"In 1965, the Labour-controlled House of Commons resolved that moving to a comprehensive system would preserve all that is valuable in grammar school education for those children who now receive it and make it available to more children. Few would maintain that this has in fact been the case."

Later in the book the authors state:

"The comprehensive revolution tragically destroyed much of the excellent without improving the rest. Comprehensive schools have largely replaced selection by ability with selection by class and house price. Middle class children now go to middle class comprehensives. Far from bringing the classes together, England's schools—private and state—are now a force for rigorous segregation."

That is what the Prime Minister's adviser thinks of the policy of further comprehensivisation of England's education system. However, one of the earliest steps taken by the new Government, in the School Standards and Framework Act 1998—I had the privilege of serving on the Standing Committee—was to introduce measures that placed the remaining grammar schools in peril.

The Government implemented a one-way ratchet that allows the removal of grammar schools, but not the introduction of grammar schools. Labour Members claim that the issue is one of parental choice, but that is not true. Parents are free to choose not to have a grammar school, but they are not free to choose to have a grammar school. The ballot question is loaded, because it does not even refer to grammar schools or the intention to abolish them.

The balloting and petitioning system leaves many disfranchised voters. Parents with pre-school children or children at private schools are disfranchised for the purposes of the petition, although they can go to the trouble of registering for the purposes of the ballot. In the borough of Trafford, some 400 children attend St. Bede's college, which is a private Catholic grammar school, but they are funded as state grammar school pupils by the borough. The parents of those children are also disfranchised.

The petition provides for no mechanism to check whether signatures are genuine. The signatures will simply be checked against the list of eligible voters. The Government have not contracted the Electoral Reform Society to engage in any proper check or scrutiny of whether those people who appear to have signed a petition have in fact done so.

Two and a half years into the Labour Government's term, several grammar schools are threatened, including 33 in Kent, seven in Trafford, eight in Birmingham, three in Barnet and one in Ripon. Margaret Tulloch of the Campaign for State Education—CASE—has identified the five grammar schools in Sutton and Surrey as probable targets for this year. Why? In my view, the attacks are entirely prompted by mindless, outdated ideology. The whole debate on the Government's side has been dominated, tragically, by the ideas of an education system that Labour Members saw or experienced in the 1950s, not the reality of selective education as it is today.

In that context, I draw the House's attention to some press comment on the subject, especially from my own area. For example, the *Manchester Evening News*, although not noted for its right-wing sympathies, on 17 November 1998, in an editorial entitled "Caning the Able", stated:

"One may imagine that, with failing schools all over the country, the government would not want to waste any effort tinkering with those which are the most successful. You may think that an education system so popular that parents move home to take advantage of it would be safe from interference.

Yet the consistently high achieving grammar schools of Trafford are among selective schools which could be forced to go comprehensive as a result of a Commons vote today which will allow ballots among parents and feeder primary schools."

The article got the details of the School Standards and Framework Bill slightly wrong. It went on:

"It has been a long-held Labour philosophy that selective education is unfair. Latterly, it had seemed that the pragmatism of New Labour might allow them to turn a blind eye to those remaining pockets of non-comprehensive schooling.

Plainly, we were wrong to think that.

For the sake of their principles, the Government may be about to compromise the educational opportunities of generations to come."

I am also pleased to see that the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Mr. Field) is in the Chamber, as I should like to quote an excellent article that he wrote in the *Sunday People*:

"Grammar schools are the outstanding success of public education in this country. They act as beacons shining out so that all can see what can be achieved in the State system."

I entirely concur with those sentiments. I am especially pleased that the right hon. Member for Birkenhead is here today, as it demonstrates that this issue is not confined to one political party.

Mr. Frank Field (Birkenhead): I hope that the hon. Gentleman will tell the House that the theme of my article was that both main political parties in this country have found it terribly difficult to get secondary education right. My article also stated that we should try to spread around the successes that are achieved, and that we should want all schools to succeed in their different ways, whether it be in technology, arts or languages. If that is to be our strategy, it would be as wrong to discriminate against schools because they are academically good as it would be to discriminate against others because they excel in some other aspect of education.

Mr. Brady: Absolutely: I am delighted to confirm that that is the theme of the right hon. Gentleman's article. In this, as in many other areas of policy, the right hon. Gentleman's thinking is some way ahead of that of the Government and of many commentators. Later in my speech, I shall argue that the borough of Trafford, if it has not achieved the ideal that the right hon. Gentleman described, has at least approached it quite closely, as is shown by the overall standards and levels of achievement of its schools.

The success of grammar schools is well known and easy to identify. This year, half the top 200 places in the A-level league table were occupied by grammar schools, as were nearly half the top 300 GCSE league table places. In 1998, the 12 local education authorities at the top of the GCSE achievement tables all offered some elements of selection.

Labour Members may say that such results are surely inevitable, given that the most academically able children have been selected to go to those schools. However, I invite them to look at the overall achievements of the LEAs, as that evidence lays to rest the myth about the selective system. Of the 149 LEAs in England, 29 have a significant element of selection. In 1998, all the top five places in terms of performance were occupied by selective LEAs. Trafford came first, followed by Bournemouth, Sutton, Southend and Buckinghamshire. Twenty-three of the 29 fully or partially selective LEAs achieved above the LEA average for the country as a whole.

The evidence in my constituency fully supports those findings. Schools such as the Blessed Thomas Holford Catholic high school, Green Lanes high school, New Wellington school, and the Ashton-on-Mersey school all achieved outstanding results. Indeed, the Secretary of State himself declared the Ashton-on-Mersey school to be a beacon school—one whose achievements are so excellent that it shows the way for other schools in the surrounding area.

Strikingly, the success of selective LEAs becomes even more marked when like-for-like comparisons of areas' socio-economic profiles are made. A comparison between 22 LEAs that offer similar numbers of free school meals shows that selective LEA areas come top in 16 instances.

Mr. Bob Blizzard (Waveney): I have a question that I hope the hon. Gentleman will clarify. In 1971, under a Conservative Government, a Conservative council in my county of Suffolk abolished grammar schools and introduced a comprehensive education system. Today, that system enjoys the confidence of the people of Suffolk. It achieves good standards according to the league tables, and no school opted out of it to go grant maintained. Does the hon. Gentleman maintain that the system in Suffolk is less good than that obtaining in the area that he represents, or does he wish to introduce a grammar school to every town in Suffolk?

Mr. Brady: It is not really a question of what I say or think. I simply point out to the hon. Gentleman that the figures show that the system in the borough of Trafford achieves better results than the one operating in Suffolk. That is not a matter for us to quibble over: I have stated a simple matter of fact.

Mr. Michael Fabricant (Lichfield): Does not my hon. Friend agree that what we consider to be the appropriate system in Suffolk is not the important point, but that what parents in Suffolk choose is? Did not my hon. Friend make the point earlier in his excellent speech that the Government have deprived parents of choice? Although parents can choose to allow grammar schools to become comprehensives, the Government have decided—disingenuously and in a manner that lacks balance—that it is not possible for parents to decide that comprehensive schools can become grammar schools. Is not that what is so unfair?

Mr. Brady: My hon. Friend is right. The one-way ratchet enshrined in the legislation is entirely wrong. I can tell the hon. Member for Waveney (Mr. Blizzard) that I do not think that there should be a grammar school in every town unless parents want that. However, parents and schools should have the freedom to decide the arrangements that suit them. It should not be left to Government diktat.

The Minister for School Standards (Ms Estelle Morris): Why not give them a choice?

Mr. Brady: That is a remarkable question, given that the right hon. Lady was the Minister who, in the Standing Committee considering what became the School Standards and Framework Act 1998, opposed my amendment to give parents in all schools precisely that choice. So my record on the matter is entirely clean; the Minister should look to her own record before casting aspersions on mine.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): Like me, my hon. Friend belongs to the growing tradition of Conservatives who pay mortgages and buy their own furniture. Does he not agree that it is especially unfortunate, as he develops his arguments, that he should be chuckled at by the

hon. Member for Slough (Fiona Mactaggart), who represents the wing of her party that has inherited wealth and privilege?

Mr. Brady: I need hardly comment. As ever, my hon. Friend has made a fascinating contribution to the debate that will enlighten hon. Members on both sides.

Fiona Mactaggart (Slough): Pathetic.

Mr. Brady: I hope that the hon. Lady can contain herself, as I should like to return to the evidence of the achievements of selective systems of education. I was seeking to destroy the myth that selective systems perform better only when they are in wealthier areas.

That that is palpably untrue is borne out by the facts in Trafford, which is not the wealthiest part of the country. It has some wealthy areas, and some with considerable deprivation. In Trafford, 18.9 per cent. of children receive free school meals. That is higher than the national average, yet the LEA is arguably first, second or third in terms of academic performance. So Trafford demolishes the myth. I compare that with Kirklees, an LEA which has a slightly smaller 18.8 per cent. figure for free school meals. While Trafford was third in the 1998 GCSE results, Kirklees was 89th.

If we lose our grammer schools, selection by ability and merit will be replaced by selection by mortgage or postcode. Altrincham boys grammar school—my old school—and Altrincham girls grammar school are located in perhaps the most prosperous parts of Trafford. Under a comprehensive system, they would draw their pupils from some of the most expensive housing in the north of England. In the wards of Hale and Bowdon, new three-bedroom apartments have recently gone on the market at £500,000. That would not open up the best schools in the country to all pupils regardless of ability. It would do precisely the opposite, depriving access to the best schools to pupils who have the ability but whose parents do not have the wealth to secure that education.

The situation is similar in Barnet, where the Henrietta Barnett school would draw its catchment from Hampstead Garden Suburb, which has some of the most expensive housing in London. Destroying selection and the grammar schools would achieve precisely the opposite of what so many of the enemies of the grammar schools seek. Professor John Musgrove, former professor of education at Manchester university, said:

"You might have expected the Labour Party to abolish the public schools . . . It really was an astonishing historical irony that they should have abolished grammar schools instead. It was idiocy of the highest order and a disaster for academically gifted working and lower middle class children."

That case is further illustrated by the results achieved in 1998 by Altrincham girls grammar school. It is an exceptionally good school and 99 per cent. of the girls achieved five or more A starred to C passes at GCSE. By comparison, Eton college achieved 97 per cent., Harrow 92 per cent., and Cheltenham ladies college 89 per cent. That is the reality of an education system that provides the best possible schooling for children, regardless of their parents' ability to pay. Those public schools are selective, but extremely expensive to enter.

Mr. Phil Willis (Harrogate and Knaresborough): May I take the hon. Gentleman to another flagship area of his party's policy—the private sector? How many public schools are selective?

Mr. Brady: I chose the future of grammar schools for today's debate. The hon. Gentleman knows that I am no great champion of private schools. I believe that people should be free to choose private education if they wish, but I champion grammar schools precisely because I believe that they open up to all, regardless of ability to pay, an education for the children of parents who might otherwise have to pay. If the hon. Gentleman wants to enlighten the House by giving the statistics that he seeks from me, I shall be happy to give way again, but they would not add anything to the debate.

Mr. Fabricant: I cannot help with those statistics, but others are revealing. Since the abolition of grammar schools, the popularity of private schools among parents has gone up.

Mr. Brady: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The people who will be hurt by the Government's measures—if they proceed—will be those who cannot pay for an alternative. As happened when grammar schools were abolished, those who have the parental wealth to go elsewhere will do so. The polarisation of our education system and of opportunity for our children will thus increase, not diminish.

Mrs. Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham): It may be worth noting that many successful independent schools resulted directly from the move to the independent sector of direct-grant grammar schools when the Labour party last chose to mount an assault on the education system.

Mr. Brady: My hon. Friend is entirely right. Many of those schools were also able to preserve a tradition of free places through the assisted places scheme, another measure that the Government removed in order to diminish opportunity for ordinary children.

The Government's proposals diminish opportunity for those from working class or lower middle class families who do not have the ability to pay. However, they will also affect other groups, particularly ethnic minorities. A perfect example of the detrimental effect of the Government's policy is the Queen Elizabeth grammar school in Barnet, which draws 41 per cent. of its pupils from other cultural groups, according to the categorisation of the Department for Education and Employment. Most of those pupils are Asian people who got into the school on ability, not because of where they live or their ability to pay. The wards that would comprise the feeder area for the school under a comprehensive system have an ethnic minority population of 7.5 per cent. Members of ethnic minority groups are benefiting from the massive opportunity of fantastic education standards, and it would be snatched away from them by an unthinking and outdated policy.

A further effect of change would be a need for reorganisation in many education authority areas. Again, we face wasted opportunities for ordinary children and

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wasted money in LEAs that seek to amalgamate or close schools or rationalise school estates. In Kent, education officers estimate that that would cost £150 million. Replicate that sum across all the areas that have grammar schools and the cost would be £0.5 billion—money wasted on destroying good education rather than trying to improve bad education.

Old socialists and new Fabians—there may even be one or two of them on the Labour Benches today—frequently have more sense than to support the policies that the Government are pursuing. Stephen Pollard, former research director of the Fabian Society, has made his views clear:

"you don't overcome failure by destroying a success—grammar schools. Indeed, so true is this that the real motivation of the educational establishment is all too clearly revealed: to preserve its current power."

Sydney Webb, one of the founders of the Fabians, argued:

"What we have learned gradually and slowly is that nothing worthy of the name of a national education system can be built up of schools of a single undifferentiated type."

What he learned gradually and slowly seems to have been unlearned rather quickly by Labour between the Wirral, South by-election and today.

In 1999, the Select Committee on Education and Employment reported on highly able children, noting:

"Overall, the evidence showed that different types of schools, selective and non-selective, suit different kinds of pupils."

We have been left with a poor set of regulations that will influence the future of the grammar schools. They were criticised by the House of Lords in May 1998 when concern was expressed at how the proposals had been put in place through regulations rather than primary legislation. We are stuck with a flawed procedure, loaded against the remaining grammar schools.

At the very least, parents around the country have a right to expect that those regulations will be observed and policed by Ministers. The Minister will be well aware that one of the regulations requires a prohibition on the use of public funds. Let me enlighten the House by drawing attention to some past exchanges between the Minister and me during the School Standards and Framework Bill's Committee stage. She said:

"The Bill prevents them from using public money . . . Local authorities cannot use public money to campaign. Therefore it is right for that restriction to apply to schools and governing bodies."

I returned with the question:

"Will the Minister clarify whether a governing body could campaign corporately, provided it did not use public money?"

The Minister answered:

"No . . . The governing body as a legal entity would not be able to campaign."—[*Official Report, Standing Committee A*, 24 February 1998; c. 678-9.]

It is not only the use of public resources that is banned under the regulations; there is a prohibition on the entry into the debate of legal public bodies, such as schools, governing bodies and local education authorities. They are not permitted to incur expenditure to assist anyone else to publish such material or to influence or assist anyone else in influencing the outcome of a petition or ballot.

Regardless of the use of public money, schools and LEAs are barred from involvement as corporate bodies. That is why I wrote to the Secretary of State for Education and Employment a little over a week ago to ask him to look into the situation in the borough of Trafford where evidence has come to light of a school across the boundary in Manchester writing to parents who are Trafford residents and using school letterheaded paper, school facilities and the school roll, thereby incurring public expense. In writing formally on letterheaded paper, signed by the headmaster of the school, it has not only used public funds but engaged as a corporate body in the campaign against the Trafford grammar schools.

Given that several hundred parents have received this one-sided propaganda campaigning material from the Stop the 11-plus campaign, I have asked that the Secretary of State use his powers to declare the process void for this academic year in the borough of Trafford. I seek nothing more than fairness and an evenhanded approach. I look forward to hearing the Minister's response, which may come today or, as she suggests, a little later.

I hope that Ministers will enforce the regulations on all schools and on both sides of the debate and take this caution to heart. If they do not, they will not merely be refusing to implement the regulations in this instance, but setting a precedent for all schools, LEAs and interested parties that will define the point to which the regulations will be enforced or ignored. That threatens a free-for-all in the areas where we face campaigns for the abolition of the grammar schools.

That instance was not the first contravention of the rules. In January 1998, I had cause to report Trafford borough council itself, which had sent misleading advice to parent teacher associations, warning that they would lose their charitable status if they sent information to parents relating to the ballot and the future of selection. I took advice from the Charity Commissioners and found that the council's advice had been totally unfounded and that only party political campaigning would have contravened charitable status. That showed not a school but the LEA, through the borough council, engaging in the debate and trying to influence the future of selection in contravention of the regulations set out by the Government. I reported it to the Secretary of State but, perhaps unsurprisingly, no action was taken.

There have been reports of other abuses around the country. It has been reported that anti-grammar school campaigners have booked council chambers as if for union meetings and so not paid for the facilities. There have been reports of children signing the petitions. If they signed in the name of their parents, the situation would not be covered because the Government have made no provision for verifying whether signatures are genuine. There are reports of trade union funding of the anti-grammar campaign, which results in an unfair imbalance of resources. There are also reports of names being transferred to petitions directly from the list of electors en bloc, which again could not be discovered because the Government did not take the trouble to contract the Electoral Reform Society to check whether people have really expressed their wishes in the petition process.

What now? It is time for the Government to admit the truth: selection works. It works for pupils in grammar schools but also for those in high schools, who achieve better results under a selective system than they would under a comprehensive one. It works for low and middle-income families who cannot afford to go

elsewhere for their education. It works for the ethnic minorities, who have a route out of poverty and a chance to achieve according to their abilities.

It is time for Ministers to get a grip of the situation and either enforce the regulations by declaring the process in Trafford void and setting a precedent to show that the regulations will be enforced properly around the country, or by recognising that the regulations are not tight enough and repealing them because they do not properly protect the process and ensure fair, balanced, and open debate. They do not provide for a fair question to be asked or for a proper decision to be reached.

We cannot proceed with an unfair campaign, in breach of the rules, that could destroy the very best education in the country. That would harm the interests not of a few children in grammar schools today but of millions of children all over the country for many years to come.

10.6 am

Mr. Ben Chapman (Wirral, South): I am grateful for having been called in this debate secured by the hon. Member for Altrincham and Sale, West (Mr. Brady). Like him, I am the product of a grammar school. My school offered an excellent education. It is true that I did not take advantage of that, but that was my fault rather than the school's.

When I fought the Wirral, South by-election, one of the main themes was that grammar schools would be safe in Labour's hands. There are only 163 grammar schools left in Britain and we took the view that if they provided good education—as I am sure that most, if not all, do—they should go on providing it. Where they were better than other schools, the other schools should be advanced to the same standard. In the Wirral, while, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead (Mr. Field) has often said, grammar schools are beacons of excellence, they sit alongside other schools that perform to very high standards.

For example, I recently visited Plessington high school and technology college and South Wirral high school, both of which, like other schools, achieve excellent results in every sense. High standards and co-existence are perfectly possible, but what we are about is improving education for all of the people—for the many, not the few. We are about standards rather than structures. With 26,000 schools in the United Kingdom, there is no point in tilting at the windmill of grammar schools when they are so few and, in any event, doing a good job. We are not like Margaret Thatcher, who, as Secretary of State for Education, set the world record for the closure of grammar schools. We are about educational standards rather than dogma.

It is against that background that we established the grammar school ballot regulations, providing for parental—and no one else's—control of the future of schools. That took decisions out of the hands of politicians and put them firmly into the hands of the parents concerned. That is as it should be.

As the hon. Member for Altrincham and Sale, West said, politicians, whether local or national, are specifically excluded from taking part in the ballot process on a party political basis. Councillors need to be careful to state that they are expressing personal views, as the local education authority is bound to provide only factual information, a fair and reasonable assessment of the consequences of the ballot and a statement of its intentions.

Mr. Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield): I was struck by the hon. Gentleman's comment that it would be for parents to make up their own minds. In Buckinghamshire, where selective education continues, the first meeting initiated to try to get rid of grammar schools was chaired not by a parent but by an individual who came from outside the county, and whom I understand to be a member of the Labour party. How can the hon. Gentleman say that it is being left to the parents when it is an orchestrated campaign that seems to come from his party?

Mr. Chapman: I do not know of those particular circumstances; certainly, any voting in a ballot is for the parents and nobody else. Ultimately, the decision lies with the parents. It is right that they should make decisions on the future of their children's education.

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East): I thank the hon. Gentleman for his courtesy in giving way. Does he agree that, if parents are to make a genuine decision in a genuine ballot, the wording on the ballot paper should itself be genuine? Is he satisfied that the wording is genuine? If so, can he explain why—as I understand it—the words "grammar schools" do not appear anywhere in any wording proposed for any ballot?

Mr. Chapman: I have not studied the wording of the voting terms, but—

Mr. Field: Does my hon. Friend agree that, in Wirral, our parents are so intelligent that they would not need to have grammar schools put on the ballot paper to know which schools we were speaking about? Similarly, if any agitators from outside Wirral came in to try to initiate meetings, the local Members of Parliament would give them a pretty good run for their money.

Mr. Chapman: In my part of the world, parents continue—as they should—to have high aspirations for their offspring. As a result, many put forward their children for the 11-plus, in the hope that they will pass the examination. I visit the grammar schools, as I visit other schools in my constituency, and talk to the heads and teachers, and to the pupils, whom I receive regularly at the Palace of Westminster. I give the grammar schools, and other schools, whatever support and help I can; I hope that today is no exception.

In Wirral, to the best of my knowledge, there is no groundswell of opinion against grammar schools. I hope, therefore, that they can be left alone to establish a sense of security and to continue performing to high standards. That is not to say that there are not current issues in respect of children who sat the 11-plus and failed, and then went to secondary modern schools. By the nature of their being "secondary", children might have been seen to be branded as failures from day one at their senior schools.

Wirral council has tried to address that by establishing all-ability schools to sit alongside the grammar schools. As I have pointed out, that is perfectly possible with standards of excellence. I have much sympathy with the concept, but there are difficulties in translating it

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into reality. For example, there are no resources to help the process forward. Some parents feel that they may be hindered from sending their children to the school of their choice, or that all-ability schools will not offer the full range of the curriculum. They have made their views on the subject clearly known to me, and I have passed those views to the local education authority. Their concerns are sincere and need to be addressed.

I have said before that if the 11-plus did not exist, I would not seek to invent it. However, in some areas it does exist, and its consequences are grammar schools. What grammar schools need is stability. The perpetual threat of balloting is corrosive of the sense of security of the school, its staff and pupils. The opportunities for ballots, while rightly existing, should be less frequent. The absence of a ballot, like a failed ballot, should make for a moratorium on balloting for a reasonable period. Only in that way can schools plan ahead.

I shall not delay the Chamber for a moment longer. This is a plea, once again, for standards rather than structures.

Mr. Brady: I am most encouraged by the sensible contribution made by the hon. Gentleman. In order to be clear, if he had a vote as a parent in the Wirral, would he vote to retain or to get rid of the grammar schools?

Mr. Chapman: Given that I stood for election on the basis that grammar schools were safe in Labour's hands, I would vote for the retention of grammar schools.

If our grammar schools are doing a good job, and in my patch they certainly are, let us leave well alone—"If they ain't broke, they don't need fixing."

10.15 am

Mr. Phil Willis (Harrogate and Knaresborough): The more I come into the Chamber, the more I realise that the whole world seems to have changed around. To hear the hon. Member for Wirral, South (Mr. Chapman) arguing for the retention of grammar schools is quite an interesting development.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Altrincham and Sale, West (Mr. Brady) on securing the debate. In many ways, it clearly demonstrates that the Tory party has reached its new common-sense revolution—back to the R. A. Butler Education Act 1944 and division by ability. That is what is being argued for. A mere 72 days before the end of the millennium, when many are striving to create a more inclusive society, where inequalities are minimised and opportunities maximised, the hon. Gentleman and his party want to retain—

Mr. Brady: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Willis: I have just started and, as the hon. Gentleman had 32 minutes in which to speak, I shall carry on.

The hon. Gentleman's party wants to create, re-create, retain or enhance a system of education that, across the world, has largely been abandoned—a system that is as divisive as it is archaic. Yes, I did go to Burnley grammar school from 1953 to 1960.

Mr. John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings): The hon. Gentleman is in self-denial.

Mr. Willis: Yes, I received an excellent education—to respond to the comments made by the hon. Member from a sedentary position. Yes, I was privileged to be taught by a largely well-qualified and dedicated group of teachers. However, if the hon. Member for Altrincham and Sale, West went into Harrogate grammar school in my constituency today, and spoke to pupils or parents, the majority would make exactly the same comments about their education as I made about my education between 1953 and 1960.

The essential difference is that Harrogate grammar school is now a fully fledged comprehensive school. Furthermore, the other five secondary schools in my constituency are also comprehensive schools. Each one is different in character and ethos. Each offers parents choice and diversity. Each one produces results that are above the national norms in every case. Statemented children are not barred at the gate of St. John Fisher high school; every child in Knaresborough automatically has a place at King James's school; and Down's syndrome children can sing in the choir at St. Aidan's high school. However, all three schools regularly feature in the annual league tables among the country's most successful schools—this year, one of them was among the top 25 comprehensive schools.

All have flourishing musical, artistic and sporting traditions. No student is made to feel a failure at the age of 11, as my brother was when he failed his 11-plus and was sent to the secondary modern school in Burnley. No parent has to make excuses for their child's lack of success. No teacher has an excuse for a student's lack of achievement. That is an important issue which must be constantly addressed. For far too long, the 11-plus was regarded as an excuse for children's failure. Of course, the hon. Member for Wirral, South is right; there are some superb secondary modern schools—if I may use that term—throughout the country. They are doing a marvellous job and good luck to them. We should congratulate and celebrate them.

However, in reality, the 11-plus was an excuse for failure and far too many students, such as my brother, not only suffered at the time as a result of that failure, but suffered for the rest of their lives. So attractive are the schools in my constituency that about 300 pupils from Ripon—where selection is retained, and the grammar school and the secondary modern school are across the road from one another within the same community—regularly opt to come into Harrogate and Knaresborough's comprehensive system. A large number of them pass the 11-plus, but their parents decide on an inclusive, comprehensive education for their children.

The hon. Member for Altrincham and Sale, West mentioned LEAs. North Yorkshire, which has only three grammar schools—two in Skipton and one in Ripon—is consistently among the 10 highest achieving LEAs every year. In North Yorkshire, comprehensive education is not only alive and well, but is succeeding throughout.

I accept that not all children have access to schools of the quality found in my constituency. I have worked in areas where failing schools were all too common and were all too commonly excused because of various socio-economic factors.

If, as I hope, part of this debate is about raising standards and increasing opportunities for all our children, let us not start by preserving the drawbridge mentality of yesteryear. Surely, it is indefensible for Kent's 33 grammar schools to admit only 29 children who are statemented as having special educational needs, while its 72 other schools—the secondary moderns and comprehensives—welcome 1,979 such children. The hon. Member for Altrincham and Sale, West did not refer once to special needs children and their access to grammar schools; that is because, by and large, such children are denied access to grammar schools.

Mr. Brady: I am glad that the hon. Gentleman has finally given way, because several of the points he has made so far are entirely inaccurate or red herrings of some sort, and his point about special educational needs is utterly erroneous. Of course I did not mention special educational needs in the context of access to grammar schools: I spoke of a selective system of education achieving the best results for all children and it is highly improbable that most SEN children would find their best place in a grammar school that caters especially for the academically most able children.

Mr. Willis: There we have it. If a justification for the debate was needed, it can be found in the hon. Gentleman's statement, which sums up Tory policy on division. If that is the Tory party's common-sense view of special educational needs as we move into the next millennium, God help us if it ever gets back into power. We have fought tooth and nail for an inclusive system for all our children, yet the Tories say that, because a child has a statement, that child is automatically excluded. The presumption that special needs children do not have innate ability is anathema to me and contrary to the principles for which I have fought.

Mr. Brady: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Willis: No, I will not.

The Tories had 18 years to reverse the comprehensive system. That they did not do so was because the majority of parents recognise only too well that a system that creates grammar schools also creates secondary modern schools. I have yet to hear any hon. Member propose the extension or, indeed, the retention of secondary moderns. Noticeable by its absence from the speech of the hon. Member for Altrincham and Sale, West was any argument in favour of the retention of secondary modern schools in his constituency.

Mr. Grieve: May I enlighten the hon. Gentleman by telling him that, in my constituency, the success of the grammar schools is entirely dependent on the high standards in the secondary modern schools that remain? Their standards are well above the national average and I am quite sure that it is because of satisfaction with those schools that there is no desire to change the current selective education system.

Mr. Willis: I have no knowledge of the hon. Gentleman's constituency. If he wanted to put that statement on the record, he has succeeded.

The right hon. Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major), the former Prime Minister who is now airbrushed out of Tory political history, wanted a grammar school in every town, but where are those schools? Only Solihull took up the challenge, but that ended in dismal failure. When she was Secretary of State for Education and Employment, his right hon. Friend the Member for South-West Norfolk (Mrs. Shephard) tried to divide our school communities by offering bribes to schools to opt out and become grant maintained, but fewer than a thousand schools took those bribes. The message from parents was clear: the vast majority do not want division.

I have mentioned Harrogate grammar school. Under the Conservative Government, appalling attempts were made to divide the six brilliant comprehensive schools within my constituency. The then Secretary of State was to announce the result of the ballot at the Tory party central council meeting in Harrogate; sadly, 80 per cent. voted against going grant maintained, so she never turned up.

Mrs. Gillan: My hon. Friend the Member for Beaconsfield (Mr. Grieve) has spoken of our experience in our county of Buckinghamshire. The hon. Gentleman is leaving hon. Members and spectators outside the House with the impression that grammar schools are bad for the non-selective schools in the area, but that is quite false. I carried out a study of Salisbury and south Birmingham, where grammar schools and non-selective schools co-exist. In both areas, the proportion of pupils in the non-selective schools who achieved GCSE grades A to C rose significantly faster than the national average. That proves that grammar schools are good for us. I hope that the hon. Gentleman will now correct the false impression that he has given.

Mr. Willis: I shall make my position absolutely clear: I do not accept the premise that having grammar schools is good for non-selective schools in the area. I defy the hon. Lady to go to Kent and ask parents of children at most of Kent's secondary modern schools whether they believe that grammar schools are doing their children a service.

When the new common-sense policy on education was launched by the Tories in Blackpool, no mention was made of a return to grammar schools. Only their stealth policy was announced: to hold ballots to close failing schools—and then, presumably, to recreate them as grammar schools, as those are the excellent schools. Of course I agree that the current farce surrounding ballots should be exposed as a sham, but it is no more of a sham than allowing only parents of children at a so-called failing school to vote in the ballot on its closure. Each ballot is a sham in its own way.

During the passage of the School Standards and Framework Act 1998, my hon. Friend the Member for Bath (Mr. Foster) and I consistently opposed the proposal to ballot parents on the closure of grammar schools, because ballots are such an imprecise tool in that context. The whole community, not only parents of potentially affected children, should have a stake in local schools. Like the creation of a grant-maintained school, the closure—or, indeed, the opening—of a grammar school is like throwing a stone into a pond, with the effect felt much

[Mr. Willis]

more widely than merely at the point of impact. That is why we have consistently opposed any further selection in schools, be it based on aptitude or ability.

Dr. Julian Lewis: For the sake of clarity, will the hon. Gentleman state, once and for all, whether it is Liberal Democrat policy to close all grammar schools without ballots?

Mr. Willis: I am delighted that the hon. Gentleman has, once again, come in on cue to enable me to explain Liberal Democrat policy in all its clarity. He is such a diligent researcher that I am sure that he has read through the *Hansard* record of the debates on the School Standards and Framework Act and has discovered that Liberal Democrat Members consistently opposed the extension of selection, whether based on aptitude or ability.

We have also made it clear that the local education authority should decide the admissions policy within its area. Elected representatives should make such decisions, because they have been elected to consider the broader aspects of education in the local authority area. They remain when parents have moved on, so it is they who can plan for the future, rather than for the moment. Although I realise that it is a difficult concept for Conservative Members to understand, it would be quite presumptuous of me to impose a solution on local elected representatives.

Dr. Lewis: No ballots?

Mr. Willis: I have made it absolutely clear that we are opposed to ballots on that matter. The decision should be made by the local education authority, not through a potentially rigged ballot. At least the hon. Gentleman and I agree on the subject of ballots.

The current proposals, whereby 72 grammar schools will be covered by feeder school ballots rather than area ballots, are as illogical as they are controversial. It is nonsense that, in feeder ballots, parents of children at key stage 1 in a primary school will get a vote, but parents of children at key stage 1 in an infants school that feeds a junior school that might feed a grammar school will not.

How cowardly the question on the ballot paper will be. The hon. Member for New Forest, East was right to raise that issue, because the question will be:

"Are you in favour of all the schools listed introducing admission arrangements which admit children of all abilities?"

What would any reasonable parent answer to that? Surely the only straightforward honest question would be: "Do you want to see the 11-plus, or 13-plus, examination scrapped?"

I know how passionately the hon. Member for Altrincham and Sale, West feels about the grammar schools in his area, and I do not wish to denigrate in any way the quality of the education provided there. That would be wrong. Moreover, the hon. Gentleman is not personally responsible for the current ballot farce; the blame lies firmly with the Government, who, as a result of feedback from their focus groups, have bottled out of making a principled decision about the future of grammar schools. Indeed, we have seen some of those focus groups in action this morning.

The Secretary of State made it clear before the election that selection by ability would be abolished. There was no ambiguity about it. He said:

"Watch my lips—no selection, by examination or interview".

That means exactly what it says; it means "We are getting rid of it." Even as late as 13 November 1998, Lord Hunt said in another place:

"We do not support selection by ability at age 11; and we do not wish to see it extended".—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 13 November 1998; Vol. 594, c. 926.]

Yet the School Standards and Framework Act 1998 extended selection to enable schools to select 10 per cent. of pupils for aptitude—and we have never been told whether aptitude and ability mean the same thing. The whole issue was fudged.

Mr. Grieve: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Willis: I shall bring my remarks to a close now, if the hon. Gentleman does not mind. I have given way to him once already.

For too long, the threat to abolish or create grammar schools has been kicked about like a football. The hon. Member for Wirral, South was right to say that that is not fair on the people in those school. Either the Government should have the courage of their pre-election convictions and legislate to remove grammar schools or they should leave the decision to local authorities. At least local councillors can be booted out of office, as we can. I suspect that the parents who vote in the ballot may be less interested once their children have left the system.

10.32 am

Fiona Mactaggart (Slough): I hesitate to speak in the debate because every time I speak on education we hear the constant refrain of the hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) about the school that I attended. However, I had no more influence on my education than the hon. Gentleman had on his lack of stature—and they have probably had an equal influence on us.

I wish to contribute to the debate because I represent the constituency which I believe has the largest proportion of pupils in grammar schools; 37 per cent. of secondary school pupils in the town of Slough are in grammar schools. That has a dramatic effect on education in my town. Our experience is different from that in North Yorkshire, where only a handful of children go into the grammar schools, because in Slough, two out of three children feel like failures at 11. That is the real experience of children, because their parents put so much energy into helping and supporting their children pass the 11-plus. It has a devastating effect on the year 7 curriculum in our secondary schools, on the self-esteem of a large group of children, and on the quality of education in the town that I represent.

Do not get me wrong; I believe that the schools in Slough are trying hard to do a good job—and some of them do an excellent job. However, I am concerned about the impact of the disproportionate number of grammar schools. About 16 or 17 per cent. of our year 7 pupils come into the grammar schools in Slough from outside, so many of the grammar school places are taken up by pupils coming in from outside a town that is already highly congested.

Many pupils are refugees from the system. I vividly remember that, last year, I advised the parents of twins, one of whom had just passed the 11-plus while the other had failed. That experience within a family shows us the truth about the divisions caused by the 11-plus. The family did what many parents of pupils who have just missed passing the 11-plus in my town do; they escaped from educational apartheid into the comprehensive schools of Windsor.

I have no objection to testing. I was a teacher, and I know how important testing is in developing the curriculum for children and in finding out what their skills and attainments are. However, I am worried about a system that creates inflexibility between the secondary modern and grammar schools, and does not allow for different speeds of development. It does not have the flexibility to match the curriculum to each child's growing and changing needs and abilities.

It should be up to the parents of Slough and nobody else to decide the future of their schools. There is some hocus-pocus going on among the Conservatives, and I have been the victim of what I can only call a smear campaign. One of the Conservative councillors in a nearby county has been suggesting, first, that I am leading a campaign to abolish the grammar schools in Slough.

That is not true; the only campaign that I have led in that context was for the grammar schools, the secondary modern schools and the local education authority to be united in making representations to Ministers about getting fair rules for ballots, and that neither side could use public money. The system would not then descend to include abuse of the sort that we faced in our town when we changed the age of entry into secondary education and abolished middle schools. I am pleased to say that many of the representations that we made were incorporated into the regulations.

The second suggestion that has been made is that the question on the ballot paper is misleading. The question on the ballot paper in Slough will mention the words "grammar school" three times, but it will focus on the real question, which concerns the admission policies of the schools in question.

As the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Mr. Willis) said, the name of a school does not necessarily describe its character. Harrogate grammar school is a comprehensive school, and in Slough, seven so-called comprehensive schools have intakes that we would normally associate with secondary modern schools. The right question to ask is about the admission policies of the named schools.

The third lie being peddled is that parents will not be able to vote in the ballots. Let us be clear: every parent in Slough with children under school leaving age will have the right to vote in the ballot.

Finally, it has been said—we have heard it today—that the governing bodies have been banned from speaking out. Any governor can make his or her views heard, but, rightly, nobody should use public money to influence the ballot. Parents should make up their own minds. That is what I expect and want to happen in Slough.

In the meantime, I am focusing on the real issue, which is not whether we have an 11-plus or not. We should be asking, "What are you doing to make the schools in your constituency better?" The education action zone in Slough is now being launched, and I have put a huge amount of effort into persuading the Department for Education and Employment that we need that scheme.

For example, our secondary schools have real problems in recruiting and retaining excellent teachers. We need a structure for better collaboration across the 11-plus divide, so that every child in Slough can have an excellent education. The education action zone represents one step in that direction.

However, we should not get hung up on structures, on the names of schools, or on who is allowed into them. Our duty as politicians and as people who care about children's learning is to ensure that every school, whatever its entry policy, is excellent, and that all children get the best education, as they deserve. I promise the people of Slough and Members of the House that I am running that campaign and no other.

10.40 am

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Altrincham and Sale, West (Mr. Brady) on securing this debate and on his highly effective advocacy of the case for retaining grammar schools. At the risk of embarrassing the hon. Member for Wirral, South (Mr. Chapman) and doing grave injury to his future political prospects, I congratulate him too on his powerful, honourable and brave speech, which was applauded by Conservative Members.

Nowhere is the chasm between the Labour party's pre-election rhetoric and its post-election reality more eloquently illustrated than by its policy on grammar schools. On 7 February 1997, the then shadow Secretary of State for Education and Employment, the right hon. Member for Sheffield, Brightside (Mr. Blunkett), referring to grammar schools, declared that a Labour Government would pose

"no threat to their continuance or to their ethos or to their quality."

Following that lead, on 3 April 1997, the then Leader of the Opposition said of the existing 160 grammar schools, "Let them remain".

"What matters is what works",

he said. "Standards, not structures", he said.

"A Labour Government will not destroy your grammar schools. That is my personal guarantee",

he said.

Mr. Andrew Rowe (Faversham and Mid-Kent): My hon. Friend makes a powerful point. There has been and always will be serious debate about the principle of selection in the education system, and if all schools in the country were of a standard of which we could be proud, there might be some point in focusing on that debate. However, schools in many areas are of such a low standard that the Secretary of State himself is deeply anxious, and to attack schools that are acknowledged to be successful is a disgraceful diversion from the proper focus of our debate.

Mr. Bercow: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to point out that we will not improve the rest of our schools if we destroy the best of our schools. Why did shadow Education Ministers and the then Leader of the Opposition give those reassurances about grammar schools? They knew that grammar schools were

[Mr. Bercow]

successful beacons of excellence in our education system and they sought to assuage the concerns of those who supported those schools.

Grammar schools are renowned for their academic results, sporting prowess and cultural achievements. They have a long tradition of sending people into business, the professions, the media and public service. There are many grammar schools of outstanding calibre across the country. I shall mention only one, which is in my constituency. The Royal Latin grammar school, whose head teacher, Cecilia Galloway, provides inspirational leadership, has outstanding governors, supportive parents and motivated pupils.

The Government sought, when they were in opposition, to reassure us. What is the post-election reality? As my hon. Friend the Member for Altrincham and Sale, West pointed out, it is different from what the Government promised. First, the Government have created in the petition process a potential charter for cheats. My predecessor on the Front Bench, my hon. Friend the Member for Ashford (Mr. Green), and I have had two letters from Electoral Reform Ballot Services Ltd, dated 15 June and 28 September. Neither of those letters was remotely successful in reassuring us that there was no possibility of fraud. There is clearly a likelihood of fraud because there is no requirement for signatures to be validated.

Secondly, the electorate in stand-alone ballots and group ballots is perversely chosen. It is monstrous that parents of grammar school pupils, who have a direct interest in the outcome of the ballot and in their children's educational life chances, will not be entitled to vote.

Thirdly, as my hon. Friend the Member for Altrincham and Sale, West rightly pointed out and the hon. Member for Slough (Fiona Mactaggart) failed to recognise, the question is loaded against grammar schools principally because it does not make it clear that votes against grammar school status would sound the death knell of the schools and result in the abolition of grammar schools throughout the country. Fourthly, the Government have provided a one-way ratchet that facilitates the destruction of grammar schools, but does not permit their creation.

What are the likely effects of grammar schools being abolished? There are two effects of which the House should beware. The first is damage to education: lower standards, reduced choice and guaranteed disruption during the transition period. The second effect is financial cost due to the impracticality of converting schools. It is estimated that if grammar schools in Kent were scrapped, we would be faced with a £150 million bill simply for bricks and mortar, and a conservative estimate of the nationwide cost is £500 million.

Labour Members too often display a breathtaking naivety about the prospects of conversion. The director of education in Buckinghamshire has pointed out that the size and configuration of grammar schools do not readily lend them to conversion into comprehensive schools. They are full to bursting; they are built on the green belt, where there is no scope or desire for additional development, and the capital costs of reorganisation would be prohibitive. In those circumstances, it is absolute nonsense for the Government, who have emphasised the importance of standards, not structures, to interfere with the structure of some of the finest schools in the country. That is a disgrace.

The disgrace seems even greater when we reflect on another fact of which I know my right hon. and hon. Friends will take note: the campaign against grammar schools throughout the country is not spontaneous and is not conducted by well-meaning, independent-minded individuals acting alone, of their free will, against the best schools in the land. As *The Sunday Times* reported on 27 June, it is

"a carefully planned assault on grammar schools"

which is being aided and abetted by dozens of Labour party activists the length and breadth of the United Kingdom. As the report said, it is a centrally co-ordinated campaign by egalitarian hooligans and educational vandals. They want to destroy what exists and, as the then Leader of the Opposition said, what works, in favour of an untried and untested method that conforms to the egalitarian prejudices of Labour party members, who think that children should be used for social engineering. We believe that children have innate rights and should have the opportunity to fulfil their potential.

Does it not stick in the gullet of my right hon. and hon. Friends, as it does in mine, that the Prime Minister—who is himself the product of privilege—is standing idly by with a grinning countenance, allowing to go to the wall prized institutions that, for generations, have provided a ladder up which bright children of modest means can climb? That is the disgrace of the Prime Minister's position. He is more interested in the internecine politics of the Labour party and in deal-making, brokering and keeping the peace than in the prospects of this country's children.

Members of the Labour party and, I regret to say, the parliamentary Labour party think that their children are a class apart and that what is all right for them is unacceptable for everybody else. I give fair warning to the Labour Members concerned—they know who they are—that they can, if they wish, lurk in the darker corners and more secluded recesses of the Palace of Westminster, but lurk, and not for very long, is all that they can do. They can run, but they cannot hide because there will be no hiding place for Labour Members who speak with forked tongue, who practise double standards, and who say one thing and do another.

Those standards might be acceptable to the Labour party, but they are unacceptable to the Conservative party and to the hundreds of thousands of parents of all political affiliations who support the grammar schools. They support them not because they are politically motivated, but because they are concerned about education, and rightly so.

Tawney, the great egalitarian socialist philosopher, said that it was important that there should be the maximum diversity of type among secondary schools. How right he was. Tony Crosland it was who declared, in unprintable language, his determination to destroy every last grammar school in England and Wales. How wrong he was, and how fortunate that he failed.

However, I say to the Minister, whose local newspaper has accused her of doing an incredible disservice to Birmingham's grammar schools, that Tawney's and Crosland's statements had one thing in common: they were honest positions. This Government's position is not.

It is slippery. It is disingenuous. It is designed to cause confusion, and it is a back-door method of destroying the best schools in this country. That is wrong. We will resist it, and we will support those throughout the country—head teachers, parents and pupils—who know that their schools are successful, who resent the Government's intrusion in their affairs and who are determined to fight, fight, fight and win.

10.50 am

The Minister for School Standards (Ms Estelle Morris): I add my congratulations to the hon. Member for Altrincham and Sale, West (Mr. Brady) who, whether I agree with him or not, has been assiduous in representing what he sees as the interests of his constituents. In that, at least, I support him. I fear that that will be the end of my kind words in response to his comments.

I want to start where the hon. Gentleman started. In almost his opening sentence, he said that attitudes to grammar schools tell us something about the type of education service that we want. I absolutely disagree with that; that is where we differ.

Grammar schools have become fewer in recent years. They were set up when all that this country needed to survive economically, to flourish, to compete and to win was for a few people to be educated to the highest level. The grammar school system achieved that aim exceptionally well. That is why, in years gone by, we were a nation that competed so well and succeeded against many of our European competitors and those elsewhere.

However, I must tell Opposition Members that the challenge for this nation and the education service is no longer that of providing good education for the few—the top 25 per cent. It is—

Mr. Brady: Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Ms Morris: Not at the moment. The hon. Gentleman spoke for 32 minutes and squeezed out the comments of many others. Our challenge is to bring about a school system that raises standards for every child, and which ensures that 24,000 schools are good, and good enough for the hon. Gentleman's child and my child, for his constituents' children and my constituents' children.

I have to conclude that a party that chooses to use all its education debates and all its education energy in a fight to save the admissions arrangements of 162 selective schools in 29 local authorities, and which rarely utters words of concern about the rest—which are also, in some cases, the best—is a party that has not caught up with the needs and demands that are currently being placed on our country and on our education service.

Mr. Rowe *rose—*

Mr. Bercow *rose—*

Ms Morris: I will give way to the hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) when I have made progress.

That is what divides the parties. It is the Labour party—the Government—that has taken on the challenge, never taken on by any other Government, of not being content with being able to say that our system delivers the best for a few, and which is determined to deliver the best for everyone.

Mr. Rowe *rose—*

Ms Morris: I shall give way when I have made this point. Anyone would suppose that there was no threat to the grammar schools—that no grammar school closed—until 2 May 1997. We know, because we have heard it often said, that Lady Thatcher was the Secretary of State for Education who closed more grammar schools than any other. In the past quarter of a century—when, for all but five years, the Conservatives were in power—the number of grammar schools fell from 809 to as few as 166. Why, in 18 years, did the Conservatives not stop the closure of those grammar schools?

Mr. Rowe *rose—*

Mr. Brady *rose—*

Ms Morris: Why, in 18 years, was no new grammar school opened? Where was the legislation to give parents the power to vote to open grammar schools? Where was the legislation to stop local authorities closing grammar schools? It was not there. The need to protect the admission arrangements of grammar schools is an idea hooked into because, quite honestly, the Opposition have nothing else to say about the education agenda.

Mr. Bercow: The right hon. Lady's position is fairly apparent, but may we clarify one matter beyond doubt? If she had a vote in a ballot, how would she cast it—to retain the grammar school or to abolish it? Secondly, is she prepared, on the Floor of the House today, to give an absolute and unequivocal guarantee that the stupid regulations that the Government have pushed through Parliament will not allow for widespread fraud?

Ms Morris: Of course I will give that guarantee—that the regulations passed by the House will not be subject to fraud. We based a lot of those regulations on the ballot regulations for GM schools. Interestingly, whereas the Conservative Government never made any provision to prevent the use of public money in opt-out ballots for GM schools, the Labour Government have put in a provision to prevent public money being spent in that way; and we certainly will respond to the hon. Member for Altrincham and Sale, West. In the regulations that we passed on grammar school ballots, the provisions to protect public resource and to avoid fraud are far stronger than ever they were for GM ballots.

Whether we like it or not, the issue of selection has always been there and always will be. For as long as I can remember, the question whether we should select—comprehensive versus grammar—has been there. It will not go away; and if we had not passed the legislation, it would not have gone away. It has thwarted our education service for too long. It has taken our energy, our resource and our efforts, when we should have been concentrating on things that matter more. No magic wave of the wand can stop the debate.

As a Government, we had to decide. As that debate continued, whom did we want to have the say? To whom did we want to hand the reins of influence in that decision?

[Ms Morris]

We had three choices. We could have kept those powers to close grammar schools to ourselves—as the previous Government did—and I suspect that, with our majority, we would have got the legislation through Parliament. We could have done what the Liberal Democrats want us to do—handed the power to local education authorities. We chose neither. We chose to hand the reins of power about the future of admission arrangements for 160-odd grammar schools to the parents whose children will be affected.

Mr. Rowe *rose—*

Ms Morris: I shall give way later.

I am prepared to defend our decision on two counts. First, that is where the power should be. Secondly—and more importantly—it frees leaders of education on the Government Benches to do what they should be doing: picking up the pieces and ensuring that the education service, which has been so badly neglected for the past 18 years, is fit for all our children for the millennium.

Mr. Rowe: The Minister has made a powerful case that grammar schools would probably have withered on the stem anyway, and that there were many more important things to do in the education system, yet one of the first pieces of educational legislation that the Government introduced was to create the mechanism for destroying something that she regards as almost an irrelevance. Why?

Ms Morris: The hon. Gentleman knows well how legislation works. I believe that the Bill that became the School Standards and Framework Act 1998 was the largest education Bill that had ever been passed. It set the new framework, and the new set of relationships for schools. It was out of the way in our first year, freeing us to concentrate on other things.

In the past two years, we have focused on numeracy and literacy, where standards have risen by the biggest measurable amount ever. In each of the years since standard assessment tests began, exclusions have dropped and GCSE and A-level results have improved.

I read a comment in this morning's press by the hon. Member for Buckingham, in which he attacked the Government for vandalism of education. The biggest vandals in the education world today are those who oppose the literacy hour and the numeracy hour, which have patently raised standards for children. The biggest vandals are those who oppose performance-related promotion and the reform of the teaching profession that the Government are working on.

The biggest service that the Government can do the children of this country and their parents is not to waste our time on the future admission arrangements of 160 schools. We should leave that to the parents. The biggest service that we can do the children is to ensure that every one of them gets a good nursery education, that at 11 they can all read and write, that they go to schools that are fit to learn in, that they have teachers who are well trained and well rewarded, and that society has the highest expectations of every single one of them. That is what we are delivering, and that is where our focus will remain.

Car Pricing

10.59 am

Mr. Martin O'Neill (Ochil): It is appropriate that the House should debate this issue on the first day that the public are being admitted to this year's London motor show. It was trade day yesterday, when the lads from the motor trade—they are mainly lads—had first sight of the new models. Doubtless they slapped each other on the back, talked about great deals and discussed their bonuses in the run-up to Christmas.

Bonuses for those in the motor trade may be fewer and a little thinner this year than in the past. Earlier this year, it was assumed—it was not estimated because the men from the motor industry know their business very well, and when they say that something will happen, they try to make it happen—that 425,000 models would be sold in September 1999. According to Hugo Andreae of the *Daily Express* on Monday of last week, the official figure is now about 387,000 registrations. That figure has apparently been inflated by the registration and pushing on to the market of tens of thousands of unwanted cars, which are described in the newspapers as pre-registered cars. It is estimated that 300,000 instead of 425,000 cars have been sold.

A spokesman for Mitsubishi said:

"After a bright start to September the market stopped dead."

What has happened? Perhaps my hon. Friend the Minister, who has recently arrived in the Department of Trade and Industry from the Treasury, will be able to tell us whether there has been an economic crisis that we have not heard about, as a result of which interest rates for motor cars have risen independently. Or have the words of my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister at last been heeded and people have decided to stop using or acquiring motor cars?

It would seem that neither of those possibilities is of any relevance. Instead, the British public have said, "Enough is enough. We are waiting to see what will happen to prices. We have read about cheaper cars being available on the continent. We may not want to buy by post, through the internet or go abroad to purchase cars, but we shall certainly not be ripped off any longer."

Twelve months ago, almost to the day, I and my colleagues who sit on the Select Committee on Trade and Industry held a public hearing on vehicle pricing. We had all the usual suspects in the Box, including representatives from the Consumers Association, the National Franchised Dealers Association, the Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders and the Office of Fair Trading. Committee members arrived with the usual arsenal of misinformation, prejudice and half-digested facts that comprise the main weapons of politicians. We received additional written evidence from a wide variety of other sources. It became clear before long that the British car buyer was not doing as well as his continental neighbours.

Figures provided by the Consumers Association showed sustained price differentials between the United Kingdom and certain other European states of 30, 40 and 50 per cent. European Union limits require that the differential be no higher than 18 per cent. in any one year, and no higher than 12 per cent. over a longer period. We found that the price discrepancies were due to selective and exclusive distribution arrangements, which allow

manufacturers to set standards and criteria and determine the territory in which dealers can operate. That can be done under the block exemption, which will have to be reconsidered in 2002.

Manufacturers can tell dealers what they may sell and at what price, and where they can source their vehicles. Dealers are not even allowed to vary invoice prices. Moreover, they are not offered discounts for large volumes of sales to individual members of the public. On the other hand, discounts are offered to fleet purchasers. They are able, through various arrangements, to put their heavily discounted vehicles back on to the market at the normal recommended resale price. Franchise dealers are in a position to offer a specialist after-sales service, which the purchaser of an expensive item would expect.

Under the block exemption, there is the sweetener that a member of the public may buy a car from a recognised dealer in the certain knowledge that he will receive a consistent maintenance service. Unfortunately, that service seems to be indifferent. At best it is not bad, but more often than not it is unsatisfactory. That is the conclusion to be drawn following research involving a wide variety of organisations, and not only campaigning groups such as the Consumers Association.

The House will be aware of a "Panorama" programme on the issue and an article in *The Sunday Times*. Many organisations are carefully considering the issue and arriving at the consistent conclusion that the present arrangements offer the motorist little protection. If our cars are being badly serviced, there is always the worry or anxiety that unsafe cars that are hazards to the public in general are going on to the roads.

There are other reasons why the price of cars might be higher in this country than elsewhere. Apparently we are a high-wage, strong-currency economy—although we can probably set aside the high-wage issue. Simple economics tell us that if we have a strong currency it is cheaper to import. Cars imported into the country should therefore be cheaper—although perhaps that does not apply to all cars.

For example, Saab has announced that it will cut the prices of its cars by 5 per cent. because of the slide in customer demand that I have already mentioned. If Saab can do that on the basis of one month's poor figures, perhaps others could do the same. I think of Volkswagen and BMW. After all, we have had an exchange rate of about DM2.70 to the pound, or even better, for the best part of three years. Organisations of such sophistication, size and skill could surely accommodate the minor arithmetical problems that are involved in currency exchange rates.

There is also a technical argument, which has been trumpeted over the years as being of far greater significance than other considerations. The argument is that we drive on the wrong side of the road. Of course, we all know that it is the others who drive on the wrong side. Regardless of who drives on the wrong side, we are in the minority. Perhaps it is fair, therefore, that we should be punished for being British and driving on the wrong side. However, if we are being punished, why should the Irish not be punished? I shall take the case of Fiat—which sells cars in Ireland—as an example, and use euros as a simple basis for comparison.

In 1998, according to figures produced by Directorate-General IV of the European Commission, a Punto in Eire, on the basis of an index, was 104.9 euros. In the UK, it was 141.6. The Bravo was 100 euros in Eire and 149.9 in the UK. The Marea was 102.6 and 148.6 euros respectively. So much for driving on one side of the road as against the other.

Mr. Nigel Griffiths (Edinburgh, South): I know that my hon. Friend will want to draw the attention of the House to the fact that motorists in Japan, which has one of the biggest car markets and some of the biggest manufacturers, drive on the same side of the road as us, yet the price of Japanese cars here appears to be extraordinarily higher than in Japan.

Mr. O'Neill: I do not want to go around the world, but I am grateful to my hon. Friend. I chose the simplest example and the nearest at hand. It is a wee bit awkward taking the boat to Tokyo to buy a car, but it is not that difficult to go to Dun Laoghaire and up to Dublin to pick up a motor, or to drive down from Belfast.

If higher prices are not the result of wages, our currency and the side of the road on which we drive, taxation could be the reason. I suppose that there is an assumption that because the British pay too much tax on everything, we pay too high a tax on motor cars, too. However, it is not quite like that. If there are demons and villains in this scenario, they must be the representatives of the Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders. They are the guys with the black hats who do not ride white horses. They might drive white cars, but, in my book, in the parlance of the old westerns, they are the bad guys.

The SMMT stated that in a low-volume market where taxes are high, manufacturers set local prices to support sales and dealer viability in the short term. The National Franchised Dealers Association put the matter somewhat less elegantly, stating that consumers in countries with high car taxes are being subsidised by those in countries with low car taxes. We pay too much in the United Kingdom because in other countries the taxes are higher, so the prices are lower and the revenues are equalised across Europe.

Car manufacturers are helping our Chancellor by maintaining high prices, which enable him to take more tax, albeit at a lower rate. We hear much about whether we should cede the power to tax to the European Union. That may be an exaggeration, but the setting of car prices strongly influences the revenue that the Chancellor gets as a consequence of the taxation regime. It is up to Parliament, not some board of directors in Detroit, to determine the level of tax revenues for motor cars in this country.

I have mentioned the Consumers Association, which has ploughed a long and often lonely furrow in the campaign to highlight the differentials in car pricing. Another body involved, which is generally agreed to be the most cautious, was the Office of Fair Trading.

Mr. Lindsay Hoyle (Chorley) *indicated assent.*

Mr. O'Neill: My hon. Friend the Member for Chorley (Mr. Hoyle) nods in agreement. He was perhaps a trifle severe on that organisation, but that eventually had the desired effect.

John Bridgeman, the director general of the OFT, said that he did not think that there was active collusion between car companies; that there was not a world

[Mr. O'Neill]

conspiracy whereby the guys in the SMMT got together in some international forum where they set prices. However, he did say that there was the possibility of a complex monopoly. Put simply, that occurs when a company acts in a monopolistic fashion in its dealings with its retailers in controlling pricing and supply. It does not require the perpetrator to work in concert with others, but simply to act in a particular way with regard to its own outlets and customers.

The early thinking of John Bridgeman was confirmed in March when the OFT referred the new car market to what is now called the Competition Commission, following evidence that practices employed by manufacturers' dealers were distorting competition. In announcing the inquiry, Mr. Bridgeman endorsed many of the Select Committee's conclusions: the market was not working, manufacturers had too much power, the 1992 Monopolies and Mergers Commission report recommendations had failed, and second-hand car prices did not represent the value of the car. Evidence suggests that recommended resale price fixing enables even the most inefficient car dealers to make adequate returns. The OFT backed us on volume discounts, and questioned bonuses as a way of recompensing dealers and discouraging parallel importing.

Having referred the matter to the Competition Commission, the OFT took on Volvo. With a robustness not usually associated with regulatory organisations, it accused Volvo of being involved in disgraceful practices and of fixing prices and penalising distributors who would not toe the line. The impression was that the OFT would have liked to go the distance with Volvo, but was unable to do so because of legal limitations on immediate action. All that it did, which was in some ways disappointing, although understandable, was to tell Volvo that it had been caught. Volvo said that it was sorry and would not do the same thing again.

By 1 March 2000, the OFT will have the power to levy penalties of up to 10 per cent. of turnover on any company caught doing what Volvo had done. Moreover, a company could be liable to prosecution if it tried to interfere with the inquiry.

The Competition Commission for its part will report in December, but, in an almost ground-breaking approach towards establishing a broader view, it has already indicated its first thoughts and sought opinions on various matters that coincide with the recommendations made by my colleagues and myself, which were broadly agreed with the OFT.

The Competition Commission is considering forcing manufacturers to supply cars to virtually any dealer, ending territorial allocations, abolishing recommended retail prices and other controls, allowing dealers to choose whether they wish to repair, abolishing preferential fleet discounts, and reducing manufacturers' power to end dealerships arbitrarily, within a redefined block exemption. That seems to be its thinking. We have not yet had its final report, but we have had a clear indication of the direction that it will probably take.

In response, the SMMT stated that the separation of sales and servicing is not in the customer's interest and probably will not reduce costs, and that the block exemption is not responsible for price variations in the UK and throughout Europe. The SMMT did not go through the usual litany—tax, wrong side of the road, and the other aspects that have been mentioned this morning—but it suggested that the Competition Commission had not thought the matter through properly or understood the industry. Perhaps the truth is that the Competition Commission has understood it too well, and that the SMMT is running out of places to hide.

Ford, one of the leading members, responded by inviting people to buy its cars and promising to reimburse them if it later decided to cut prices. In effect, Ford was saying that it would have to cut prices, but did not propose to do so immediately and certainly would not get involved in a price war. Vauxhall, on the other hand, recognised that it is now possible to make purchases via the internet. The car companies are not slow. The erstwhile Mandelson message about e-commerce obviously got through to Luton. Vauxhall has offered a £1,000 price cut on a new car purchased through the net.

What about the dealers—the men who provided specialist advice and help, who allowed prospective customers to sit in the leather-upholstered car, even if they wanted only the one with felt-covered seats, and who were solicitous to a fault about customers' requirements? They will still be responsible for handing customers the keys. In the motor trade, dealers are akin to the nurse in the maternity ward handing the child in swaddling clothes to the mother. That link with the past will remain. The truth, however, is that Vauxhall could not give a toss about its dealers if it is obliged to cut prices, especially if the cheapest way of doing so is through the net, ignoring the dealers.

Suffice it to say that, by and large, the dealers are not impressed, and they are beginning to break ranks with the motor trade. They recognise that the manufacturers' stranglehold is almost a thing of the past. Dealers have been unanimous in their opposition to the Consumers Association for having the audacity to propose setting up a not-for-profit internet service that will enable people to obtain advice and assistance in purchasing cars from abroad.

That is a fairly modest attempt by the Consumers Association, but it is a logical step, providing a recognised means, using the net and taking advantage of the opportunities of e-commerce to allow the public to get in on the act. It is a helpful start, which will be followed by other purchasers and organisations. It is clear that few industries have responded to criticism with such characteristic arrogance and disdain.

For once, however, consumers are fighting back. They resent having to pay £12,870 for a British-built Rover 214 in Britain when in France, according to European Commission figures, the road price is £8,217. It costs £4,650 more to buy a British car in Britain than to buy one in France. We, the British public, resent having to pay more for 62 of the 74 main types of car. We resent the poor service and the shoddy maintenance, which the block exemption protects and sustains. Our car industry employs many thousands of honest and dedicated people. Their products stand comparison with any in the world, but they are depressed and embarrassed when the industry to which most of them have devoted their lives is selling their fellow citizens short.

The Competition Commission is to report soon; its warning shots have already been fired. The Government know the arguments; I know that my hon. Friend the

Minister has been listening. The Select Committee was unanimous and there was a clear view that rip-off Britain must stop. Let us start with the car industry: a car is the biggest single purchase that members of the public make, apart from taking out a mortgage to buy their home. People usually live in their home for a long time, but the pain, anxiety and suffering of buying a car is repeated every three or four years when they buy another.

The Government have said that they are prepared to take action on mortgages and to protect the home buyer. Let us see them show the same commitment and support for the consumer that they have shown in that area, and let us stop rip-off Britain in car showrooms and car factories.

11.22 am

Mr. Norman Baker (Lewes): I welcome the presentation made by the hon. Member for Ochil (Mr. O'Neill), the Chairman of the Select Committee on Trade and Industry. It is almost impossible to disagree with much of what he said and I hope that that suggests that there will be unanimity across the House as we try to deal with what is a genuine problem.

Rip-off Britain must indeed stop. Let me make it clear that the Liberal Democrats fully support that concept. We believe that it is in the interests of society as a whole for the consumer to be looked after. That is done by achieving diversity of supply and ending artificial and inappropriate distortions in the marketplace. We want a fairer market and if we achieve that we will have proper competition, which will be to the benefit of all. The present pseudo-cartel arrangements benefit no one apart from those who operate them.

Having been reshuffled across from the environment brief, I should say that environmental benefits would flow from the course of action that the hon. Member for Ochil described. It cannot be good for the environment if people have to disappear abroad to buy cars and then drive them back again—extra transport movements that would otherwise not be required. It could be argued that discounting or bringing car prices back down to a realistic level in the European Union would artificially encourage people to buy cars. However, new cars are far less polluting than older vehicles and high car prices in this country act as a disincentive to people to buy cars, which will disbenefit both the economy and the environment because people will be encouraged to use more polluting cars for longer. The pollution caused by a 20-year-old car is of huge compared with that caused by a new car, so the hon. Gentleman was absolutely right to make that case.

The Consumers Association investigation found that Britons pay the highest price for 60 of the 74 best-selling cars in the EU. As the hon. Gentleman said, the estimates suggest that the average excess amount is more than £3,000. Overall, UK motorists are being overcharged by £6 billion a year. That huge sum, which is being kept by those in the motor trade, would not be available to them were the artificial cartel arrangements removed. The Chairman of the Select Committee referred to particular examples. My example is a Rover 414 built in Birmingham, which costs about £3,000 or £4,000 more here than in Portugal. The hon. Gentleman referred to France, but the same situation applies to other countries in the EU.

The whole basis of the EU is the securing of level playing fields across Europe—it has always been committed to free trade—and I cannot understand how on earth that body, and the European Commission in particular, could grant the motor vehicle industry a block exemption from article 85(1) of the treaty of Rome and then extend it in 1995. How could it possibly conclude that that was in the interests of the consumer? It seems to be contrary to the very essence of the EU. I hope that that exemption, which is currently being reviewed, will end in 2002; in my view, it is indefensible in any terms.

The Competition Commission has condemned those arrangements, as well as appointed dealerships, which are an odd way of approaching the sale of any product. It would be very odd to go into a record shop only to be told, "This is an EMI record shop so you can buy the Beatles here, but not the Rolling Stones." I am sorry if I am not very up to date; perhaps I should have mentioned Blur and Pulp. When they send down their envelope, I expect that the *Hansard* reporters will want to know who Blur and Pulp are. No, they are shaking their heads.

As the hon. Member for Ochil said, the excuses have largely been dropped. The one about right-hand drive cars is nonsensical. How expensive is it to produce a right-hand drive car?

Mr. John Burnett (Torridge and West Devon): I have done a little personal research on this matter, which was fairly easy to do. For a UK exporter of Mercedes-Benz cars, for example, the disparity in price between a left-hand and right-hand drive is approximately £400 or £500 at the very most.

Mr. Baker: I am grateful to my hon. Friend who, if anything, overstates the case, though he is no doubt being generous to the Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders. Certainly the disparity is not £3,000 or £4,000, which is the disparity between UK prices and those found elsewhere in the EU.

We have also heard the nonsense about the strong pound and the impact of currency value. Presumably prices should go up and down when the value of currency goes up and down, but it does not seem to happen that way. That is a bit like supermarket prices for farm goods: we are told that supermarkets have to deal with a strong pound, which is why their prices have gone up when prices have gone down at the farm gate. That does not add up and some people are maximising their personal profits at the expense of the consumer. That is not something that any party in the House would seek to defend.

I want the arrangements to be changed. I want an end to the block exemption and an end to rip-off Britain, and I want a fair deal for those who want to buy cars or any other commodity in this country. The House must champion the consumer cause. The Liberal Democrats will certainly do so, and I hope that there will be unanimous support for the Select Committee report.

11.28 am

Mr. Lindsay Hoyle (Chorley): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Ochil (Mr. O'Neill), the Chairman of the Select Committee, who has ensured that we can have a fair and open debate, but I am sorry that the Conservative Benches are empty because we ought to discuss properly the important subject of the great British rip-off. There are no two ways about it: we in this country are totally ripped off from start to finish and people who

[Mr. Lindsay Hoyle]

buy a new car are paying way over the odds. We are subsidising the rest of Europe and the rest of the world market.

The Ford Mondeo is supposed to be the car of the world—built to be bought anywhere throughout the world. What do we find? It is up to 53 per cent. cheaper in Spain than in the UK. The Mondeo does not seem to be the car of the world, after all. The Great British customer is subsidising the rest of the world and those car products so that Ford, Nissan or whoever may achieve a percentage market share throughout the world. That is what we are paying for, and it has to end: it is not acceptable and we should not put up with it.

I agree with the examples given by the hon. Member for Lewes (Mr. Baker). The car that we buy may have a compact disc player, and in some cases we pay twice as much for CDs. Spare parts are another example. People think that they will derive some benefit somewhere because they pay so much more for their car, then end up paying 30 or 40 per cent. more for spares as well. The car and everything on it are expensive commodities. A new car is probably the second most expensive purchase that people make—after the purchase of a property. It should therefore be pointed out that, if people buy new cars, it is better for the environment if they have lean-burn engines so that there is less pollution. The price of new cars should be brought down and the standard of MOTs lifted so that we get rid of polluting vehicles and everyone has the ability to upgrade to a better car. That would be more in keeping with our environmental aims.

There are many gains to be made from selling cars more cheaply. I cannot understand manufacturers' reluctance to reduce the price of cars. They seem to feel that it is all right for people in other European countries to have cheap cars, but not for people in this country. Although, if cars were cheaper, our factories would not make as much money per vehicle, they would sell many more vehicles, which would ensure that profits did not fall and more people were employed in the manufacture of cars in this country because the turnover would be greater. We should consider those benefits. It is naive to believe that simple gains can be made by inflating prices; that is not the way forward. It is not good for British business or jobs.

The time has come to put British workers first. We should create more jobs through better pricing. The price of cars is just one good example of the British rip-off—the price of CDs is another. I could list many products in respect of which people are ripped off, and the time has come to end it. Yet another example is the price of motorcycles—part of the motor industry. This country used to manufacture great motorcycles. Now, however, motorcycles—even a Triumph built in this country—can be exported to America, taken out of the crate, taken round the circuit a couple of times, put back in the crate, shipped back to this country, and it is still cheaper than buying it through an official dealer. A Nissan built in Sunderland and sent all the way to Japan, then shipped back, is still cheaper than if bought direct from the Nissan dealership in the UK. That just proves that a cartel is operating. The cartel must end—there are no two ways about it.

As the pound got stronger, did we see Volkswagens coming in more cheaply? No, the price actually went up. We cannot and should not tolerate that. We are always told about the benefits of Europe. Instead of always taking the disadvantages from Europe, it is time to take the benefits, one of which is better pricing across all products.

It is no use fining companies. Volkswagen did not mind paying £50 million when it was found to be in breach of EU law. Instead, we should impose mandatory prison sentences. Company directors might then think twice and realise that they cannot rip the British public off in that way. When the good consumers of Chorley go to their dealer, he cannot offer a higher discount because he will lose his franchise, so I do not blame the dealers. Dealerships could improve, but ultimately they operate in a straitjacket: if they do not accept the manufacturer's rules, they lose their dealership. Thus consumers in Chorley do not get a fair price for the product.

The only alternative is to buy in Europe and ship the car back to the UK, or buy on the internet. Vauxhall accepts the fact that people can save £1,000 by using the internet. Why do not Vauxhall, Ford and other manufacturers act as honest brokers by slashing prices tomorrow and ensuring that consumers in Chorley and the rest of the country can benefit from cheap prices, as consumers do in Europe?

11.34 am

Mr. Bob Blizzard (Waveney): I shall say just a few words because the point has already been powerfully made by my hon. Friend the Member for Ochil (Mr. O'Neill). He covered all the necessary ground and I would find it hard to believe that anyone in the Chamber today would disagree with what he said.

One way to measure the degree of the rip-off in car pricing in this country is to look at the price of cars as a percentage of annual income. The price of a new car is more than the annual income of many people. If one wants to buy a new car—or even a nearly new car—one must devote a huge percentage of one's annual income to it. It is a much higher percentage than in Europe or north America.

In their efforts to persuade people to use their cars less, the Government have drawn analogies with Germany, where there is greater ownership but where people use their cars less. It is difficult to convince people in this country that they should not use their car to capacity when they have invested such a huge proportion of their annual income, or their income over many years, in buying it in the first place. The Government's transport policy would benefit from getting car pricing right.

My experience of one-make car dealers is that they are not wonderful salesmen. Most salespeople for different products target people and follow-through. When I have wandered around forecourts looking at cars—I have never bought a new car, but I go round to see what is on offer—I have found that there is very little follow-through. It strikes me that many dealers are happy to make their money each week or month by selling just a few cars rather than charging less to see whether they can sell more. A friend of mine sells in the secondhand car market and I have watched his progress over the years. By knocking down the prices, he can sell more cars and make a living as well as anybody else, and customers benefit. Most new car dealers sit in their showroom all week and make their money by selling just one vehicle.

My hon. Friend the Member for Chorley (Mr. Hoyle) mentioned the cost of spare parts, particularly parts of the bodywork and trim of a car. My hon. Friend the Member for Ochil said that the nightmare of buying a new car recurs every four or five years. Those of us who have never bought a new car do not go through that, but we experience a nightmare every time someone knocks into our car. I wonder how many other hon. Members have parked their car in a station car park, only to find on their return at the end of the week that the piece of plastic that covers the rear light has been smashed. One then goes to the dealer to see how much such a tiny item costs. Usually the price is colossal, outrageous and unfair.

Mr. Baker: I absolutely agree with the hon. Gentleman. Another example of a rip-off is when the consumer has to buy a huge replacement part such as a sealed unit or computer-operated unit. Whereas previously one could have bought a bulb, one now has to buy a sealed headlight and the cost is far higher. It is also much more wasteful in environmental terms.

Mr. Blizzard: I absolutely agree with the hon. Gentleman. Until a few years ago, I tried to carry out some repairs by myself, but the invention of all kinds of weird clips and specialist tools now prevents me from performing a simple repair. Various ways have been devised to continue to rip off the motorist.

Once when my car engine malfunctioned, I was told that it was caused by the leads—my car had leads, plugs and other conventional things. I took the car to my friend, whom I trust and who has a good garage—I shall not mention his name—who told me, "I have some leads for you, Bob, although the ones for your car would have cost £120. These are the same leads as those for the Vectra and they are half the price." The manufacturers obviously think that people with a slightly larger car will pay more. That kind of practice needs looking into. Will the Minister therefore say whether an investigation into the pricing of spare parts is part of the Competition Commission's remit? If it is not, could it be something else for the commission to consider? Plainly, not merely a new car but motoring itself has become far too expensive.

The cost is completely out of kilter with the rest of Europe and the world. We are being ripped off. It would be an important victory for the British consumer if, at the Government's instigation, the inquiry brought some justice and fairness into the prices of new cars.

11.40 am

Mr. Nick Gibb (Bognor Regis and Littlehampton): I add my congratulations to the hon. Member for Ochil (Mr. O'Neill) on securing this important debate and I welcome the Minister of State, Department of Trade and Industry to her new position. It is nice to be opposite her once again so soon after leaving the shadow Treasury team.

Real concern exists about the higher prices paid for cars in this country compared with the rest of Europe and the Opposition share that concern. The European Commission's latest six-monthly price survey shows that the United Kingdom is the most expensive market for 61 of the 72 best-selling models in the European Union, followed closely by Ireland, which was referred to in the debate. Price differentials in excess of 20 per cent. have been found for all manufacturers throughout the European Union and for 16 out of 72 models there are variances of about 40 per cent. in price.

The Opposition's approach is that the Government should deal firmly with any cartel or restrictive practice, if that is the conclusion of the Competition Commission. However, it is important for hon. Members to understand the reasons for the discrepancies before jumping in with remedies and regulations. Those reasons are many and varied.

The Select Committee on Trade and Industry, which the hon. Member for Ochil chairs, states in paragraph 38 of its report:

"A number of factors account for the high prices paid by the UK consumer for new cars. Exchange rates and taxation levels influence the validity of comparisons and affect manufacturers' pricing strategies. The unique elements of the UK market—particularly the power of the fleet operators and the size of the second-hand car market—account for some of the differentials from EU prices".

It goes on to conclude something different, but I wanted to quote that section initially.

Mr. Burnett: I hope that the hon. Gentleman will agree that disparities due to taxation are grossly exaggerated. For example, compare a car that is manufactured and sold in Germany with the same car in the United Kingdom—the value added tax disparity is 1.5 per cent.

Mr. Gibb: My point is that the reasons for the price discrepancies are many and varied and I listed some. There are others and I will come to those.

The 1992 Monopolies and Mergers Commission report, which was also referred to in the debate, cited those factors as the principal causes of the price differentials. The Select Committee went on to conclude, differently from the 1992 MMC report, that the dealer network—the selective and exclusive distribution arrangement—was the "key factor" behind higher UK prices. That led the Committee to conclude that it

"can see no justification for retention of the block exemption and recommend that it be not renewed."

That same conclusion is reflected in the remedies letter that was issued by Competition Commission a couple of weeks ago, which states:

"The Commission has not reached final conclusions on any aspect of the inquiry. Its present view is that the selective and exclusive distribution system in its existing form has a number of disadvantages and that, as a result, prices of new cars in the UK are higher than they would be in a less restrictive environment."

Interestingly, that letter goes on to state:

"the SED system may be contributing to a lack of arbitrage which is enabling the continuation of significant price differences between the UK and other EU member states."

We need to ask ourselves why that arbitrage takes place in the European Union, but not between the continent of Europe and the UK, given that the block exemption applies throughout the EU and SEDs exist in Europe as well as the UK. The initial response of the Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders to that remedies letter makes that very point. It states:

"It is disappointing to note that while the Competition Commission clearly fully understands that Block Exemption is an EU policy matter, it fails to grasp that Block Exemption cannot therefore itself be held responsible for price variations . . . across Europe and at work in the UK."

[Mr. Gibb]

That is a valid point. Surely, as the exemption applies to the whole of Europe, it cannot be the only factor that has led to the differential in prices.

On a cautionary note to the Government, when the Competition Commission reports in December, will they respond rapidly? There is much uncertainty in the industry and a rapid response would be helpful to put an end to it.

The answer to the dilemma of why the block exemption is causing price differentials in the UK but not in Europe might lie somewhere between the opposing views of the SMMT and the Select Committee. It revolves around arbitrage, which was highlighted in the letter from the Competition Commission. SED might have delivered higher prices in the UK but not in Europe simply because of the practical difficulties that a UK consumer faces in buying a car from a European supplier. It is difficult to shop around when that means crossing the channel rather than driving across a nearby border. The fact that the UK consumer needs a right-hand drive car, is not the overall reason, but it is a factor making it slightly more difficult for that consumer to go to a dealer in Belgium or France. Our company car fleets have an effect by raising expectations for higher specifications in cars.

As a result of the impact of all those factors on the ability of the UK consumer to shop across EU borders, there is a blockage in the arbitrage that should take place with such glaring price differentials. We are now seeing some arbitrage with the Consumers Association's moves to provide it.

It is worth noting that Britain has such a large company car fleet because company cars were used to avoid the strictures on pay rises during the 1970s—the era of prices and incomes policies. The company car was a way to deliver a pay rise without appearing to do so. It was a response to Government interference in the free market. In turn, it has had a lasting effect on the free market in new car sales, which ought to provide a salutary lesson to Ministers that when they respond to all the reports and investigations into this serious problem, they should not simply make matters worse for the consumer by adding further distortions to the market that will damage consumer interests in the long term. Competition and the free market are the consumers' friend. Ministers who reach for the statute book add to costs and generate unforeseen consequences, which invariably result in the consumer receiving a worse deal.

The Government need to look to themselves to find out whether and by how much they contribute to higher prices in the UK, not merely in the motor industry but in other areas, for example through higher taxes. The Minister is a great supporter of the climate change levy. What effect is it having and will it have on the manufacture of cars in this country? There are more and more regulations. The proposed new directive on end of vehicle life in its current retrospective form would add hugely to the costs of UK car manufacturers and thus to UK car prices.

Clearly, if the Competition Commission finds a cartel or restrictive practices, the Government must take firm action, but I counsel caution about precipitate regulatory measures, which would in the long term add costs and restrict and distort the market further, thus further damaging the interests of the consumer.

11.49 am

The Minister for Small Business and E-Commerce (Ms Patricia Hewitt): First, I apologise to you Mr. Deputy Speaker and, through you, to the House for being fractionally late for this important and interesting debate. I join my hon. Friends and hon. Members in congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Ochil (Mr. O'Neill) on securing this important debate and on doing so so early in our resumed Session.

Through you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I also thank not only my hon. Friend the Member for Ochil, but other members of the Select Committee on Trade and Industry for the inquiry into an issue that has caused great public consternation and is a matter of such important public interest. We heard a thoughtful and wide-ranging speech from my hon. Friend, as we would expect, in which he considered each of the arguments advanced to explain or justify the higher car prices in the United Kingdom. In fact, we almost had a round-the-world tour, as my hon. Friend admitted. He comprehensively demolished each one of them.

We also heard a thoughtful and interesting speech from the hon. Member for Lewes (Mr. Baker), a forceful speech from my hon. Friend the Member for Chorley (Mr. Hoyle) and an interesting speech from my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Mr. Blizzard), who rightly drew attention to the importance of the Government's policy of promoting the ownership of cars, especially smaller and cleaner cars, while helping car owners to use their cars more sensitively and in a way that does less environmental damage. I am also rather pleased to say that he shares with me a deep and extensive technical knowledge of motor car maintenance.

We then heard a thoughtful speech, as ever, from the hon. Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton (Mr. Gibb). I thought that I had left the hon. Gentleman safely in the confines of the Standing Committee on the Financial Services and Markets Bill, but it is a pleasure to see him here on the Opposition Front Bench.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ochil (Mr. O'Neill) called for action to protect consumers. The Government are already acting to protect consumers. We want to make sure that, for cars as for all other services and goods, consumers get a fair deal within open and competitive markets. That is why we have already introduced and secured the passage of the new Competition Act 1998. That is why we have created the new Competition Commission, with much tougher powers to fine companies for anti-competitive behaviour. I have to observe that, although the hon. Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton spoke, as one might expect, of his devotion to free markets, it was the Labour Government not the last Conservative Government, who introduced the Competition Act and have created the Competition Commission with the powers that it needs to do the job on behalf of the consumer.

There are other forces making for greater competition within the marketplace. I want to touch on one that was mentioned in passing. We are seeing the beginnings of electronic commerce and shopping for cars on the internet. I have a role as the new Minister for Competitiveness, Business and E-Commerce. As we see—already in the United Kingdom—more consumers shopping on the internet, so we will see a powerful competitive force bearing down on retailers and

manufacturers alike. The more transparent information consumers have, the easier it becomes for them to access car purchases in other parts of the European Union and the more manufacturers will have to respond. I welcome the fact that one or two have already seen the writing on the wall and are making their models available to internet shoppers.

Mr. O'Neill: Will my hon. Friend take account of the fact that within government there seems to be a varying response to the attractiveness of the internet? The internet does not seem to have reached Swansea yet. A firm in my constituency about which I am in correspondence with the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions is having considerable difficulty getting a rapid response from Swansea once it has obtained the car from abroad after purchasing it on the internet on behalf of a British customer. It seems that things get clogged up in Swansea. Will she look into whether Swansea is on line or, if not, on the ball? It does not seem to be at present.

Ms Hewitt: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising that extremely important point. The Prime Minister is determined that we should drive the benefits of digitilisation and electronic access right through government. He has set stretching targets for access to electronic government services, and that certainly includes Swansea. I know from my previous role in the Treasury that the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency is already engaged in an extensive upgrading of its information technology in order that it can—this is important to the point that my hon. Friend makes—achieve on-line, real-time connections with car manufacturers, dealers and importers and deal with the very blockage that he specifies. I certainly undertake to follow up the specific point that he raises, if he will let me have further details.

In addition, last May we announced plans to lift restrictions on the import of cars from outside the European marketplace. That, too, will result in increased competition and a better deal for consumers. As a result of that decision, many cars will cost thousands of pounds less than they do at the moment. Some 55,000 cut-price cars will be allowed into the United Kingdom between March and the end of next year. From January 2001, the limit on non-EU imports will be completely removed.

We welcome the expiry at the end of this year of the voluntary restrictions on imports of new Japanese vehicles that was provided for in the 1992 agreement between the EU and Japan. Once again, the transition to a truly free market in Japanese cars will give customers increased choice and competition. It will also encourage Japanese companies to expand their activities here and in other countries within the EU.

As has already been said, in March this year the Director General of Fair Trading, after an extensive inquiry, referred the supply of new motor cars in the United Kingdom by manufacturers and wholesalers to the Competition Commission. He expressed his view forcefully that the market was not working properly and in particular that there was an imbalance of power between manufacturers and dealers that was distorting and impeding competition. In July, the Director General of Fair Trading also concluded that some Volvo dealers, to which hon. Members have referred, had not been offering discounts beyond set levels. An agreement and an admission was reached with Volvo which made it clear that such restrictive cartels would not be permitted in the future.

We now have the Competition Commission investigation. Earlier in October, it issued its remedies statement. It is a discussion document and the commission has invited comments from the industry, consumers and other stakeholders, but it has suggested a number of possible remedies, some of which have implications for the European regulations on the block exemption. I shall come back to that issue in a moment.

The Competition Commission has also suggested that, for instance, suppliers should be prohibited from recommending retail prices; that they should be required to offer franchised dealers who wish to buy cars on firm sale terms no less favourable than those offered to fleet customers—something that would make a real difference to the prices made available to individual consumers. It has suggested that suppliers should be prohibited from discriminating in the terms offered to contract hire companies and that dealers should be able to opt for an equivalent reduction in the wholesale price in place of the bundled financial and other benefits often offered by suppliers with their cars.

The report from the Competition Commission will be delivered to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State in December and he will decide what action, if any, is appropriate if the commission makes adverse findings. We will publish the report as soon as we possibly can. I certainly take account of the comments made by the hon. Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton and other hon. Members about the need for action following the report, depending what it says, as rapidly as possible.

My hon. Friend the Member for Waveney asked whether the Competition Commission inquiry specifically covered spare parts or after-sales service. The investigation is into the supply of new cars so it does not, I understand, cover the issue that he raises. But the commission is certainly aware that the supply of parts is an important part of the dealer's business and so has some bearing on its investigation.

The Government's general approach was set out in our response to the Select Committee's report. As I have already said, the answer to the difficulties lies in the development of an effective, transparent, competitive market. We need distribution arrangements that promote competition. As I have already explained, the Competition Commission is specifically examining the selective and exclusive distribution system that is used by car manufacturers. Its findings will help to inform the Government's response and contribution to the European Commission's evaluation of the block exemption regulation which must be completed by the end of next year.

It is essential to have open and effective markets throughout Europe. We seek to ensure that any infringements of European Commission competition law that restrict imports into the United Kingdom are vigorously pursued by the Commission. It is also important that we have within this and other markets demanding and informed consumers. My hon. Friend the Member for Ochil was right to stress that, increasingly, we have demanding and informed consumers. Whatever the short-term pain to the manufacturers, demanding and well-informed consumers are an important part of ensuring that we have healthily competitive markets.

[Ms Hewitt]

It is also essential that we have an efficient and innovative car manufacturing and distribution sector. My Department has worked for many years with the motor industry to improve efficiency and innovation in the supply chain, but also to consider how the distribution system can be modernised and improved.

As the hon. Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton said, the block exemption applies throughout Europe; it does not bear down solely upon British consumers. The European Commission is required to draw up a report evaluating that exemption by the end of next year, taking particular account of price differentials between member states and the quality of service to final consumers. The Commission has recently circulated a series of questionnaires to interested parties throughout the EU, seeking information and views on the workings of the system.

My officials recently met the Commission team undertaking the review and we have impressed upon it the importance that we in the United Kingdom attach to the issue. I want to ensure that the review is undertaken in as transparent a way as possible and gives the fullest possible opportunity for all interested parties in the United Kingdom to make their voices heard. I hope that the Commission, if it has not already done so, pays close attention to the Select Committee's report as well as to the Government's response. The Competition Commission's inquiry's findings will provide invaluable material for that review.

But we should recognise that restrictive practices are not confined to the United Kingdom. In January 1998, the European Commission fined Volkswagen 102 million euro for breaking rules on cross-border trade in motor vehicles. The matter allegedly involved the company trying to obstruct sales of its cars in Italy to non-Italian purchasers, mainly from Austria and Germany, who wanted to take advantage of lower pre-tax prices there. That ruling is subject to appeal. But similar cases have been brought against DaimlerChrysler and Opel's Dutch subsidiary by the Commission, again involving alleged improper restrictions on cross-border car sales. More recently, the Commission has begun investigations into Renault and Peugeot.

I assure the House that the Government are committed to a policy under which British car consumers will get good value for a good product. We have strengthened competition authorities which are already taking the necessary action to deal with any evidence of restrictive or anti-competitive behaviour. The Government are committed to strong competition and powerful, well-informed consumers. The European Commission is already taking action where restrictive practices are seen to operate in the EU, and we now have the review of the block exemption to which we and I hope other hon. Members will also contribute.

All that, as well as the technological changes to which I have already referred, means that we shall see an increasingly competitive car market not just within the United Kingdom but throughout the EU. That will be to the benefit of British consumers, but it will also be to the benefit of British and European car manufacturers alike.

12.6 pm

Sitting suspended.

Royal Hospital Haslar

12.30 pm

On resuming—

Mr. Peter Viggers (Gosport): I am grateful for the opportunity to raise an issue of overwhelming importance to my constituency and to everyone in the armed forces. I congratulate the Minister of State on his promotion, and look forward to seeing him in Gosport when he visits Haslar hospital on 2 November. He will find that loyalty to the armed forces—Army, Navy and Air Force—is second to none in Gosport. He will be greatly impressed by the fervour with which local residents wish the hospital to be retained.

Although I welcome the Minister, it would have been appropriate if he had been accompanied by a colleague from the Department of Health. This matter has two aspects—defence, and health and the local civilian population. We can agree on two points. First, we can agree on the importance of defence medical services. Medicine is an integral part of defence. Every ship carries medically trained staff and every four-man Army stick going out on patrol—wherever it may be—has one man who is trained in medicine. The medical background involves proper training somewhere, and there must be a centre of medical excellence.

That centre is Haslar hospital and the accompanying Blockhouse, which contains the Royal College of Defence Medicine. Between them, they provide background basic training for everyone in the armed forces. Specialist staff are also trained in other hospitals, but the centre is Haslar.

The second point on which we can agree is that defence medical services have been through an exceptionally difficult period. The Government's document "Defence Medical Services: A Strategy for the Future" points out that the armed forces are manned by only 50 per cent. of the doctors required and only 75 per cent. of the nurses. That is a serious situation. With the collapse of the Berlin wall and the end of the cold war, it was possible and appropriate to reduce our armed forces. Across the board, the forces have been reduced by about 25 to 30 per cent., but the reduction in medical services has been greater, at around 40 per cent.

The number of hospitals in the armed services has gone from seven, to five, to three, to one in a surprisingly short time. In 1994, the Government, knowing all the facts and having investigated the subject with extreme care, produced "Defence Cost Study 15", which suggested that there should be a single tri-service hospital. After a great deal of further discussion, it was decided that that hospital should be Haslar, then renamed the Royal Hospital Haslar. It was proposed that the hospital should be increased from 200 beds to 375. The fact that that was never done is the root cause of our present difficulties.

The Select Committee on Defence, of which I was a member, has been much quoted after saying in February 1997:

> "We can only report to the House our firm view that the state of morale at all levels of the Defence Medical Services is lower than we have ever encountered in the armed forces."

Some other criticism has been similarly quoted, but a sentence that I helped to write, at paragraph 71 of that report, has been less quoted:

"In view of the fundamental changes which have been made over the last five years, nothing would be achieved by imposing on the Defence Medical Services any further structural changes."

We were adamant that that was the case. It would be quite wrong to deal with defence medical services by trying to change them dramatically, yet that is exactly what the Government did with their astounding decision in December 1998 to close Haslar.

Broad reasons have been given for the closure. First, the Ministry of Defence hospital units at Peterborough, Derriford and Frimley have proved a good means of training and retaining medical staff. The Ministry has said that MDHUs work well. They may work satisfactorily when it comes to providing medicine, and it may be that they are adequate for training staff. However, they do not give armed forces personnel what they joined the forces for. I talk to many people who say that the MDHUs are all very well, but—they always use the same words—they are not what they joined for. If the Government rely too much on MDHUs, they will lose even more staff.

The Ministry's second reason for closing Haslar is that there has been a change of strategy by the local NHS trust, which is in a period of some movement. Queen Alexandra hospital, Cosham, which has 600 beds, is in the process of taking over the acute function of St. Mary's hospital, Portsmouth, which has 550. That will provide turmoil enough for one period. It is not thought that the new construction, backed by the private finance initiative, will be commissioned until 2005. We face five years of intense movement involving Portsmouth hospitals. The PFI bid does not include a military element. The Minister will find, if he is accurately advised by those in the locality, that the Portsmouth area is most uncertain about accepting an MDHU at Cosham. Nor has the Ministry yet got round to specifying what the unit might be.

The third reason given for the closure of Haslar is that the running costs are quite high. In a letter to me, placed in the Library following a parliamentary question about the costs of building new military hospital facilities to replace Royal Hospital Haslar, the Minister wrote:

"As far as building costs are concerned, these will fall to the private sector partner . . . The Ministry of Defence will not pay direct running costs since Portsmouth Hospitals Trust will recover these costs through its treatment charges".

I think that the Minister was saying that the costs of replacing Haslar would be nil. That does not bear proper financial scrutiny.

The tide is turning as regards ideas about the size of hospitals. Recently, it has been believed that larger hospitals are more efficient. However, I refer the Minister to an authoritative article in last week's *British Medical Journal*, which noted:

"The literature shows quite conclusively that there can be no general presumption that larger units produce better outcomes for patients."

The summary of the article says:

"Service planners would do well to give more prominence to the importance of ensuring that hospital services are local and easily accessible."

The consequences of closure will be dramatic for defence. Already, there is overstretch in the armed forces, as the Minister well knows. The overstretch in defence medical services, which have requirements to man areas including Bosnia, Cyprus, the Falklands, Northern Ireland and others, is dramatic. Only one figure is required as an example: the establishment for orthopaedic surgeons at Haslar is eight; the hospital had six, but five have resigned.

What the Government plan for defence medical services might work. But it will not work next year, or in three or five years' time. I submit that it will take 25 years to rebuild the defence medical services and the consultancy skills of those leaving them. That serious national problem has an immediate local focus for Gosport and the surrounding area. Haslar is effectively the district general hospital for Gosport, and it has superb facilities. In the past 10 years, £35 million has been spent there, and it has excellent MRI and CT scanners, a hyperbaric unit and a much needed accident and emergency unit in an area where road access to the next closest hospital can be slow.

Mr. David Chidgey (Eastleigh): I have long and close family associations with the hon. Gentleman's constituency. I should like to put it on the record that I know how valuable the emergency services at Haslar are. A member of my family owes her life to the fact that after a serious road accident she was able to go to Haslar for excellent long-term treatment which restored her to health. In the absence of those services, the road link to the Queen Alexandria hospital in Portsmouth is totally inadequate for getting people in emergencies to hospital in time.

Mr. Viggers: The hon. Gentleman has been staunch in his support of Haslar, as have colleagues from all parties. I am grateful to him for his support today. He knows, because he was there, that the reaction to the closure of Haslar in the Gosport area was instinctive and dramatic. When I announced a rally and march, I thought that we might get a few hundred people, but 22,000 turned out. The Library cannot find a record of a rally or march of that size anywhere about the closure of a hospital. Petitions were signed by 250,000 people. I presented a parliamentary petition signed by 45,000. We had "Save Haslar" in lights and we have received thousands of letters. The reaction has been overwhelming.

The more people locally look at the issue, the worse they find it. Travel from Gosport to Queen Alexandra hospital, Cosham is either by bus, boat and then two more buses, one of which goes once an hour, or by the other way, which is longer, by bus and similarly inconvenient. Car parking at that hospital is notoriously difficult and a taxi costs £11. My constituents who might have to travel there as patients or to see friends or family would find it incredibly inconvenient.

The area is calculated to need 13 intensive care beds. There were 10 such beds at Queen Alexandra hospital and four at Haslar. The Haslar beds have closed, so we now have 10 of the estimated 13 required. On accident and emergency cover, almost 20,000 people are seen each year at Haslar. Of those, on the health authority's own figures, it is estimated that 5,000 will need to go each year to Queen Alexandra hospital by ambulance. That is 13 visits a day and a dedicated ambulance will be required simply to run A and E cases to Cosham.

I asked the local ambulance trust if I could do a practice run. I thought of simulating rushing a heart attack case to Cosham at 7.30 am. The word "rush" is misleading.

[Mr. Viggers]

because the notorious Gosport bottleneck, with only two main roads to take people in and out of the peninsula, would probably mean a journey of 45 minutes. There is no doubt that lives will be lost on the roads between Gosport and Queen Alexandra hospital if Haslar is to close.

There has been a local consultation procedure about the alternative to an accident and emergency unit at Haslar. The health authority suggested a nurse-led casualty unit somewhere in the Gosport area. The response to that was vehement and unanimous: thousands of people said no. The health authority has now advertised for a nurse for an exciting new venture: a nurse-led casualty unit in the Gosport peninsula. The Minister looks surprised. It may be that he is unsighted, as civil servants say, on the issue. It would have been helpful to have one of his colleagues here to advise him on the point.

Ministers have given every kind of assurance. The document in my hand shows their happy smiling faces promising that Haslar's services will be saved. All the assurances that I have here are worthless because there is no doubt that health services on the Gosport peninsula will deteriorate if Haslar hospital is closed. What a mess. My constituents want me to express that not in sorrow but in anger and frustration that Ministers do not appear to be listening to local views and the health authority appears not to be taking account of the representations that have been made. There is no doubt that if this hospital closes, lives will be lost.

I know that the Minister has his brief, prepared for him by his officials. He may well believe, on the advice that he has been given, that he is doing the right thing. I have been a Minister, too, and, unlike every current defence Minister, I have served in the armed forces. I know the special loyalty and deference paid to Ministers and senior officers. Not for nothing was the television series called "Yes, Minister". When a general or admiral asks a man or woman in the armed services, "Everything all right?", he only ever gets one answer: "Yes, Sir." That is how the armed forces work. I know from talking to a wide range of people in the defence medical services—majors, colonels, many of them my friends—that they are deeply upset. Many of them are leaving and more will leave.

I have a solution. In November 1997, the Government announced the closure of the coastguard station in my constituency, and, just as today, I got an Adjournment debate. As today, I said that I thought that the decision was wrong. The Minister said that the Government would go ahead. We lost the battle, but in politics the important thing is to win the war. Someone with more wisdom than the Minister showed in turning my advice down suggested that Lord Donaldson, a man of wide experience, should investigate the coastguard service and advise the Government whether their decisions were right. He looked carefully at the facts and decided that the decision to close the Lee-on-the-Solent station was "not appropriate". The result was this headline: "Rescue Station Escapes Closure".

As the closure of Haslar involves local issues of defence and health, the Government should set someone with sufficient authority and wisdom to study the subject and decide whether the closure is the right course for both defence and civilian interests. If the closure goes ahead, the costs in terms of money, suffering and even lives will be incalculable.

12.46 pm

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Mr. John Spellar): The hon. Member for Gosport (Mr. Viggers) has raised important issues. I am fully aware of his longstanding interest in the Royal Hospital Haslar and in the defence medical services generally, which he demonstrated in his speech. I am also pleased that other hon. Members with an interest in the hospital are here, notably my hon. Friend the Member for Portsmouth, North (Mr. Rapson) and the hon. Member for Eastleigh (Mr. Chidgey).

I recognise the concerns of people in the Gosport area about our plans for the Royal Hospital Haslar and about the recent changes in the hospital's paediatric and intensive care services. It is appropriate to remind hon. Members of the problems faced by Haslar and the reason we decided that it should close. The intention to close it is part of the future strategy for the defence medical services announced by noble Friend the former Secretary of State for Defence in December 1998. I assure hon. Members that that decision was taken only after very careful consideration and that closure will happen only when suitable alternative arrangements are in place.

As hon. Members know, Haslar was originally selected by the previous Administration to be the tri-service core hospital following the notorious defence costs study 15 in 1994, to which the hon. Member for Gosport alluded. It was expected to provide the number and variety of cases to enable our medical personnel to develop and maintain their skills and professional accreditation so that they could support operational deployments and provide a high standard of health care. In the event, there has been a considerable shift since then in conventional wisdom in the national health service towards much larger acute hospitals that can sustain a high degree of sub-specialisation. That does not apply only in this case; it is a much broader national debate.

Unfortunately, Haslar does not have a sufficient population fully to support modern specialised services or to maintain training accreditation for our medical personnel. In addition, it is fair to say that our working experiences of closer co-operation with the NHS at the three Ministry of Defence hospitals units in NHS district hospitals at Plymouth, Frimley Park and Peterborough have shown that there are many benefits to be had from such arrangements in this sort of organisation. At the same time, it has become clear that Haslar's running costs are significantly higher than possible alternatives. That matter has been carefully examined.

Our plans for defence secondary care in the Portsmouth area are, therefore, now based on the establishment of a new Ministry of Defence hospital unit in a local NHS trust hospital—the Queen Alexandra hospital at Cosham—which is represented by my hon. Friend the Member for Portsmouth, North. The Portsmouth Hospitals NHS trust plans to redevelop that hospital under a private finance initiative. Hon. Members may be aware that the trust's proposals were approved earlier this year. The Portsmouth and South East Hampshire health authority is leading the process in planning the shape of new services in the Gosport area, and our Defence Secondary Care Agency is a full partner in that process, together with local NHS provider units and primary care groups.

I should like to take the opportunity to make it clear once again that we are committed to retaining Haslar until our new MOD hospital unit is in place at the Queen Alexandra hospital. Any rumours that we have plans to close the hospital before that time are unfounded. I very much welcome the opportunity to reaffirm that. However, that is not to say that there will be no changes in the way services are delivered, as Haslar and the Portsmouth Hospitals trust work increasingly closely together. We have not said that exactly the same services would be provided on the Haslar site right through until its final closure. Hon. Members will, therefore, understand that the timing of Haslar's eventual closure will depend on the establishment of that new hospital unit. That, in turn, will obviously depend on progress on the redevelopment of the Queen Alexandra hospital by the Portsmouth Hospitals trust. As the hon. Member for Gosport will understand, we cannot say categorically how long Haslar will remain open. However, through discussions, we are aware that the redevelopment of the Queen Alexandra hospital is expected to take several years, and, once again, I can confirm that Haslar will remain open during that time.

The former Secretary of State for Health, my right hon. Friend the Member for Holborn and St. Pancras (Mr. Dobson), said that the people of Gosport are entitled to top-quality health care. That is why we are working closely with the Department of Health to ensure that the standard of health care is maintained throughout the transition to new arrangements. As hon. Members will be aware, a partnership board has been established to ensure effective management of local health care during that period. As hon. Members would expect, that board includes representatives from our Defence Secondary Care Agency, from the Portsmouth and South East Hampshire health authority and the Portsmouth Hospitals trust—as the main providers in that area.

We had realised that the partnership board might identify services that could sensibly be re-configured before Haslar's closure. That has proved to be the case in respect of paediatrics and intensive care services. The decision to close in-patient paediatric services was made as a result of low activity levels and child patient occupancy, and—an important point that carries weight in all these matters—the impact of those factors on the accreditation of paediatric staff by their professional organisations. On average, only two of the 12 paediatric beds were occupied. Children's acute in-patient and day-case services were thus transferred to the Queen Alexandra and Queen Mary's hospitals on 31 July this year.

I realise that that change caused understandable concern among local people. However, we are assured that the alternative care arrangements put in place will ensure that a high standard of care is maintained locally. Furthermore, out-patient clinics continue to be held at Haslar. The accident and emergency department there continues to treat children who are not seriously unwell, nor suffering from major trauma.

The transfer of intensive care services also became necessary as a result of low patient throughput, which additionally caused problems with the new requirements for training accreditation in intensive care. That is a subject over which we have little control, because the matter is decided by the professional associations which provide accreditation. Furthermore, there were problems as to the availability of service personnel. The transfer of services to the Queen Alexandra hospital took place on 31 August this year. However, Haslar retains a high dependency unit, and there has been no reduction in the overall volume of intensive care services in the Portsmouth area.

Further re-configuration of services may be necessary. The hon. Member for Gosport has rightly drawn attention to local speculation and concerns about the future of the accident and emergency department at Haslar. He will be aware that the MOD, the Portsmouth and South East Hampshire health authority, Gosport borough council and the save Haslar task force are participating in a workshop on 22 October to review models of accident and emergency care. The workshop will explore alternative ways of providing services with the help of experts in accident and emergency care and emergency medical transport. When a decision is made on future arrangements, it will then be the subject of statutory public consultation.

The priority in any such changes is to ensure that high quality services continue to be available to residents of the Gosport area. The Defence Secondary Care Agency is working with the Portsmouth and South East Hampshire health authority and the Portsmouth Hospitals NHS trust to achieve that. I can assure the House that my Department will continue to work closely with the Department of Health on future health care in the Portsmouth area. The importance of joint management during the transition programme leading up to the closure of Haslar is fully appreciated by all concerned.

Under the local partnership board, a joint implementation management team and a clinical integration board have been set up to plan and manage the transition—including the move of services between sites where that is necessary in order to sustain training and patient care. There is also close co-operation at senior level between my Department and the Department of Health. That co-operation will be not only at official level. Shortly, I shall be meeting my noble Friend, Lord Hunt, the Under-Secretary of State for Health to discuss health care arrangements in the Portsmouth area and other related matters. As the hon. Member for Gosport kindly mentioned, I also look forward to visiting the Royal Hospital at Haslar on 2 November and discussing those issues with task force representatives.

I fully appreciate that the future of Haslar is of deep concern to hon. Members and their constituents. I can assure them that the Government recognise that concern. That is why my Department will continue to work closely with the Department of Health to ensure that effective health care arrangements are maintained both for the service and the civilian populations in the Gosport area—not only during the period up to the closure of Haslar, but beyond that time, as our new developments begin to bed in and the new services start to take effect.

Pensioners

1 pm

Mr. Llew Smith (Blaenau Gwent): On occasions, we rightly debate what we sometimes describe as minority issues. However, this debate concerns not only the plight of 10 million pensioners, but the problems that face all of us—problems facing Members of Parliament, but, more important, those facing people outside Parliament who have not been as fortunate in the wages and pensions that they receive and will receive.

Next spring, if the Government insist on linking pension increases to prices, a single pensioner will receive an additional 75p a week, bringing his pension up to £67.50, while a couple's pension will increase by £1.20 to £107.90 a week.

If we as a Government allow that to happen, we shall be in the obscene position of having Cabinet Ministers who earn in excess of £94,000 a year lecturing senior citizens on why a 75p rise is adequate, why £67.50 or £67.70 a week is an adequate sum on which to live. I do not know whether that is the third way, but I do know that it is wrong. I suspect that few Labour Members would be willing to defend it and I am sure that pensioners will be outraged. I do not believe that the Government would act like that and I am confident that the settlement will be more generous, but the question is how generous? The Government will have to build on the positive initiatives of the past couple of years, including the reduction in VAT on fuel and the additional winter fuel allowance.

Today's debate is about beginning to rectify a wrong, that wrong being pensioner poverty. One of my predecessors, Nye Bevan, was fond of reminding us that

"Socialism is the language of priorities".

I believe that there are still some Cabinet Ministers who remain proud of their socialism; that being so, they have a duty and an obligation to prioritise the attack on pensioner poverty. Nye was also fond of the quote:

"This is my truth, now tell me yours."

The truth of pensioner poverty is that, from April this year, means-tested income support for pensioners rose to £75 a week for a single pensioner and £116.60 for a couple; for a couple with a non-means-tested pension, the figure is £106.70, while a single pensioner receives £66.75 a week.

The Government claim that, by raising income support, they are helping the poorest pensioners, but that is not so, because although the poorest pensioners live below the level set for income support and are entitled to income support, for a variety of reasons they fail to claim it. It has been estimated that as many as 860,000 pensioners are in that position. That is not all: as many as 600,000 pensioners below income support level cannot claim, because their savings are taken into account, with the result that the guaranteed minimum does not apply to them.

Another truth is that the value of the basic pension has fallen dramatically as a proportion of average earnings. If pensions had continued to be linked to earnings, as they were until that link was broken in 1980, a single pensioner would now receive £95.05 a week. In addition, the Green Paper "A new contract for welfare: Partnership in Pensions" shows that the combined value of the basic state pension and the proposed second pension will reach only about 21 to 26 per cent. of the average male wage by the middle of the next century.

When the Labour Government introduced their pensions reforms in 1975, they included a compulsory second tier, the state earnings-related pension scheme, and guaranteed that pensions would rise in line with earnings or prices, whichever was the higher. The two pensions combined were to be equal to almost half the average earnings. That is far better than the proposals in the current pensions Green Paper, which shows that the Government are determined to privatise much of our pension provision, despite the scandal of private pension mis-selling in the 1980s. If anyone doubts that, they should take note of what my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Social Security said:

"if people stay in the state system, they will lose money".—[*Official Report*, 15 December 1998; Vol. 322, c. 771.]

That might be an honest statement of intent, but it signals disaster in terms of providing for future pension needs.

It is possible that the Minister who winds up this debate will express sympathy with the demands of pensioner organisations and myself, but he will quickly follow that by saying that the money to meet those demands is not available—indeed, he might challenge me to state where the money is to be found and who is to pay. Anticipating such a challenge, I shall suggest how the bill for increased pensions can be paid.

I remind the House that immediately after world war two this country faced bankruptcy, yet we still managed to finance the transfer of millions of workers from military to civilian production; to introduce a massive housebuilding programme; to create the finest piece of socialist legislation this century—the jewel in our crown—which established the national health service; and to legislate for a major welfare reform programme. All that and much more was achieved by a country which faced bankruptcy. Now, 50 years later, we are one of the richest countries in the world, so our potential achievements are far greater.

The National Pensioners Convention, Age Concern and Help the Aged campaigned for a 1999 increase to £75 per week for all single pensioners and £116.60 for pensioner couples. That, they emphasised, would be the first step. I am sure that they will agree that those sums are still a pittance, well below the 50 per cent. of male average earnings which, it is normally argued, represents the poverty line.

The Government obviously support means-testing and would probably argue that it is wrong for the richer pensioners to receive as much from the state as poorer pensioners. In my opinion, the answer is not means-testing, but a progressive tax system that taxes at a higher rate those on high earnings when they are in employment. That is the way we should tackle inequality. I shall make some suggestions in that respect later in my speech. For now, I shall simply state my belief that the principle of universality in pension provision is just as important as in other public services.

The £75 non-means-tested pension, with proportionate increases for married couples, demanded for 1999 would have been a step forward, but only a single step. The other demand made by the National Pensioners Convention is that the Government should recognise the need to restore the link between wages and pensions—which, as we all

know, was broken by the Tories in 1980—and begin to move toward setting pensions at the levels they would have been in 1999 had the link not been broken. That is obviously fair, given that national insurance contributions are linked to earnings.

The cost of meeting the £75 and £116.60 non-means-tested pension would be £4 billion—a tiny sum compared with the savings that have been made and the moneys now available. I shall suggest a few areas in which the money could be found to ensure that pensioners receive the income and the justice they deserve. Many of the figures I shall use were provided by the House of Commons Library statisticians. They emphasise that we can meet our manifesto commitment to ensure that pensioners share the benefits of increasing national prosperity. We have rightly placed considerable emphasis on fulfilling our manifesto commitments and I am sure that we do not want to break that one.

First, the Government Actuary estimates that there will be a surplus in the national insurance fund of approximately £5.9 billion in 1999–2000. Secondly, the breaking of the link between pensions and wages has resulted in massive savings. Answering a question in the other place in February 1998, Baroness Hollis said that those savings now totalled £10.1 billion a year. Since 1980, when the link was first broken, savings of about £85 billion have been made—at the expense of senior citizens.

Thirdly, about £4 billion is spent—and therefore wasted—each year on the administration of means-tested benefits. Fourthly, many people, including up to 860,000 pensioners, do not claim the benefits due to them. The Government recently announced that for the year 1997–98 the savings amounted to between £1.6 billion and £4.1 billion.

Fifthly, budget forecasts show that there is now a budget surplus of about £12 billion. That is almost certainly a conservative estimate, because we know that the economy has expanded far more rapidly since the forecasts were made, and the budget surplus for the years 2000-01 and 2001-02 is likely to be about £20 billion.

Sixthly, if we linked our defence expenditure to the average expenditure of other western European countries we could save about £4 billion.

Finally, the money could be found by changing tax rates. For example, if we taxed incomes over £100,000 at 50 per cent. we would raise an additional £2 billion, and increasing that rate to 60 per cent. would raise an additional £4 billion. It is important to apply the fine socialist principle of the redistribution of wealth by taxing the highest earners at a higher rate.

Redistribution is necessary because under the previous Government—unfortunately, this has continued under the present Government—the gap between the rich and the poor has widened, with the poorest 20 per cent. experiencing no change, or even a decrease, in their real income. Again, pensioners are a significant number within that group; again, they are losing out.

Those are just a few suggestions about where the money could come from to meet pensioners' demands. I emphasise that fact, because I am sure that other hon. Members, including my hon. Friends—and, who knows, perhaps even the Minister when he responds to the debate—may have other suggestions about how the money can be raised. I do not suggest that all the savings that I have mentioned should go to pensioners, although much of the money thus raised should go to them. We are no longer facing bankruptcy, as we were in 1945. We are an extremely rich country, awash with money that could meet the pensioners' demands.

Of course other issues, too, affect pensioners, and the Government must address those as well, including the costs involved when pensioners enter nursing homes. The Royal College of Nursing has called for nursing care to be free under the NHS to all who are assessed as needing it, wherever it is provided.

Finally, as I switch on my television every night I am confronted with news of the plight of the farming community, yet hardly any mention is ever made of the plight of the pensioners. There are far more pensioners than farmers—10 million of them. All of us, not only politicians but people in the media, too, should concentrate a little more time and effort on highlighting the plight of the pensioners.

I also saw on television that Prince Charles had come to the assistance of the pensioners. May I, through this debate, invite him to my constituency of Blaenau Gwent? Perhaps he could chat with some of the senior citizens organisations; I am sure that he would learn a lot about the plight of those 10 million pensioners.

Pensioners demand not the third way but justice. That is why we, the Labour Government, were rightly elected a while ago. For me, it is as simple as that, and I look forward to sitting on the Government Benches and sharing the joy as the Chancellor announces policies to ensure that justice is done for our pensioners.

1.15 pm

The Minister of State, Department of Social Security (Mr. Jeff Rooker): I am glad that my hon. Friend the Member for Blaenau Gwent (Mr. Smith) secured this debate, and I congratulate him on raising the issue so early after the recess. I am also glad about what he said in his last sentence, because I, too, will be on the Government Benches when the Chancellor makes his Budget statement in due course, and many of the issues that my hon. Friend has mentioned are for my right hon. Friend to decide. Clearly, my hon. Friend will not expect me to make a Budget statement today. However, I will do my best to deal with some of the issues that he has raised.

I make no apology for taking as my theme one of the first points that my hon. Friend made. He was, I believe, paraphrasing Nye Bevan when he said that we should prioritise our attack on pensioner poverty. That is what the Government intend to do. We cannot have more than one priority. If we are to prioritise our attack on pensioner poverty, pensioners who are not in poverty will not be the priority. That is self-evident, but it has to be said.

My hon. Friend made some fair comparisons when he talked about the way in which things have developed in the past 20 years. Those are fair and appropriate points. Since 1979, pensioners' average incomes have grown, but the fact remains that inequality among pensioners has also grown. A significant number of people have been left outside the improvements in general living standards. It is because we are not prepared to leave things like that that we intend to prioritise the issue.

I shall try not to use too many statistics, because sometimes they get in the way of the argument. However, the incomes of the least-well-off 20 per cent. of single

[Mr. Jeff Rooker]

pensioners have risen by only 28 per cent. since 1979, whereas there has been an increase of 80 per cent. for the richest 20 per cent. of pensioners. One can see that there has been a widening gap.

In the poverty report that we published three weeks ago, entitled "Opportunity for all—tackling poverty and social exclusion", we said that there had been a widening gap of inequality in society. That includes the gap between the poorer and the better-off pensioners, and the main reasons for that gap are the tremendous increase—162 per cent.—in the real value of occupational pensions and the rise of more than 100 per cent. in investment incomes.

As a result, the proportion of pensioners dependent on means-tested benefits fell from 57 per cent. in 1979 to 40 per cent. in 1996–97. I shall return to the issue of take-up later because, as my hon. Friend said, it is crucial.

At the moment, 28 per cent. of recently retired pensioners are means-tested in the widest sense, in that they are on state benefits. Talk of certain types of welfare reform and help with savings is much too late for those people. We need two separate policy initiatives, one for today's pensioners and one for tomorrow's pensioners. Many of the issues that my hon. Friend raised relate to today's pensioners, who need help now to enjoy a decent retirement. The Government have taken action in many areas, and will continue to do so.

I claim no special rights in this respect, but I was a Member of Parliament between 1974 and 1979, and I know that the link with earnings rather than prices lasted for only four years; it was a very short period. Indeed, when I was first elected, pensions were not even uprated annually. I believe that there was one period of two or three years in which pensions did not change.

We made it clear in our manifesto commitments that the basic pension would remain, would not be means-tested and would be raised in conformity with the rise in prices. I am not picking and choosing among our manifesto commitments, but I cannot pre-empt what my right hon. Friend the Chancellor will say in his statement about social security benefits next year, because that statement has not yet been prepared. However, my right hon. Friend is required to take into account a range of factors, including recent changes in the retail prices index.

Mr. Smith: Pensions may be linked to prices in future. Is the Minister saying that the 75p increase for a single pensioner next spring will be adequate, taking into account the possible price rises by that time?

Mr. Rooker: No; I am saying that there is press speculation, and everyone knows the level of the retail prices index. A statement will be made in due course, as normal. We are not required to make a statement until the second or third week of November. I do not know when that statement will be made, but it will be made at the appropriate time and in good time. At this time, I shall not debate whether that increase should be one figure or another.

There are now just under 11 million pensioners. Over the next 30 years, that figure will increase to almost 15 million, and there will be fewer people of working age. We must consider those long-term issues. We must also provide a help package to today's poorest pensioners. My hon. Friend referred to the minimum income guarantee. No pensioner in any hon. Member's constituency, whether or not he or she is listening to this debate, should have a total weekly income of less than £75 a week, provided that they have no more than £3,000 in savings. However, we know from estimates that there are several hundred thousand pensioners who receive less than £75 a week, and we can correct that situation.

There are difficulties in the take-up of benefits. We have done more to solve those problems than previous Governments and have recently published research on that subject so that we can introduce a specific Government-led campaign to reach those pensioners. Ministers cannot simply say that the minimum income guarantee exists so no pensioner should be receiving less than £75 a week, without introducing an active, positive campaign to seek out every one of those poor pensioners, and that is what we intend to do. The basic figure for the minimum income guarantee is £75 a week, and the figure will be higher for older pensioners and those who are disabled. About 1.5 million pensioners have already benefited. Single pensioners have gained £160 a year in real terms.

The Chancellor has made it clear that the guarantee will be increased in line with earnings. That is important for today's pensioners, but it has consequences for our plans for stakeholder pensions and the state second pension, which we must tackle in due course. We are prioritising our attack on the poverty of today's pensioners. The guarantee means that pensioners over 80 will be more than £400 a year better off after two years of increases. No one can argue that we are not taking action.

We have just published a large programme of research into why some pensioners do not claim benefits. I regret, as do the Government, that we cannot run the campaign this autumn. It must take place early next year. It is not possible for the Benefits Agency to carry out that work before Christmas. We are preparing for that campaign and we shall ensure that it is effective. We must focus on building links with partner organisations, including those in the voluntary sector and local authorities. Pensioners who are identified as being potentially entitled to benefit will be issued with a specifically tailored leaflet that will provide information. There is no leaflet and no application form relating to the minimum income guarantee. The relevant application form is that for income support, which is 40 pages long.

It is not necessary for pensioners to visit a benefits office to claim the minimum income guarantee. If they do not want to go to the office, the information can be taken over the telephone or during a home visit. I encourage hon. Members to make that abundantly clear to pensioners in their constituency who argue that they do not want to go to the social. We shall explore ways to work on a permanent basis with our partners in local government to offer pensioners services relating to benefit entitlement.

My hon. Friend referred to the capital limits for the guarantee as a disincentive for saving, including saving for long-term care. We recognise that those limits can appear to be—and are—unfair to those who have saved. The present capital limits, which have been frozen for a considerable time, have been a disincentive and send the wrong message to the people who will be the next generation of pensioners. The message is that it does not pay to save, which is the exact opposite of the message that the Government seek to send out. We are therefore

considering the rules on capital. They are not straightforward because there are different rules for different benefits. We shall make an announcement on that as soon as possible. I regret that I cannot give a date for that.

Our package for pensioners is not only for those who are the least well off. As my hon. Friend acknowledged in an earlier meeting, the £100 winter fuel payment will go to all pensioner households and is not means-tested. People do not need to apply for that payment, which will be paid to 10 million pensioners in 7 million households before Christmas. That is a substantial increase on last year's payment. Pensioners are not a homogenous group and one cannot treat them as such, but, by and large, that payment should mean that people should not be afraid to keep warm this winter.

My hon. Friend mentioned SERPS. Many people retiring today, who have been fortunate enough to have 20 years' work, will receive SERPS. SERPS is not to be sniffed at, despite the previous Government's attack on the system in 1986. The average male retiring today will receive £49.44 a week from SERPS, and women will receive between £22 and £24. That is a tribute to the planning of the previous Labour Government. Unfortunately, it is not possible to turn back the clock and reverse what happened in 1986. We are grappling with the major problem of the mis-selling of pensions and the changes to SERPS for widows, which the previous Government deliberately hid for over a decade. We must get to grips with that within the next three weeks because of the Welfare Reform and Pensions Bill, which is being considered in the other place. That legislation may entail the expenditure of billions of pounds.

We have made progress on the tax guarantee for pensioners. Under the guarantee announced by the Chancellor, two thirds of pensioners will not pay tax, and this year 200,000 fewer pensioners are paying tax than last year. My hon. Friend was generous enough to mention VAT on fuel. People tend to forget that 5 per cent. is the lowest that we can set VAT on fuel. We have reintroduced free eye tests for pensioners.

We are conducting a listening process across the country. Ministers are listening not to organisations but to ordinary people. I have participated in two such events. The first was in Liverpool last week, and the second was in Southampton on Monday. We are listening to people so that we can construct policies that are effective for today's pensioners and tomorrow's pensioners. We need to make two specific policy efforts because if we introduce our measures for tomorrow's pensioners using the normal methods of the House, they will not help today's pensioners. We are prioritising today's pensioners in our attack on pensioner poverty. That means that we have to target our resources and we make no apology for that. We shall be judged on what we have done for the poorest in our society, and we shall be judged at the next election, not halfway through the next century when our new pension programmes will have come on-stream.

Victims of Crime

1.28 pm

Mr. Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green): Today, although I am usually on the Front Bench, I take my place on the Back Benches to represent a constituent. I shall describe a shocking constituency case that I believe highlights a failure in the criminal justice system, and I hope that once hon. Members have heard that case, they will agree with me. The case is not isolated; it is one more example of a system that is no longer trusted by large numbers of the public.

You, Mr. Deputy Speaker, will know that I tabled this debate before the House rose for the recess some months ago, so I did not know that in the past seven days other cases would come to public notice which reinforce what I am about to say.

Over the weekend, an award was announced in the Silcott case. When a person who is doing time as a murderer finds himself better off to the tune of £50,000 or £60,000, it sets the public wondering. They say that something seems to be wrong. In the past few days, the case of Dr. Joan Richardson was concluded. It appears that, were it not for the fact that the family were in a financial position to bring a civil prosecution, that would have been yet another case of injustice, and Dr. Richardson's killer would have gone free.

Last night, in an Adjournment debate on rural crime instigated my right hon. Friend the Member for South-West Norfolk (Mrs. Shephard)—my colleague and friend—she drew attention to a case in her constituency. In doing so, she again highlighted what has gone wrong with the system.

I hope that those three incidents give some idea of what I consider to be wrong. However, today I shall focus on one case in my constituency, about which I am concerned, and draw some conclusions. In December 1998, I was contacted by Mrs. Hockley, who had just written to the Home Secretary—he or his office took more than six months to reply—and to the Prime Minister. On reading her letter, I was reminded of an article in my local newspaper entitled "Rough Justice?", which was about the murder of Mrs. Hockley's son, Matthew Hockley, and the subsequent trial. She had written movingly about the failure to convict two men for her son's murder.

However, it was the last sentence in Mrs. Hockley's letter to me which set me on the course of action that has culminated today. She wrote:

"I am at my wits' end knowing that the two murderers are free and living while my beloved son is dead. Please help me."

I am afraid that an examination of this case illustrates so much of what is wrong, and shows how urgently action is needed. I hope that the Minister will respond.

On 11 October 1997, in the evening, at the Fox and Hounds pub in Chingford, Matthew Hockley was stabbed to death—not one stabbing but multiple stabbings, in a brutal assault. The police charged two brothers with the offence, and with the joint offence of wounding with intent in respect of a different victim. Before the case came to court, the accused absconded but were eventually brought back into custody. The case commenced on 3 August 1998 at the central criminal court at the Old Bailey.

[Mr. Iain Duncan Smith]

Before the case began, the Crown Prosecution Service was so certain that the evidence and the witness statements stacked up that it informed my constituent, Mrs. Hockley, that, in its opinion, the case was 99.5 per cent. sure to result in a conviction, and that the perpetrators would serve at least 15 to 20 years for what they had done. Yet before August had finished, the accused were acquitted and Mr. and Mrs. Hockley—and their family, Matthew's brothers and sisters, and nieces and nephews—are left surveying the ruins of their lives, with the desperate and constant reminder not only that their son was murdered, but most particularly that those whom the police, the Crown Prosecution Service and witnesses believed to have committed the murder are now free.

When I took up the case, I tried hard to understand how such an injustice could have come about in a system that I had grown up to believe was one of the best in the world. On 9 December 1998, I wrote to the Home Secretary, and that letter was passed to the Director of Public Prosecutions. When I read his reply, I felt that, while he was outlining the CPS version of events and how it had arrived at its conclusions, he was already starting to distance the CPS from the whole process, and especially from the failure. Intriguingly, the director said that the senior Crown prosecutor who had said that the CPS believed that the case was 99.5 per cent. certain of success could not recall ever saying that.

Once one has read to the end of the letter, one is left with the strong impression that the CPS never thought that the case could possibly have arrived at a successful conclusion. That strikes me as strange, because I cannot conceive of why the CPS would have gone about prosecuting the case if it genuinely did not believe that it would be successful. That is not the impression that the CPS gave to the police or to my constituents.

Some other very serious issues required some answers, which were not given. For example, the Queen's counsel who had started the case with the CPS found that he was unable to take the case to court because he had other commitments. That is fair enough; it does happen. Some cases go on longer than expected. A week before trial, a new prosecutor—a new QC—was given the case. That prosecutor had less than seven days in which to understand the intricacies of the case and prosecute it, but, despite, that there was no discussion by the CPS about postponing the trial or finding another way round the problem.

How can a prosecutor come to such an important case with just seven days preparation, and how can the CPS gamble that such an individual can master that brief and prosecute successfully? Surely it would have been better to go for some form of postponement, but that suggestion was refused.

When I inquired into the circumstances of what happened during the case, it became apparent to me, from discussions with the police, that several times during the case it was quite clear that the command or knowledge of what happened during the investigation was simply not there, and that elements were left unprosecuted.

For example, Mrs. Hockley maintains that the accused absconded for three weeks, which seems to be the recollection of the police, but during the case the prosecutor simply allowed that to be referred to as a matter of a few days. When the accused stated that when they left the pub, the victim was still sitting happily on a chair smoking, that apparently was not challenged although, according to all the witness statements, at that stage Matthew Hockley was already dead, or very seriously wounded, and the individuals were throwing bottles and chairs at him.

I do not intend to describe all the problems. I mention a few to highlight the mess that the case got into. Surely a week is not enough time in which to master such an important case. More important, when I then received a letter from the Attorney-General, whom I have known for a long time, about the case—to his credit, he was genuinely sympathetic—he seemed to be saying that the problem was simply the witnesses' failure to back up their witness statements. He said:

> "It is important to remember that the decisions of police and CPS were based on the statements that were taken from the witnesses not the evidence that they gave in court which departed from their statements."

One is left wondering why that was not ascertained before trial. How can one go to trial in such a case and not try to discover whether the witnesses will back up their statements or are likely to agree with what they said at the time when they were interviewed?

I hope that the Minister takes some account of the fact that, on this occasion, the police, to whom I spoke at great length, said that that was not the whole story. I do not know whether the Minister is aware of an organisation called Victims Voice. I was in contact with it some years ago about another case in my constituency. The organisation represents people like Mrs. Hockley. It has tried to contact the Government to get a response from them since they came to power. It maintains that it has done so without any success. I remember taking representatives of Victims Voice to see my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard) when he was the Home Secretary and having discussions with him. However, Victims Voice is saying clearly that it receives no response from the Home Office or the Home Secretary, or even the Prime Minister, to whom it has written. That is not good and I am sad that that is the position.

Victims Voice has said that when Labour was in opposition, it had the clear understanding that a different view would be taken by a Labour Government. It is worried that the position is changing since the Opposition became the Government. I shall not draw conclusions about that; I simply say that an examination is needed. If what I have said is correct, I suspect that the Government need to have a rethink about their attitude.

I understand that Victims Voice organised a launch and that a letter to the Home Secretary last October, in which it asked him to attend, went unanswered. A fax to the Prime Minister received a rather bland reply two weeks later. Victims Voice has a serious issue to raise. It represents people like Mrs. Hockley who have suffered, and it has a right to be heard.

The Lawrence case is a recent example. I know that there are huge debates about other issues surrounding that case, but we should not lose sight of one simple fact arising from it—the parents have no redress, so their son's murder goes without answer. Like Mrs. Hockley, they are ultimately the victims of a system that seems to have failed them.

I have said that the Hockley case is not an isolated example, and from that I want to draw another conclusion. Over the past 24 hours, Victims Voice responded to my request for some other examples. There was the Crown *v.* Skeets and the Crown *v.* Skeets again in 1999. That was where the dismissed individual went on to commit another murder. There was the Crown *v.* Terrance Maul and Craig Maul. There was the Crown *v.* Donald Forbes followed by the Crown *v.* Donald Forbes again. That was a second homicide. There was the Crown *v.* Wayne Scotland. There was the Crown *v.* Scotland again. That represented a failure.

There was the Crown *v.* Anthony Diedick, the Crown *v.* Freddie Foreman, the Crown *v.* Jennings, Parker and Parker, the Crown *v.* Duffy, the Crown *v.* Colin Stagg, the Crown *v.* David Fields, the Crown *v.* Dunlop, the Crown *v.* McCluskey, Khan and Hunter, the Crown *v.* Stephen Plank and the Crown *v.* Keith Nicholas Whitehouse. I could go on, but I shall not do so. I simply say to the Minister that this pattern cannot be allowed to continue, otherwise people will lose faith in the system.

I ask for some redress for those who are now the victims, who are the families. It is clear that some cases will fail and we need to have a mechanism whereby, in a criminal sense, it is possible to have a rethink about certain cases and allow the families of those who have been murdered some form of redress. At present, if someone is sufficiently wealthy or manages to secure enough money, he can pursue some action through the civil court. However, in my constituency case—I discussed the matter at length with Mrs. Hockley—that is not an option because she does not have the money. Therefore, she is left staring at the ruin that is now her life.

The families of these victims do not want to create a victim culture. They would not call for that. They are not chasing for more money because they know that that will not bring back those who have been murdered. However, they do not want to see criminals benefit financially from any of their previous activities. Most of all, they want to be able to see justice done if the process fails in the first instance. It is the inability to deal with a failure, such as the one that I have outlined, that creates a terrible sense of injustice, and which can lead to problems in future.

I know that there will be problems. I am the first to accept that there are always problems with prosecutions because there is no absolute certainty. We all know that sometimes prosecutors do not get it right. However, when they do not get it right—not because of the innocence of the accused but because the prosecution has failed—the question that needs to be answered is how we deal with that failure. Justice must be done and be seen to be done. My worry is that if the Hockley case and other cases become known as the norm outside the House, and if newspapers represent them as real failures, ordinary men and women will think seriously about taking the law into their own hands. None of us in this place wants that. Any Government need to face that situation and find some way to deal with the anger and concern.

I quickly examined the number of cases tried in the Crown courts where there were no guilty pleas and the cases were contested. There were about 22,229 during 1998–99, with 11,561 convictions. Therefore, there was a failure to secure convictions in 8,668 cases, about 43 per cent. of those brought to trial. There were 8,668 Mrs. Hockleys; 8,668 cases that make people wonder on whose side the system is.

It is probably a conservative estimate that about £3.5 million is spent on failure. That should wake us up to the real failure that the system represents. No Government can possibly allow that situation to continue if they have any belief in the criminal justice system, as I do. I believe that we still have a great criminal justice system. It is still a system where justice can be found. However, I am afraid that ordinary men and women will find themselves so worried about the outcomes of serious cases that they may end up trying to take the law into their own hands. Now is the time for the Government to face that. Surely now is the time for them to make clear observations and statements of policy and deal with the matter.

1.46 pm

The Minister of State, Home Office (Mr. Charles Clarke): First, I congratulate the hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr. Duncan Smith) on securing a debate on the operation of the criminal justice system in respect of victims of crime. I have great sympathy with him on the specific cases that he raised and thank him for the way in which he put his case, which raised profound issues about the opacity and lack of clarity in the way in which the criminal justice system operates in many cases. I, too, have had constituents who have felt extremely frustrated, to put it mildly, about the way in which the system operates. I am sure that all right hon. and hon. Members will have had a similar experience.

I know that the hon. Gentleman appreciates that I am not in a position, any more than he is, to put myself as judge and jury in particular cases, nor to comment on the range of cases that he has mentioned. I simply say that the cases that he mentioned at the beginning of his speech—those of Silcott and Joan Richardson, the Emneth murder very near my constituency and the case of Matthew Hockley—are very different in character and raise different issues that need to be addressed. I am grateful to have the opportunity to tell the House what the Government are doing and will do to help victims of crime, and also deal with a number of the points that the hon. Gentleman raised.

First, I place on record that we acknowledge that the previous Government took some steps in the second half of their period of office to move forward in this matter, and we have sought to move further. We believe, as we have heard today in respect of Matthew Hockley's case and the other cases that the hon. Gentleman raised, that first and foremost victims want offenders caught, charged and convicted. However, as he acknowledged, sometimes there is simply insufficient evidence to bring charges. Sometimes a jury will decide that guilt has not been established beyond reasonable doubt. As I have said, I cannot comment on specific cases, although I have sympathy with the particular case that the hon. Gentleman raised.

The hon. Gentleman is correct to say that it is our duty—not only the Government's duty, but that of the system—to establish a criminal justice system that is responsive to the wider needs of victims. Evidence suggests that, first, the victims want from the criminal

[Mr. Charles Clarke]

justice system a simpler, clearer and less opaque process so that they can understand exactly what is happening, and a system that deals with cases much more speedily and effectively. Secondly, they want to be treated with dignity and respect, and in far too many cases that does not happen. Thirdly, they want to get proper information about their cases from the various agencies that are involved in the process, and the hon. Gentleman named some of them. Fourthly, they want their views taken into account in the process that goes forward. Fifthly, they want protection from intimidation and repeat victimisation, which is too often a feature of the cases that we are discussing. Finally, they want compensation for the injuries or loss sustained. I shall deal with each of those factors.

As for simpler, clearer and faster justice, we have taken steps, following the Narey and Glidewell reforms, to try to expedite the process. One of the most frustrating features for the hon. Gentleman's constituents and for mine is the very long time that is often taken as the various agencies within the criminal justice system interrelate before being able to resolve a case in the most effective way.

We are actively considering how we can create a simpler and clearer system. As I know the hon. Gentleman will acknowledge, there are important issues of human rights and the rights of victims, as well as the rights of those who are prosecuted. We must secure a balance between the various agencies operating in the field. The present situation is too complex and too opaque and needs to be changed.

Secondly, with regard to victims' dignity and respect for victims, since May 1997 we have increased by 50 per cent. the grant to Victim Support, an important organisation in this field—a grant that had effectively been frozen by the previous Government.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned Victims Voice. As it happens, I had a fringe meeting at the Labour party conference which dealt with many of the issues that have been raised today. Representatives of Victims Voice attended that meeting and made a powerful series of interventions. I spoke directly to them about the issues that the hon. Gentleman raised and about more general issues, and I committed myself to studying their material, of which they gave me a substantial quantity, and from some of which the hon. Gentleman may have drawn. I also undertook to speak further with Victims Voice, and I can confirm to the House that that is my intention. My previous meeting with the group was not arranged in advance, but, as I said, I met representatives at the Labour party conference, where we discussed some of the issues.

Our increased grant to Victim Support has enabled that organisation to use the new money to establish a new national telephone helpline for victims, which has made a major difference, and, more importantly, to start introducing a support service for victims and witnesses in magistrates courts. The support service for witnesses that has been developed is an important element in securing convictions. As the hon. Gentleman would no doubt acknowledge—although I do not make the point in any way about Matthew Hockley—in many cases securing a conviction depends on the preparedness of witnesses to stand up, even though they may feel intimidated by the criminals. That is why we have given support to Victim Support, which, in turn, has been able to enhance the support that it provides to victims in its local community-based schemes, and for witnesses in its Crown court support service. We are looking to extend the scheme in that area.

In addition, for the first time, this year we have provided a grant of £100,000 to an organisation called Support after Murder and Manslaughter, all of whose members have suffered bereavement as a result of homicide. We seek to give concrete support in specific ways. I hear the hon. Gentleman's point about Victims Voice, one of the organisations involved, and will deal with that specifically.

The third aspect is information about developments in a case. That was one of the most powerful points made by the hon. Gentleman. We have taken forward the pilot project introduced by the victims charter to establish ways of providing more timely and better quality information about a case to the victims, from the time that a crime is committed to the eventual possible release of the offender—right through the process.

It is our intention shortly to issue national guidance on the matter, as we acknowledge that the organisations concerned need better quality advice. In particular, we have asked the Crown Prosecution Service, which featured several times in the hon. Gentleman's speech, to take responsibility for conveying information to victims about the decisions taken by the CPS. I can tell the House that it is actively working to put in place an effective system for that. It is intended that that should be in place by April 2001, and, to that end, a series of pilots is being run in various parts of the country. As I am sure the hon. Gentleman would concede, there are serious difficulties surrounding how to give information, at what stage, and with what authority. I hope that the hon. Gentleman will support the steps that we are taking.

The fourth important aspect is to take victims' views into account. Of course, those views are already taken into account informally in respect of some decisions, but I place no substantive weight on that because an informal mechanism is not a good way of proceeding. We are considering the introduction of a system enabling victims in all but the most relatively minor cases to have the opportunity to explain the effect that crime has had on them—physically, emotionally, financially or in any other respect.

It is important for victims to give as well as to receive information, as a way of bringing them closer to the heart of the criminal justice process, and ensuring that, in reaching decisions, the system takes greater account of the experience of the victims of crime. It is not an easy matter, but we are actively considering it and believe that it will be an important development.

The fifth aspect relates to intimidation and repeat victimisation. I do not suggest that that is an issue in the Hockley case, but in many other cases it is significant. Provisions in our Youth Justice and Criminal Evidence Act 1999 fulfil our commitment to provide greater assistance to rape complainants, children and other vulnerable and intimidated witnesses, who for obvious reasons may find it particularly difficult to give evidence in court.

The 1999 Act gives authority to the courts to provide a range of special practical measures to help witnesses to give their best evidence in court. The measures include

screening the witness, allowing evidence to be given through a live link rather than in the courtroom, and banning defendants from personally cross-examining their alleged victims in sexual offence cases. As I mentioned in relation to Victim Support, I highlight that aspect because it was one of the weaknesses in the system identified by the hon. Gentleman when he referred to the proportion of convictions in the cases that go to the Crown court. We must do everything possible to strengthen witnesses who might feel anxious about going to court, and enable them to give evidence truthfully and straightforwardly.

Mr. Duncan Smith: Will the Government give serious consideration to redress in cases that have fallen not because the evidence was dismissed, but because of ineptitude and incompetence in the process of prosecution? Is there any way that the Government could deal with that through the criminal system?

Mr. Clarke: As I said at the outset, we are examining the entire way in which the criminal justice system operates, to ensure fairness. The hon. Gentleman makes a fair point, and it is one of the aspects that we shall consider.

On reparation and compensation, the United Kingdom currently has the most generous system of state compensation in Europe. In 1998–99, the criminal injuries compensation scheme paid out almost £200 million to more than 46,000 successful applicants. Nevertheless, we did not think that that was adequate in all respects, and the Government earlier this year issued a public consultation paper on the scheme, inviting suggestions for possible changes to the rules of the scheme and for eligibility for payment—a relevant point in this discussion.

We had a large number of responses to the consultation paper, which are being analysed. We shall announce our conclusions as soon as we can. I can guarantee the hon. Gentleman that his comments this afternoon will be taken into account in that process. Compensation is also provided to victims through compensation orders made by the courts. It is estimated that about three quarters of all compensation orders are in paid in full within 18 months.

My conclusion relates to the hon. Gentleman's final point—the Lawrence case. Sir William Macpherson's inquiry into the murder of Stephen Lawrence made recommendations about the treatment of victims and witnesses, which we are taking forward together with the other measures that I have outlined. We want to build on the start that we have made. We want to provide greater protection, better information and more opportunities for victims to have their say. Above all, we want to restore victims to the heart of the criminal justice system and maintain this country's growing reputation as a European front-runner in victim care.

It being Two o'clock, the motion for the Adjournment of the House lapsed, without Question put.

Sitting suspended, pursuant to Standing Order No. 10 (Wednesday sittings), till half-past Two o'clock.

PRIVATE BUSINESS

BAXI PARTNERSHIP LIMITED TRUSTS BILL *[Lords]*

Read a Second time, and committed.

Oral Answers to Questions

NORTHERN IRELAND

The Secretary of State was asked—

Decommissioning

1. **Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours** (Workington): What progress has been made through the Decommissioning Authority on the proposals for the purchase of decommissioned weaponry. [92968]

The Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office (Mr. Adam Ingram): Decommissioning schemes were published in June 1998 after extensive consultation. They make no provision for the purchase of paramilitary weaponry as that option was not supported by any of the parties. The people of Northern Ireland need to know that paramilitary weapons have gone for good and I believe that they would not find the concept of giving money to terrorists acceptable.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: I thank my right hon. Friend for his reply, but the purchase of decommissioned weaponry has played a part in internal conflict resolution in various parts of the world. Would not it be wrong to rule it out even at this stage?

Mr. Ingram: I note what my hon. Friend says. Although that is a matter not only for the Government, but for all the parties, I think that I have made our view clear.

Mr. Ken Maginnis (Fermanagh and South Tyrone): Does the Minister recognise that there is no democracy in western Europe where terrorists or insurgents in possession of weapons or associated with those who are in possession of weapons enter government? Will he reassure us, as Parliament reassembles, that it is still Government policy that no one who is a terrorist or terrorist linked can enter government while those terrorist organisations continue to hold weapons?

Mr. Ingram: Those matters undoubtedly are subject to the discussions currently taking place under the Mitchell review. Clearly, the principles set out in the Good Friday agreement are ones that the Government uphold entirely. I am sure that that is consistent with the views the hon. Gentleman has expressed.

Dr. Nick Palmer (Broxtowe): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the key question in determining whether an individual is a terrorist is attitude and commitment to peace? Without wishing to downgrade the importance of decommissioning, perhaps even more focus should be put on the commitment to ending the war.

Mr. Ingram: This is undoubtedly a difficult process. What the Good Friday agreement has set in place, and what previous Governments and this Government have sought to achieve, is a new climate of opinion to persuade people away from the culture of violence and into the culture of democratic politics. The Good Friday agreement established a good framework for that, which is why we ask all the parties associated with the review to proceed with all haste and good intent to bring it to a conclusion.

Mr. Andrew Robathan (Blaby): On decommissioning, does the Minister agree with the Prime Minister that

"Adams and McGuinness are sincere"

and that the IRA leadership are prepared to give up violence for good when there is no evidence at all that they are prepared to give up violence? Not one ounce of Semtex or one weapon has been surrendered, although we read that the IRA is recruiting students at Belfast freshers' fair, and we know that it is torturing and intimidating people daily on the streets of Ireland. When will the Minister and the new Secretary of State take action against that serious security problem?

Mr. Ingram: The Government take all those issues seriously, which is why we keep the status and the quality of the review under close scrutiny. To do otherwise would fail all the people of Northern Ireland and what we are trying to achieve through the Good Friday agreement. The hon. Gentleman uses emotive language, but he should apply some good common sense to it and try to look at the matter in a much more balanced and progressive way, because that is what the Good Friday agreement did.

Devolution

2. **Judy Mallaber** (Amber Valley): What progress is being made towards devolution in Northern Ireland. [92970]

3. **Mr. David Winnick** (Walsall, North): If he will make a statement on progress with the Belfast agreement. [92971]

4. **Shona McIsaac** (Cleethorpes): If he will make a statement on the setting up of the Northern Ireland Executive. [92972]

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Mr. Peter Mandelson): The parties are currently engaged with Senator Mitchell in a review of the implementation of the Good Friday agreement. The review's aim is to reach an agreed basis for establishing an inclusive Executive and securing the decommissioning of all paramilitary arms by May 2000. The agreement is crucial for the future of peace and stability. I would urge the parties to use this opportunity to deliver its full benefits to the people of Northern Ireland.

Judy Mallaber: May I welcome my right hon. Friend to his first Northern Ireland questions and wish him well in his work to further the peace process? Does he agree that there is no alternative to the Good Friday agreement, which has been overwhelmingly endorsed by the people of Ireland, north and south? Will he join me in encouraging all those taking part in Senator Mitchell's review to show the courage and flexibility to bring it to a successful conclusion?

Mr. Mandelson: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. May I say at the outset that, whatever I am able to achieve as Secretary of State for Ireland—[HON. MEMBERS: "Oh."]—

for Northern Ireland, I shall be doing so on the basis of a tremendous legacy, which I have inherited from my predecessor, my right hon. Friend the Member for Redcar (Marjorie Mowlam). Were it not for her, we would not have this ceasefire or the Good Friday agreement. Northern Ireland would be a less friendly place were it not for her contribution while she was in office.

It is absolutely essential for the Good Friday agreement to work. There is no alternative to that agreement; there is no plan B, should it fail. If it were to fail, I have no doubt that what would follow would be a collapse of the ceasefires and renewed violent confrontation. I pay tribute to Senator Mitchell and all those from Northern Ireland parties who are currently involved in the discussions, which are taking place as we meet this afternoon. I trust that all Members of this House will acknowledge the magnitude and importance of that work, and will give those parties their unequivocal support.

Mr. Winnick: I, too, welcome the Secretary of State to his position and echo exactly what he said—and rightly so—about his predecessor and her immense contribution to trying to bring peace to Northern Ireland. Does my right hon. Friend agree that it will be a tragedy for both communities in Northern Ireland if no progress is made in implementing the agreement? Will he give a clear pledge today that, whatever happens, there will continue to be close working co-operation between the two Governments, British and Irish, at both ministerial and senior civil service level?

Mr. Mandelson: Yes, I can give that undertaking to my hon. Friend. I readily acknowledge the work that is done by him and his colleagues on the British-Irish Inter-Parliamentary Body, which makes a valuable contribution to the close working relations between ourselves and the Government of the Republic of Ireland. Those will be maintained.

I entirely echo my hon. Friend's earlier remarks. In Northern Ireland, nationalists and republicans are rightly looking to the early implementation of the power-sharing Executive. Unionists, on the other hand, are looking for unequivocal evidence that republican violence is ended for good. Each party is entitled to what it wants. They need each other to make that possible; both aims need to be fulfilled. There must, therefore, be considerable give and take, and I hope that from the talks taking place this week will emerge the necessary clarity, but also the certainty, that each side needs in order to make the progress that we want to see.

Shona McIsaac: Does my right hon. Friend believe that the quality of life in Northern Ireland is now far better than it has been for a generation? Do we not have the best chance for a stable future that we have had for the past 30 years, with, for example, the ceasefires holding over the summer, the parades passing off without too much trouble and, importantly, 20 out of 26 councils having some form of power sharing? Will he impress on all the parties involved in Northern Ireland that they should not lose sight of those achievements in the current wranglings over the agreement and the setting up of the Executive?

Mr. Mandelson: I strongly agree with my hon. Friend. It really is difficult to overestimate how much progress Northern Ireland has made during the 1990s. A decade ago, 80 to 100 people were being killed each year in Northern Ireland. Violence was a daily reality, politics were in a stalemate and there was little or no dialogue between the parties. Today, the picture is very different indeed. That is due to the enormous efforts of representatives drawn from each party, but due more than anything else to the overwhelming demand and desire for peace that is expressed by those in all communities. It behoves politicians of all parties to listen to the public in Northern Ireland and to ensure that they deliver to those people the unbreakable peace that they need for their future happiness and prosperity.

Mr. David Trimble (Upper Bann): I also welcome the right hon. Gentleman to the Dispatch Box in his new role as Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. I assure him that my colleagues and I will do all that we can to assist him and others to bring about the full implementation of all aspects of the Belfast agreement. Does the Secretary of State recall that only last Saturday, our party conference once again committed itself to a fully inclusive Executive, so there can be no doubt of our commitment on that? However, we require at the same time clear evidence of irreversible commitment to peaceful means. I welcome what the Secretary of State said about the need for clarity and certainty. We are not interested in a fudge; we are interested in what will work.

Mr. Mandelson: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for his remarks and his welcome. I look forward to working closely with him and all his colleagues in the months and years ahead. It is entirely reasonable that he and members of his community should demand and receive that reassurance and certainty of intention, which it is an obligation on those in the republican movement to give him and the people he represents if we are going to make the progress in the implementation of the Good Friday agreement that we want. The key to peace is persuading republicans and other paramilitaries to engage exclusively in democratic politics and to renounce violence now and for ever. They have come a long way. They are still travelling in the right direction, but many have not yet completed their journey. We look forward with some certainty and clarity to those people setting out exactly how they are going to arrive at the end of that journey so that peace can be secured for ever.

Mr. Andrew MacKay (Bracknell): Does the new Secretary of State accept that we will support him in his endeavours to implement the Belfast agreement in full, which will hopefully one day bring lasting peace to Northern Ireland? Will he further accept that, as the Opposition, we have a constitutional duty to speak out where we feel it necessary? We cannot give him a blank cheque—unlike the previous Paymaster General.

Mr. Mandelson: As it happens, the cheque was not blank and I am glad to say that it has now been repaid with interest, but I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for his welcome. I hope that with a new Secretary of State in place, it is possible to make a fresh start and to return to the bipartisan spirit that has always characterised relations between the parties on Ireland. If that is the case, I can assure the right hon. Gentleman that I will reciprocate. That unity of purpose between the parties is more

important than ever now, as we move into the critical phase of the implementation of the Good Friday agreement, and I look forward to a constructive relationship with the right hon. Gentleman and his colleagues.

Mr. MacKay: May I move on to another aspect of the Belfast agreement and ask the Secretary of State about the Patten commission report on policing in the Province? Clearly, the overwhelming number of recommendations should be implemented very quickly and are straightforward, but he will be aware that some of them are security sensitive. Surely it would be wrong to implement those recommendations until there is an end to violence for good. Can the Secretary of State give us an assurance that those that are security sensitive will not be implemented until there is a lasting peace?

Mr. Mandelson: I can assure the right hon. Gentleman that while I am Secretary of State, I and my colleagues will always act in the best interests of the security of Northern Ireland and on the basis of the security advice that we receive from those who are our professional advisers. The Patten report is an honest and a good report, and I very much want to hear everyone's views on it.

I should like to take this opportunity to refer to the Royal Ulster Constabulary. I honour those in Northern Ireland who have taken so much and have sacrificed so much in the course of their duties to protect all the people of Northern Ireland. They deserve our gratitude and from me they will get it unstintingly. Our job is to develop a police service in Northern Ireland that builds on the best traditions of the RUC—its integrity, its courage and its discipline—but a service, too, that all communities in Northern Ireland can identify with and feel protected by. It is that goal by which I shall be guided throughout.

Mr. Lembit Öpik (Montgomeryshire): I should also like to welcome the right hon. Gentleman on what turns out to be national stress-free week. I have no doubt that he will enjoy his new role every bit as much as his predecessor did. The document "The Way Forward" put together by the two Governments in July indicated that we might expect a report from General de Chastelain around September. I am just wondering whether there is any sign of that report.

Mr. Mandelson: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. I had not noticed that it was national stress-free week so far, but it is only Wednesday. The decommissioning report to which he refers would, of course, have flowed from the implementation of the "Way Forward" proposals, had they been accepted by the parties. I assure the hon. Gentleman that I had a long and constructive discussion with General John de Chastelain and his colleagues last week. I am pleased to say that they stand ready to assist Senator Mitchell and any outcome of the review that is taking place this week. I suspect that, should those talks go well, we shall have every reason to call on their services.

Dr. Norman A. Godman (Greenock and Inverclyde): Might I remind my right hon. Friend that the Equality Commission has an important role to play vis-a-vis the Good Friday agreement and the peace process, but may I point out that the commission is distressingly under-resourced in terms of staff and office accommodation? I hope that he and his Ministers will do something about that.

Mr. Mandelson: My hon. Friend makes a good point. I am grateful to him for referring to the immensely important role of the Equality Commission. I shall certainly be listening to the representations that they have already made about what they consider to be a shortage of resources and staff in carrying out their job. They are building up their work and operation, and they will certainly receive every encouragement from me in the months and years to come.

Mr. Michael Mates (East Hampshire): I am sure that all of us wish the new Secretary of State well as he sets out on his daunting task. Does he recall that the Prime Minister sold the Good Friday agreement, in the summer after it had been reached, when he went to address the people of Northern Ireland before the referendum, on the basis that he would guarantee parallel movement towards full implementation? Is he aware that there has been no parallel movement, and will he make it his first task, as he sets out on this job, to insist that there is?

Mr. Mandelson: The hon. Gentleman is quite right to stress the important dimension that the terms and conditions of the Good Friday agreement must go forward together and must be taken forward by all the parties in unison. I attach enormous importance to that. But the reason there has not been parallel movement is the reason the Good Friday agreement is not being implemented at the moment, which is what Senator Mitchell is addressing during the talks this week. I remain hopeful that a proper agreement and sequencing of those steps forward, which accommodate the goals of devolution and decommissioning, can go forward hand in hand, because I have no doubt that if they do not do so, we will not have the implementation of the agreement that we want.

Lifelong Learning

5. **Gillian Merron** (Lincoln): What proposals the Government have for lifelong learning in Northern Ireland. [92973]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Mr. John McFall): The policy statement on lifelong learning in Northern Ireland was published in early 1999, and contains a 12-point action plan and related targets for the next three years. A copy has been placed in the Library of the House. In addition to the UK-wide initiatives of university for industry, new deal and individual learning accounts, a range of local initiatives is also being implemented.

Gillian Merron: Will my hon. Friend join me in paying tribute to the trade unions which have worked closely with employers to provide learning opportunities for working people of all ages and from all walks of life? How will the university for industry work and build upon such initiatives so that we can see further educational development in Northern Ireland for all?

Mr. McFall: My hon. Friend will be pleased to hear that the university for industry is taking shape in Northern

Ireland and in the next month, we shall be announcing three or four learning projects. The Irish Congress of Trade Unions in Northern Ireland is bargaining with the Training and Employment Agency for a skills initiative which will promote learning in the work force. Northern Ireland suffers from a high level of adult basic literacy and numeracy problems, and the trade unions are playing a full part in ensuring that that is corrected.

Mr. Clifford Forsythe (South Antrim): Does the Minister agree that, in apprenticeship schemes and, therefore, in lifelong learning, priority should be given to those who take the practical rather than the academic route so that they obtain the skills and qualifications to enable them to succeed in their chosen field?

Mr. McFall: The hon. Gentleman has mentioned these issues to me before in the Chamber and outside. He will be pleased to know that yesterday, I was involved in the signing of a concordat on the plumbing industry, from which he comes, to ensure that those in that industry have great training and enterprise. The hon. Gentleman can relay that to his constituents and I shall be delighted to talk to him about it.

Unemployment

6. **Dr. Brian Iddon** (Bolton, South-East): If he will make a statement on recent figures for unemployment in Northern Ireland. [92974]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Mr. John McFall): Latest estimates from the labour force survey for the period from June to August 1999 show that approximately 58,000 persons are unemployed in Northern Ireland. That represents a decrease of 3,000 over the year and the current unemployment rate is 7.8 per cent.

Dr. Iddon: I welcome that announcement, but will my hon. Friend join me in welcoming the Chancellor's statement at Bournemouth that the Government's target is full employment? Does he agree that, if that can be achieved, it will represent one of the best ways of eliminating discrimination in the workplace, including religious discrimination?

Mr. McFall: I agree with my hon. Friend that the Chancellor's statement at Bournemouth was a signal statement. The Chancellor made his contribution to Northern Ireland in May 1998 when he produced a £350 million package for his initiative. That covers several areas, including investment funds, skills and entrepreneurship. The fact that the new deal is turning into a permanent deal is another good sign for the young people of Northern Ireland.

Mr. Roy Beggs (East Antrim): We all acknowledge the fact that unemployment is still far too high in Northern Ireland and we recognise the success that Government policies have had recently in reducing unemployment and providing new jobs. Will the Minister reassure those who may lose their jobs in the Mother's Pride bakery in Londonderry and in the Larne paper mills that the Industrial Development Board is doing everything possible to encourage new investment in such areas to give hope for the future?

Mr. McFall: The hon. Member mentions the loss of 84 jobs at British Bakeries in Londonderry, but that has been partly offset by the additional 50 jobs created in Belfast. With regard to the IDB and its involvement in new projects, he will be pleased to know that of the 21 inward investment projects in the past year, 13 have been placed in areas with high unemployment and social disadvantage.

Mr. Eddie McGrady (South Down): May I take this opportunity to welcome the new Secretary of State for Northern Ireland on behalf of my party and promise our fullest co-operation for the welfare of all our people? I also welcome the new Minister, the hon. Member for Knowsley, North and Sefton, East (Mr. Howarth). I express our sincere gratitude to the outgoing Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Redcar (Marjorie Mowlam), who will always be remembered in the hearts and minds of the people of Northern Ireland.

The Minister has welcomed the unemployment figures, but is he aware that they will be increased in the near future when those engaged in agricultural industry—the farmers, their families and workers—become unemployed? In his capacity as Minister with responsibility for economic development, will he create a special interdepartmental task force, including the Department of Economic Development, the Department of the Environment and the Department of Agriculture, to assess the needs of the farming community, and make drastic proposals to keep them on the farm and taking part in our rural community?

Mr. McFall: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that in his constituency, British Aerospace has announced a £2 million expansion and 195 new jobs in Kilkeel. The issue of farmers is being addressed in the economic development forum, involving all the social partners, that I have established in the Department of Economic Development. Yesterday, I opened a £5 million project—the Government contributed £1 million—for Linden Foods in Dungannon, to ensure that the rural and agricultural elements are maintained. That project was well received by the farmers.

Mr. Robert McCartney (North Down): Is the Minister aware that in the past year, the number of people directly employed in the pig industry in Northern Ireland has fallen by more than 50 per cent., from 4,000 to 2,000? That number is likely to fall further. What efforts has the Minister made to support the pig industry and to alleviate the acute financial and other distress suffered by farming families involved in the pig industry?

Mr. McFall: The Government acknowledge the serious situation of the pig industry and my noble Friend Lord Dubs is addressing it in his capacity as Minister with responsibility for agriculture. I mentioned earlier that I visited Linden Foods yesterday. My right hon. Friend the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food has also visited that project, as has Lords Dubs himself. We are working with the industry in Europe to ensure that we get the best possible deal.

Policing

7. **Mr. Andrew Dismore** (Hendon): If he will make a statement on the Patten commission's report on policing in Northern Ireland. [92977]

The Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office (Mr. Adam Ingram): On 9 September, the Patten commission issued its report and the Secretary of State announced that the Government accepted its findings in principle. A copy of the statement has been placed in the Library of the House. As required by the Belfast agreement, the Government are consulting various parties. Consultation will last until the end of November and an implementation plan will then be published.

Mr. Dismore: Does my right hon. Friend agree that the Patten report provides a blueprint for the future policing of Northern Ireland which has the potential to take the politics out of policing and to take forward the political process? Does he also agree that political progress will aid the implementation of the Patten report?

Mr. Ingram: I think that that would have resonance in many of the key sectors in Northern Ireland, as my hon. Friend says, and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State made clear in an earlier answer the way in which the Government are taking the matter forward. This is an important report, which will lead to better policing in Northern Ireland in the future. That is what all communities in Northern Ireland want.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [92998] **Mr. Tim Boswell** (Daventry): If he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 20 October.

The Prime Minister (Mr. [redacted] Blair): This morning, I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in the House, I shall be having further such meetings later today.

Mr. Boswell: Does the Prime Minister support the right of state school governors to solicit top-up contributions from parents to maintain essential staffing levels and the core activities of their schools?

The Prime Minister: Schools are perfectly entitled to ask for voluntary contributions from parents; they have always been entitled to do that. What must not happen is people being forced to pay such contributions.

Mr. Giles Radice (North Durham): May I congratulate my right hon. Friend on the common approach to asylum seekers achieved at the recent summit? However, does he agree that it would be totally against the British national interest—and entirely crazy—for a British Prime Minister to threaten to block, or indeed to block, the enlargement of the European Union to include countries such as Poland, Hungary or the Czech Republic? That is what the Leader of the Opposition proposed at his recent party conference.

The Prime Minister: We shall certainly not take such a course. I notice that the Leader of the Opposition is shaking his head, but that is precisely what the Opposition have proposed. In case any doubt remains, let me make it clear that the Opposition have said that, in government, they would insist on an amendment to the treaty of Rome. If such an amendment were not granted, they have said that they would block all European Union change, including enlargement.

If anyone wanted a clue to the real Conservative intentions, how about the following quotation, which I did not read out yesterday? The Conservative pressure group on Europe contains 13 Front-Bench Conservative spokesmen, and its vice chair, Mr. Roger Helmer, a Conservative Member of the European Parliament, said:

"The big stick is the threat of withdrawal . . . I don't rule out withdrawal as an option."

Perhaps the Leader of the Opposition will finally disown remarks such as that.

Mr. William Hague (Richmond, Yorks): Whose fault is it that the Home Secretary was allowed to make an announcement about 5,000 more police officers that bore so little resemblance to the truth? Was it the fault of the Home Secretary, or of the Prime Minister, who allowed him to do it?

The Prime Minister: What my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary said was as follows:

"So, over the next three years, on top of the 11,000 recruits already planned, we will be giving the police the money they need to recruit 5,000 more officers. That's 5,000 more police officers over and above the police service's recruiting plans."

That is what my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary said. That is what he meant, and that is what he will do.

Mr. Hague: What the Home Secretary said is what he repeated in an article on Monday, when he wrote:

"There will be 5,000 more police officers."

However, in a letter to the Home Secretary, the Chief Secretary to the Treasury wrote:

"Dear Home Secretary,

I must stress that, as has been discussed at length . . . the package does not provide for 5,000 "additional" police officers . . . There should therefore be no references to this package being one for 5,000 additional officers . . . I am copying this letter to the Prime Minister".

So the Prime Minister must have known, before the Home Secretary's speech, that the promise of 5,000 more officers was not the truth. Did the Prime Minister read the letter, and what did he do about it?

The Prime Minister: It is exactly the truth. Perhaps the best evidence of that came from the Association of Chief Police Officers, which, when the Conservative party got this matter off the ground, said:

"We regard Jack Straw very much as a man of his word. He has repeated his commitment . . . and we see this as real new money for extra recruits."

There will be 5,000 more officers. The distinction lies between those 5,000 more officers and what happened when the right hon. Gentleman was a member of the previous Government. They cut police numbers by 1,500.

Mr. Hague: When the previous Government left office there were 16,000 more police officers in this country, and 16,000 additional police officers. Under the previous Government, "more" and "additional" meant the same thing, as they usually do in the English language. Is the Prime Minister happy that the Home Secretary should write articles saying that there would be 5,000 more police officers? Was he happy for his press secretary to say on Monday that

"there will be 5,000 more police officers as a result of what Jack announced"?

Will the Prime Minister clear up this matter? Will he tell the whole country whether, over the next three years, there will be 5,000 more police officers than there are now?

The Prime Minister: Yes, there will be 5,000 extra police officers. Yes, the £35 million is new money. Yes, as opposed to the plans that we inherited from the previous Government—of whom the right hon. Gentleman was a member—which predicted a fall in police recruits, we will have a rise in police recruits.

Mr. Hague: Given that the number of police recruits is scheduled to be 16,000 over the next three years as opposed to 18,000 over the past three years, the Prime Minister's comment is no more truthful than those of the Home Secretary before him. Let him answer the question that I have asked. Let him cut the waffle—and cheer up about it; we have weeks of this before Christmas. Will there be 5,000 more police officers than there are now?

The Prime Minister: I have just said that the Home Secretary said that there would be 5,000 more recruits in addition—*[Interruption]*—yes, in addition to the 11,000 that there are already. Let me correct the right hon. Gentleman's statement that the previous Government increased the number of police officers. I have the figures, and from 1993-94 until the Conservatives left office, they cut police numbers every single year.

Mr. Hague: The evasion by the Prime Minister of such a straight question is a truly pathetic spectacle. Is he not ashamed that, for a few cheap, misleading headlines during the Labour party conference, his Government have behaved in such a way that the chairman of the Metropolitan Police Federation has said:

"This is a complete betrayal of the people and the police officers of this country"?

The Prime Minister: As I have just said, the Association of Chief Police Officers has said that this is real new money for real recruits. There will be 5,000 extra officers.

Another point is worth making. Under its guarantee, the Conservative party is committed to cutting public spending. The Conservatives have made a commitment on tax policy that cannot be financed without that cut. Let me tell my hon. Friends and the Opposition that whenever the Conservatives raise any question on health spending, school spending, transport spending or police spending, we know that they propose to cut Government spending, and that this Government are raising it.

Mr. Hague: These questions are about the integrity of the Government. Is it not part of the Prime Minister's job to set standards of truthfulness and integrity for the Government? Is that not what he spectacularly fails to do? He says that waiting lists are down when they are up, that class sizes are down when they are up and that taxes are down when they are up. Now he says that police numbers are up when they are down. Is it not time that he looked around the Cabinet table and was tough on lies and tough on the causes of lies?

The Prime Minister: First, as I have already said on police numbers—*[Interruption.]*

Madam Speaker: Order.

The Prime Minister: On tax lies, some people remember VAT before the last general election. On waiting lists, the right hon. Gentleman is wrong. They are 60,000 below the level that we inherited. On class sizes, for five, six and seven-year-olds, they are now almost 300,000 below the level that we inherited. None of those things would have happened if we had taken his advice. His advice was not to cancel the assisted places scheme, so we would not have had the money to cut class sizes. *[Interruption.]* I was just trying to turn up this letter from him. A year ago today, he said:

"The shadow Chancellor and I, and many independent economists, have warned that your three-year spending settlement was reckless and based on hopelessly over-optimistic growth estimates."

The fact is that we are spending more money on schools, hospitals and the police. He opposed that extra spending, called it reckless and irresponsible and asked for us to cancel it. The one group of people who can make no complaint about anything to do with public services are those who would privatise them rather than modernise them.

Miss Geraldine Smith (Morecambe and Lunesdale): Will the Prime Minister join me in congratulating all those concerned with producing the Government's imaginative proposals for objective 2 areas, especially on having the good sense to include many traditional seaside resorts? Does he agree that the benefits that objective 2 funding brings to areas such as mine are a good example of how Europe really works, and expose the anti-European rantings of the Leader of the Opposition for the jingoistic nonsense that they are?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is right, but it goes further than that. The Conservative party proposal, which is to have opt-outs for all countries in any area other than free trade and the free market, which is what the shadow Foreign Secretary said, includes structural funds. I do not know whether the Leader of the Opposition even knows that that is a consequence of his policy. We would not have a structural fund settlement under the Conservative party proposal. It is not merely that the Conservatives would be on a conveyor belt to withdrawal because that is the only way they could make their policy stick: they would be giving up literally

billions of pounds from Europe that would go to hard-pressed constituencies the length and breadth of this country.

Mr. Charles Kennedy (Ross, Skye and Inverness, West) *rose—*

Hon. Members: Hear, hear.

Mr. Kennedy: That is probably as good as it gets. *[Interruption.]* I know that my friends will do their best to help me.

Does the Prime Minister agree that it must be a source of political frustration to him and his colleagues that, after more than two years of Labour in office, the gap between rich and poor remains distressingly wide and deep? In particular, does he acknowledge that offering pensioners a miserly 73p basic state pension upgrade is adding insult to injury? If, as a member of a fairly poverty-stricken category, he was offered 73p extra income per week, what would he advise people to spend it on?

The Prime Minister: The gap between rich and poor is actually narrowing as a result of this Government's policies. There are hundreds of thousands fewer children in poverty. By the end of the Parliament, there will be 2 million fewer in poverty. The working families tax credit, the new deal and the extra increases in child benefit all contribute to that and were all, of course, opposed by the Conservative party.

Something else that is opposed by the Conservative party—and I hope when the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Inverness, West (Mr. Kennedy) is talking about pensioners he will take this into account—is the £100 that will be given to each pensioner household this November. That goes a very long way to boosting the incomes of pensioners. If we take into account all the help that this Government have given to pensioners, the average pensioner is actually getting more than if we had indexed pensions to earnings.

Mr. Kennedy: Will the Prime Minister acknowledge that, as well as the income levels of pensioners, the other big issue about which everyone in the House should be concerned is the need for all of us—who, one day, will face pension provision ourselves—to have some continuity of policy?

Does the Prime Minister agree that one of the great failings of British politics is that, since the consensus over the former state earnings-related pension scheme was broken under the previous Administration, we have not been able to re-establish all-party consensus for long-term basic state pension provision? Would he be willing, as Prime Minister, to hold talks on that matter with the leader of the Conservative party and myself to see whether we can achieve—*[Interruption.]*

Madam Speaker: Order. The House will come to order. Mr. Kennedy, continue.

Mr. Kennedy: Many people want to answer for the leader of the Conservative party. Would the Prime Minister be willing to try to re-establish a tripartite basis on which long-term pension provision in this country could be conducted? That would make sense for all concerned.

The Prime Minister: As the right hon. Gentleman knows, I am always willing to try to move across party boundaries when it is in the national interest to do so. He is right that pensions are a very important area indeed. I would be very happy to work with him in relation to that, but I point out to him that the strategy for pensions reform, in respect of the new stakeholder pensions and of the state second pension, that we set out in the pensions Green Paper has received a widespread degree of support.

We are well on the way to formulating the right framework for pensions in future, but I agree that this is something that will transgress all political parties and will move through Governments—[HON. MEMBERS: "Transgress?"] I was trying to think of a polite way of putting it for the Conservative party. The issue will cross political parties and also move through Governments. I am perfectly happy to look at how such a cross-party consensus could be established, but must say that, on the basis of the Conservative attitude so far, I am not very hopeful.

Dr. Gavin Strang (Edinburgh, East and Musselburgh): Does my right hon. Friend agree that Britain's air traffic control system is the safest in the world? Does he accept that there is real apprehension throughout the country about the complex part privatisation scheme that was announced by the Government just before the House rose for the summer recess? In recognising the importance of public opinion and the fact that such concerns are shared by air traffic controllers themselves as well as by airline pilots, will the Prime Minister assure us that there will be the fullest consultation with the whole aviation industry before any decision is taken to introduce legislation on that matter?

The Prime Minister: Of course there will be a full process of consultation. As to safety, my right hon. Friend will be aware that, as a result of the Deputy Prime Minister's proposals, safety will—for the first time—be separated out and dealt with properly in the public sector. Whatever the public-private sector partnership proposed for air traffic control, in respect of safety, we shall be improving the present situation.

Q2. [92999] **Mr. Simon Burns** (West Chelmsford): May I remind the Prime Minister that my question to him of 9 June showed that, during the two years to March 1999, the 13-week-plus out-patients waiting list for Mid Essex had increased from 555 people to 2,422 people? Is he aware that, since then, the number has increased by a further 862 to 3,284 people? Does the Prime Minister not understand that fiddling the in-patient lists by allowing the out-patient lists to balloon out of control is a cynical exercise that is causing patients grave distress and suffering?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman is simply wrong to say that the out-patient lists have grown as a result of the in-patient waiting lists. Actually, in his area, the in-patient waiting lists have fallen, and more out-patients are being treated—not less. More are being treated than before. More than half of out-patients—

this is part of the confusion that lies at the heart of his question—never become in-patients. In fact, we are treating more out-patients and we are getting in-patient lists down.

Finally, the only way that we can get all lists down is by extra investment and reform, and change in the health service. The hon. Gentleman and his party are against that extra investment. It is no use the hon. Gentleman shaking his head. A few months ago, the Conservatives said at the Dispatch Box that extra spending of £21 billion on the health service was reckless and irresponsible. They cannot turn around now and say that they want even more spending than the £21 billion that we are putting in.

Q3. [93000] **Mr. Robin Corbett** (Birmingham, Erdington): Does my right hon. Friend recall that, at Prime Minister's questions a year ago, the Leader of the Opposition claimed that there was an economic crisis and demanded that the Chancellor be summoned to the House to explain the mess into which he had got the country? May I renew the demand for a statement from the Chancellor, so that he can tell us about record low inflation and interest rates, more jobs and less unemployment—policies that we would not get off the back of a lorry?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. A year ago, the Tories were telling us to cancel the spending plans, saying that we had produced an economic mess and recession. In fact, as my hon. Friend says, we have the lowest inflation for 30 years, interest rates down, debt under control, employment up by 600,000 since the election, unemployment down and long-term unemployment halved. All of that would be at risk if the Conservatives' policies were pursued. They would scrap the working families tax credit, scrap the new deal and scrap Bank of England independence.

Although they tell us that they want to cut social spending, I can tell the House that, in the past few weeks, they have tabled amendments to the social security legislation for an extra £3 billion of spending. The truth is that their policies do not add up and they are not thought through. For that reason, among many others, they will never get the chance to put them into practice.

Mr. Alex Salmond (Banff and Buchan): Does the Prime Minister accept that, if he continues with the fuel price escalator for the course of this Parliament, it will be the equivalent of putting 5p on the basic rate of income tax, except that it will take the form of an unfair, back stairs form of taxation? When he was campaigning so hard during the Hamilton, South by-election, did he detect growing public opposition to fuel taxes, toll taxes and tuition fees? Is that why the Labour majority went from 16,000 to 500, or does he prefer the explanation offered by the Secretary of State for Scotland, that people are so happy and contented with the new Labour party that they cannot be bothered to vote for it?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman is the one who fought the Scottish elections on putting up income tax. That was his very claim, and there is no point in his denying it now, let alone turning around and accusing us of putting up taxes. What is more, when we add up the spending promises of the Scottish nationalists, there is no way 1p on income tax would be enough. The truth is that their spending pledges and tax pledges are about as coherent as the Conservatives'.

Q4. [93001] **Mrs. Louise Ellman** (Liverpool, Riverside): What advice will my right hon. Friend offer the Leader of the Opposition when the right hon. Gentleman visits a betting—*[Interruption.]*

Madam Speaker: Order. Let me hear the hon. Lady.

Mrs. Ellman: What advice will my right hon. Friend offer the Leader of the Opposition on Friday, when the right hon. Gentleman visits a betting and gaming establishment in my constituency—a constituency in which unemployment has fallen by more than 22 per cent. since the general election? Given the Tories' record of economic failure, their opposition to the new deal and the minimum wage, and their hostility to Europe, what odds does my right hon. Friend recommend the Leader of the Opposition take on a Tory return at the next general election?

Madam Speaker: Order. I must remind the hon. Lady that the Prime Minister is responsible only for Government policies and that Prime Minister's questions have nothing whatever to do with the Leader of the Opposition. She has had a good try, but we must now move on.

Mr. John Butterfill (Bournemouth, West): You will remember, Madam Speaker, that during yesterday's statement on the Tampere agreement, I asked the Prime Minister whether he could explain how we could have a common system of judicial authority when there was no common legal system. After some consultation with the Home Secretary, he told me that the common judicial authority would apply only to serious criminal cases where the countries concerned agreed that there was a case to answer that was applicable in either country. However, I see that paragraph 5 of the annexe to the report issued on the Tampere agreement states:

> "Judgements and decisions should be respected . . . while safeguarding . . . legal certainty . . . and economic operators."

It is clear that paragraph 5 envisages that common authority applying to civil cases as well. Will the Prime Minister explain?

The Prime Minister: I can explain it. Things such as small claims will be dealt with by co-operation between the judicial systems, and things such as extradition cases will be dealt with by the application of the court decisions of one country in another country; where serious crime is concerned. Neither of those things, however, imply any common judicial system.

Q5. [93002] **Mr. Gwyn Prosser** (Dover): Will my right hon. Friend acknowledge the efforts made in Kent by local authorities and others to deal fairly with asylum seekers, and will he assure me that those councils will receive their fair share of funding? Is he aware that many of our problems in Dover stem from the asylum system shambles that we inherited from the Tories? Does he accept that the Immigration and Asylum Bill and the agreements secured in Finland earlier this week will go a long way towards relieving the pressure on us? As all that

hard work is being done, will he also join me in condemning those who would exploit Dover's difficulties for their own political ends? Some of them are sitting on the Opposition Front Bench now. *[Interruption.]*

The Prime Minister: As ever, the Conservatives want to deny their record in government. I gladly acknowledge the efforts made by local authorities in Kent to deal fairly with asylum seekers. They can now reclaim costs associated with supporting asylum seekers of up to £150 a week for single adults and £220 for families. My hon. Friend is right to say that the system that we inherited was a complete shambles. That is why we want to introduce fundamental reform—and the only way in which we shall achieve that is to have a simplified, far more streamlined procedure, and to deal with the cases more quickly. That is precisely what we are introducing—*[Interruption.]* It is no use the shadow Home Secretary shouting. The right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) was a Home Office Minister when the Conservatives introduced the shambles that we are having to clear up.

Q6. [93003] **Mr. Lembit Öpik** (Montgomeryshire): Wales trusts the Prime Minister, because he told us to. Does he remember talking about objective 1 and 2 funding on 30 April—coincidentally, that was just before the Welsh Assembly elections—and saying:

"I won't let the people of Wales down"?

In the spirit of that good faith, can he confirm whether he will provide new money from the Treasury for objective 1 and 2 matched funding?

The Prime Minister: I think that I said that after the election, as well as before. On both occasions I explained that within the comprehensive spending review, all those things have to be looked at. *[Interruption.]* We do not intend to let the people of Wales down. I have also said throughout that the only reason why we can have this discussion is that we achieved objective 1 and 2 status for Wales. We know that we have to make it good, but that must be decided in the proper normal way, through the comprehensive spending review. That is what we said at the election, and that is what we will hold to.

Q7. [93005] **Ms Rachel Squire** (Dunfermline, West): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the members of the official Opposition and of the press who are anti-Europe refuse to recognise the benefits of the jobs, training, transport and community development that European funding has helped to bring to my constituency and to many other parts of Scotland, England, Wales and Northern Ireland? Does he also agree that as the United Kingdom negotiates further funding from Europe, it will speak with a stronger voice because of devolution and the partnership approach, which has already been demonstrated by the Scottish Parliament and the United Kingdom Government towards Europe?

The Prime Minister: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend's work in putting forward a case for funding for her area. Our proposals for objective 2 coverage in Scotland for the next seven years will target the most needy areas of the country, and we envisage significant coverage for south Fife. She is absolutely right—we obtained a very good result for this country by patient, sensible and constructive negotiation.

As I pointed out a moment ago, Conservative party policy is to renegotiate the basic terms of the treaty of Rome and to block any change unless it is allowed to do so, and there is no support anywhere in Europe for that. *[Interruption.]* Let Conservative Members name a country that supports their policy. They can shout it out; they have done enough shouting. There is no country that supports them. *[Interruption.]* Norway? Norway is not a member of the European Union.

The plain fact is that we can make progress with sensible engagement under a Labour Government, or we can go along with the far right Thatcherites who now control the Conservative party and who have the right hon. Member for Richmond, Yorks (Mr. Hague) under their thumb.

Control of Hedgerows in Residential Areas

3.31 pm

Mr. Jim Cunningham (Coventry, South) *rose—[Interruption.]*

Madam Speaker: Order. Will hon. Members who are leaving the Chamber please do so quickly? They are passing in front of the hon. Member who is on his feet. *[Interruption.]* Order. Will hon. Members please not pass in front of the hon. Member who is on his feet? About 12 hon. Members have done so.

Mr. Cunningham: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to amend the Environmental Protection Act 1990 by extending powers to environmental health officers to intervene in neighbourly disputes involving hedgerows in residential areas; and for connected purposes.

I thank Hedgeline, which has campaigned hard for a change in the law regarding nuisance hedges. The Styvechale Rate Payer Association in Coventry and constituents have written to me in support of the Bill. I also pay tribute to the hon. Member for Faversham and Mid–Kent (Mr. Rowe) and my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Dr. Jones) for their tireless work on the issue. Their efforts demonstrate the cross-party support for the Bill.

From the outset let me say that there is no proposal in the Bill to ban leylandii or any other tree or hedge. It provides for conciliation between neighbours by environmental protection officers. If that does not work, officers will be able to make a decision about the height of trees or hedgerows which will be binding and enforceable.

We should not dismiss nuisance hedges as a trivial issue—they cause suffering to thousands of people. Over the years in which I have served as a Member of Parliament I have received a number of letters from constituents complaining about the issue. The social and emotional problems described in those letters persuaded me to try to do something about the problem. I am sure that hon. Members on both sides of the House have received similar letters in their postbags and are all too aware of the distress caused by disputes involving nuisance hedges.

Problems with overgrown hedges are not new, but the advent of the leyland cypress has made those problems far more widespread. This is a new tree, which is an unlikely hybrid between two distantly related North American cypress species. It was first bred towards the end of the previous century and its phenomenal growth rate is alarming because it is not known how high the trees can eventually grow. For example, there is a tree in Kent that is over 150 ft high and still growing well. That is unusual, and no one is suggesting that the tree be cut down if it is not causing a nuisance to anyone. However, we need to take action now to prevent the situation getting far worse in the future.

An offending tree can threaten roofs, guttering, drains and, in more serious cases, even a building's structure. Furthermore, not only can they deprive unwilling sufferers of light in their homes, but they can prevent them from using their garden in the way that they choose. The law as it stands is biased almost entirely towards protecting those who want to grow leylandii and other high hedges. The law offers no protection to the people affected by an intruding hedge. People can grow rows of fast growing conifers to any height, and as close to other people's properties as they like. They can even grow trees that lean over someone's roof without having any responsibility in law to maintain them.

Neighbours can, however, cut branches that overhang fences, but frequently, the continual expense and demands on time fall on the person who derives no benefits from the trees. Fast growing hedges, often untopped and lacking maintenance, can be grown by an individual, so that the burden of continual, sometimes hazardous work falls on the offended neighbour—a neighbour who does not want a high hedge and who is prevented from reducing its height by law.

The task of cutting back a high leylandii hedge to the perimeters of one property can be daunting, especially to the elderly. These trees can grow between 3 ft and 4 ft a year, and some of the many offending hedges now stand at considerable heights. As these hedges increase in size, they can play an ever more dominant role in the victim's thoughts. They can cause extreme anxiety.

Civil law has proved inadequate at dealing with hedge disputes among neighbours. Such action can drag on for years, bringing further stress to a victim's life. The legal costs can be enormous. The sums involved can threaten life savings and sometimes even one's own home.

The present legal situation forces the victim to plead with his or her neighbours to take action—in a sense, he or she is forced to rely on the good will of others. The individual has no legal recourse to demand that an offending hedge be shortened or removed.

The situation can often develop into a neighbourhood squabble, and it can escalate into something worse, with the added injustice of one party suffering as a result of weak legislation and the other secure in the knowledge that the law will protect them.

The Environmental Protection Act 1990 outlines a variety of nuisances, ranging from noise pollution to the treatment of animals. My Bill would seek to include tall hedgerows as an environmental nuisance. In doing so, it would give legal recognition to the grave impact on people's lives often caused by nuisance hedges. At present, environmental health officers are reluctant to act. Unless a court has ruled in favour of action, the legal position for officers is unclear.

The Bill that I place before the House will clarify that position, allowing environmental health officers to make a judgment. That will, in turn, resolve disputes much more easily and quickly, and without half the distress and cost now caused.

We must strike the right balance between rights and responsibilities. No one wants to dictate the plants or furnishings that a person enjoys in his garden, but the right to make such choices should be accompanied by a responsibility not to intrude into other people's peaceful lives.

I hope that the House will agree that the measures in my Bill do not unnecessarily erode an individual's right to enjoy his property as he chooses, because it is equally an individual's right to be free from the tyranny of the invasive practices of another. We must take action now. I beg the House to support the Bill.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill ordered to be brought in by Mr. Jim Cunningham, Mr. Alan Hurst, Mr. Tom Clarke, Dr. Lynne Jones, Mr. Simon Burns, Mr. Andrew Rowe and Mrs. Christine Butler.

CONTROL OF HEDGEROWS IN RESIDENTIAL AREAS

Mr. Jim Cunningham accordingly presented a Bill to amend the Environmental Protection Act 1990 by extending powers to environmental health officers to intervene in neighbourly disputes involving hedgerows in residential areas; and for connected purposes: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time on Friday 4 November, and to be printed [Bill 152].

Opposition Day

[20TH ALLOTTED DAY]

Food and Farming

Madam Speaker: We now come to the first Opposition motion on the Order Paper. I have selected the amendment which stands in the name of the Prime Minister.

3.39 pm

Mr. Charles Kennedy (Ross, Skye and Inverness, West): I beg to move,

That this House notes with dismay the plight of British farmers whose incomes have plummeted to record lows in the last four years, as a result of higher costs and lower farm gate prices producing rapidly increasing losses, despite continually high supermarket profit margins and costs to consumers; further notes that the extra costs imposed through regulation and public health protection that fall directly on the industry should more properly come from the public health budget; deplores the failure of the Government to provide an adequate response to this national food crisis; and therefore calls on the Government to recognise that its latest financial package is insufficient to tackle the fundamental restructuring of UK and EU agriculture policy, necessary for a secure future for British farmers, consumers and the countryside.

I notice from the Order Paper that we have the obligatory amendment from Her Majesty's Government, but that we do not have an amendment from the Conservative party. We shall find out in due course whether Conservative Members will support our motion. I hope that they will, but it seems unusual that one of the other Opposition parties has not put down on the Order Paper its views on such an important issue.

The importance of this issue is self-evident to all of us who have a constituency concern, a parliamentary concern or a public policy concern in terms of rural Britain generally. Indeed, that has been further recognised by the Government, who have come forward with additional financial support. The Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food has been the first publicly to recognise in the media, in public prints and in discussions with my hon. Friends and with others representing the agricultural community, the extent of the difficulty that is being faced. That is why with the resumption of Parliament after the summer recess the Liberal Democrats were determined to take the earliest possible opportunity to give the House an opportunity to express the concern that has been made clear to all of us from all parties over the summer months about the degree of difficulty and, although it is a much overused word in politics, the degree of crisis that is facing the rural sector, rural interests in general and the agricultural sector, in particular.

Let us consider some of the basic headline facts. The National Farmers Union has estimated that net income has fallen by 75 per cent. in the past two years and is certainly on a continuing downward spiral. It is estimated, if we take the figures for England alone, that the average net farm income for 1998-99 is a mere £8,000. It is not possible to run a business or a family enterprise on that level of income nowadays. After a recent audit of 5,000 farmers, the NFU estimates that we are now entering the worst agricultural depression since the 1930s. For all those headline reasons, it is essential that Parliament should be seen to be debating the issue.

We should also be seen to be debating and discussing the issue because there is a much wider public policy that goes beyond the immediate difficulties that are being confronted. On a European level, there is a broad agreement among member states, the United Kingdom included, and the Government, with all-party support, that we must seek and achieve further reform of the common agricultural policy, and that there will have to be a further emphasis or shift in the balance of approach away from direct sector support in terms of prices and price maintenance and towards environmental husbandry and countryside management.

Is there not a great contradiction? If the family farm as a base unit within this country continues to implode, what will happen? More and more amalgamations will take place. We shall end up with a structure of family farming that will be more like that in North America than in the UK at the moment. We shall not then have the custodians of the countryside who for generations have been working, managing and looking after it to deliver the very environmental and countryside objectives that as a country and as a European Union we want to see achieved. It is surely of fundamental importance that in tackling the farming crisis we put it in a broader context and get across to the Government, and the Government get it across to the decision makers and policy makers at a European level, that unless something is done with even more urgency to redress the catastrophic state of income and the depressed state of morale among our farmers, we shall thwart the longer-term policy that we all think is a sensible way in which to move.

We welcome the package with which the Government have come forward but what further policy objectives should they as an Administration within a UK context be pursuing? My hon. Friend the Member for North Cornwall (Mr. Tyler) and some of my other colleagues met the Minister fairly recently and rehearsed some of the arguments that we feel and argue as Liberal Democrats should be put forward.

First, there should be a Government-funded calf disposal scheme. That is surely essential given the difficulties in that sector. Secondly, there should be a national ewe cull scheme. Given the efforts made recently by my party colleague, Ross Finnie, in his capacity as a Scottish Agriculture Minister, and given the rebuff that he suffered at the hands of the European Commission, I shall be grateful if the Minister or whoever responds to the debate will give some further indication of what further discussions, if any, have yet taken place with the Commission to see what else can be achieved.

Thirdly—

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East): I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his courtesy in giving way. He mentioned Scottish agriculture. Will he explain to the House why his colleagues in Scotland are keen that the Government should maintain the ban on beef on the bone?

Mr. Kennedy: My colleagues in Scotland are operating, as indeed are the Government here, on the advice of the relevant chief medical officer. The Agriculture Minister and the Deputy First Minister, my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr. Wallace), made it clear that the objective must be the earliest possible lifting of that ban. That remains the policy and the approach.

That is what devolution is all about. I appreciate that the hon. Gentleman has a healthy interest in constitutional matters of one kind and another, both internally and in relation to Europe in the broader sense, and that he pursued an honourably consistent argument against devolution, but those of us who have argued consistently for it have always been quite happy with the fact that devolution, by definition, means that there might be different policies running in different parts of the United Kingdom. We should lose no sleep about that. It is a healthy democratic development, for which we should make no apology.

Mrs. Ann Winterton (Congleton): The right hon. Gentleman is very gallant, and I am grateful to him for giving way. Will he explain to British farmers, and my farmers in particular, how the policy evolved? Will he explain how the Liberal Democrat party in Scotland or elsewhere can still support a ban on beef on the bone, against all the best scientific advice? Can he further tell me how the Minister for Agriculture can try to kick the French into touch, when he is being undermined by the Scottish Parliament?

Mr. Kennedy: I am beginning to lose the plot, but perhaps the hon. Lady lost it earlier than I did, in the course of her question. The Minister can speak for himself in due course, but I do not think that he feels that the Scottish Parliament, by any of its efforts or activities, is undermining the legitimate legal recourse, which we strongly support, that he is pursuing against the quite unacceptable activities of the French with regard to British beef.

Mr. Desmond Swayne (New Forest, West): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Kennedy: I shall give way to the hon. Gentleman in a minute. I just need to work up to that moment. I am sure that the House shares my sense of anticipation.

To return to the serious point made by the hon. Member for Congleton (Mrs. Winterton), I reiterate to her that within a devolved United Kingdom set-up, there can be differences of approach in different political circumstances. That does not remove the basic Liberal Democrat commitment, which we share with the hon. Lady and her colleagues: we would never have imposed the beef on the bone ban in the first place. She may remember that when I moved the opposition to that on the Floor of the House, we were delighted to have Conservative support. I look forward to being even more delighted to receive further Conservative support from the hon. Member for New Forest, West (Mr. Swayne).

Mr. Swayne: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his courtesy. I followed entirely the logic of his answer to my hon. Friend the Member for New Forest, East (Dr. Lewis), but will he recognise that it generates frustration and is clearly not devolution, as the right hon. Gentleman calls it, when the policy of the Liberal Democrat party and the party of government in Scotland is allowed to force the beast ban—the beef ban—to remain in England? Our policy is being driven by the policy of the devolved regions.

Mr. Kennedy: It would be almost unparliamentary for me to speculate why the hon. Gentleman might be against

[Mr. Kennedy]

beast bans. However, I simply say to him that if one is serious about the devolutionary process—this party certainly is serious about that and about moving towards a more federally constructed constitution for this country—people in this place such as he and I are no longer in a position to discuss whether a different coalition is on the move in Edinburgh or a different set of political circumstances are in place in Cardiff. It is no longer our job to second guess.

I am going wide of the motion, and you may soon upbraid me, Madam Speaker, but I say to those Conservatives who care and are concerned about these matters that, although we may disagree, the sooner the Conservative party in this place accepts the new reality of British politics and starts to apply its mind collectively and constructively to that, the better. We would stop wasting time on exchanges such as this and get on with serious policy issues that Westminster should be concerning itself with. That is what the argument has to be about.

Dr. Norman A. Godman (Greenock and Inverclyde) *rose—*

Mr. Kennedy: I shall give way to the hon. Gentleman, who is an old pal, and then I must make progress.

Dr. Godman: I am glad to be described as an old pal.

I am not on my feet to defend that remarkable Agriculture Minister, Mr. Ross Finnie, but I say to the right hon. Gentleman—my old pal across the way—that I have every sympathy for the hill farmer, the crofter and the small farmer. May I point out to him that the richer farmers have had a hell of a lot more out of Brussels than, for example, our fishermen? I hope that, on another occasion, he will argue with the same vigour on behalf of his fishermen constituents in Ullapool and elsewhere.

Mr. Kennedy: We can happily give that guarantee. One need only look at the spread of seats represented by the Liberal Democrats to understand the inherent importance of the fishing industry, whether in Cornwall, in Berwick, in my own part of the country or wherever. We will come back to that issue on another occasion, but I am sure that the hon. Gentleman understands that on the first day in the job, in a parliamentary sense, one cannot do everything.

I am delighted that my hon. Friend the Member for South-East Cornwall (Mr. Breed) will be winding up the debate on our behalf. He has already established a track record on this issue, which has had a direct impact on the Office of Fair Trading. There are further searching questions to be asked of the role of the supermarkets in all this. Why are prices so depressed at the farm gate when the consumer, far less the farmer, sees no merit or benefit accruing from that? I know that that has been looked at in terms of competition policy, but it is essential that the Minister redoubles his efforts to get some of the supermarket chiefs—the big hitters who are calling so many of the shots—in for discussions and to call them to account.

I hope that some of our Select Committees will look at that matter in the new Session of Parliament. The Select Committee on Welsh Affairs has already considered it and it is absolutely essential that the supermarkets are called to account with greater rigour and greater vigour, because common sense and our own local experience tells us that there is something fundamentally remiss when the income level is dropping, the purchase level is collapsing and the supermarkets do not seem to be passing any of the effects of that on with the interests of the consumer in mind.

Mr. Richard Livsey (Brecon and Radnorshire) *rose—*

Mr. Kennedy: I know that my hon. Friend has been much involved in this issue.

Mr. Livsey: I thank my right hon. Friend for giving way. The Select Committee on Welsh Affairs made its report 18 months ago and our family farmers have experienced depressed prices for the past three years. Is not a resolution of this problem long overdue? There is no income and farmers are in a great state of personal depression because they are making no profit whatever on our family farms. This urgent matter must be resolved immediately.

Mr. Kennedy: I agree with my hon. Friend and pay tribute to the role that he played in the Select Committee's work on that report. The Minister and his Department have to get motoring. We can all issue complaints and constituency press releases and we can have debates on the Floor of the House, but the Ministry is best placed to tackle the issue. There is no doubt that there is cross-party agreement that something is wrong. Consumers perceive that a rip off is taking place and it is high time that those responsible were called to account. I hope that the Minister will do that.

In addition to the decline in income that is being suffered, the Government are piling on the charges, which is a perverse thing for any Administration to do, given that there is not the income base, in a family-run farm business, to sustain those charges. As my hon. Friends have told the Government on many occasions in recent times, it would be sensible to postpone, if not abandon, the policy of cattle passport charges. Why load more costs on the industry at a time when it cannot sustain them?

Mr. Bob Russell (Colchester): Stick the charges on the supermarkets.

Mr. Kennedy: That is an idea worth looking at. Perhaps the Minister might like to respond to it.

The second issue is that of importation. It is crazy that we load regulations and standards on ourselves and our domestic producers, which we cannot impose, on an equivalent basis, on some of our European competitors who provide lower quality importation products. Because of insufficient labelling, those products are then passed off to British consumers. That is a daft state of affairs. We have asked the Government repeatedly to do something about that. They need to move with more alacrity.

Mr. A. J. Beith (Berwick-upon-Tweed): Has my right hon. Friend noted today's press release about chicken imports from Thailand? It says that EU inspectors approved a number of chicken factories there without

visiting them, and that the potential use of antibiotics in Thailand is not regulated, known about or exposed to our consumers.

Mr. Kennedy: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for that. I read those reports this morning. Given that this party supports the Government when they are positively engaged in Europe, we should use that positive engagement to insist that such ludicrous states of affairs are not allowed to be maintained. I could not agree with my right hon. Friend more.

This is a short debate and I am anxious that as many hon. Members as possible from all parties can contribute. I wish to deal with two other issues. The first is that of genetically modified products, which is capturing people's imagination and triggering anxiety—and rightly so.

The Government have inherited a series of contractual relationships and decisions from the previous Administration. That is understood. However, they must recognise that the GM issue goes much wider than the rights and wrongs of the issue itself. Scientific input is essential for any Administration. It would be highly irresponsible to suggest otherwise. Clearly, however, the Government are not carrying consumer confidence with them. It would therefore be best to opt for a five-year ban on the commercial exploitation of GM foods. The Government should recognise the extent of public opinion and the fact that they are not carrying public opinion with them on this issue. Ultimately, that will do more damage to the general credibility of agriculture and the food chain, which will benefit nobody, least of all farmers.

The second much broader issue is that of the single currency. I am glad that Britain in Europe campaign was launched last week and that it has a healthy degree of cross-party support, which is important. The Government must recognise, however, that there has been a significant change in grass-roots farming opinion on this matter. My view is based on discussions that I have had in the past couple of years. Because of the strength of the pound over the past period, the increasing perception among the agricultural community in this country is that a commitment on the part of this country to a single currency would be in the long-term interest of UK agriculture.

Mr. Christopher Gill (Ludlow): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way on that point?

Mr. Kennedy: I can hardly not give way to the hon. Gentleman on that issue, but may I finish this point first?

I appreciate that the Minister is constrained by the policy of the Chancellor, the Foreign Secretary and the Prime Minister, who from time to time seem to have the same policy on this issue. None the less, I hope that he will acknowledge that there will be real long-term benefits to British agriculture if we are coherently and sensibly part of a single trading currency zone within Europe.

Mr. Gill: Does the right hon. Gentleman accept that many people, himself included, who should know better and probably do, know that the rate at which the United Kingdom would be permitted to join the single currency would be as laid down by the treaties? It would not be a figure plucked out of the air that would suit the British farmer. Is it not time that the House faced the reality and told the British farmer that the single currency is not the panacea for all ills because we will have to go in at the mid-point of the exchange rate mechanism, which is DM2.95?

Mr. Kennedy: No one who has considered the issue sensibly would argue that the single currency is the panacea for all ills in the agricultural sector or elsewhere. Of course it is not. It is a technical as well as a political and a constitutional judgment. On balance, it brings merits and benefits and that is why I am in favour of it for agriculture, as for other things.

I would gently point out to the hon. Gentleman, as I do not necessarily concur with him but respect his views and the consistency with which they are argued, that equally if one is trying to take a balanced view of the problems afflicting agriculture, one must agree that they did not all begin on the stroke of midnight of 2 May 1997. Many of the endemic difficulties affecting countryside and rural issues predate the advent of this Administration by some considerable way and I am afraid to say that some of the guilty people are now sitting on the Opposition Front Bench and used to sit on the Government Front Bench. That is an important political point of which we must never lose sight.

On behalf of my right hon. and hon. Friends, I conclude by saying that, first, it is important that Parliament is seen today, here and now, to draw attention to the extent of the crisis. Secondly, it is important that all of us in all parties and all parts of the country reflect what we have heard from our constituents during the summer recess about the depth of the depression and the extent of the doom and gloom out there in the agricultural community.

Thirdly, in considering the broader issues—labelling, importation, GMOs and so forth—we will face an even bigger problem in time to come if we cannot take consumers with us. That is essential both to underpin our domestic agricultural production base, but equally to instil a new sense of confidence in what those in politics and behind public policy are telling the people. That is what lies behind our debate and our motion and I commend it to the House.

4.3 pm

The Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mr. Nick Brown): I beg to move, To leave out from "House" to the end of the Question, and to add instead thereof:

"recognises the difficulties faced by agriculture and the wider rural economy as a result of the depressed level of farm incomes; approves of the special measures the Government has taken to assist the industry through three aid packages plus EU agri-monetary compensation worth in total £742 million; endorses the establishment of industry-led working groups to examine urgently the regulatory burdens on agriculture; supports the Government's promotion of collaborative working throughout the food chain to add value and generate the price premium that high-quality United Kingdom produce deserves, while noting that the Competition Commission's investigation of supermarket pricing includes an examination of trading practices throughout the supply chain; welcomes the Government's achievement of significant reform of the Common Agricultural Policy in the interests of producers, consumers and taxpayers; and fully supports the Government's commitment to the future of United Kingdom agriculture as a competitive, flexible and diverse industry, and the use of options available under Agenda 2000 to help secure this.".

[Mr. Nick Brown]

First, I offer my congratulations to the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Inverness, West (Mr. Kennedy) on his election to the leadership of his party. I also congratulate him on having selected a debate on food and farming for his debut in the House as leader of his party. I also pay tribute to him for the interest that he has taken in this subject in his time as the Liberal Democrat spokesman and for his constructive approach in what are difficult times for the sector. For completeness, I also welcome the hon. Member for South–East Cornwall (Mr. Breed) to his new Front-Bench responsibilities.

These are important issues and it is right that we should debate them today. We are not quarrelling, I hope, about the facts. Certainly I have no quarrel about the key fact, which is that farm incomes have fallen dramatically in the past three years and now stand at one of the lowest levels for the past 25 years. The Government see helping farmers through the deep and enduring depression in farm incomes that they are experiencing as one of their priorities. There is no doubt that the whole industry, and the livestock sector in particular, is facing severe difficulties. We are still feeling the effects of the unavoidable implications of the BSE crisis. That runs not only through the beef sector, but throughout livestock.

Mr. Norman Baker (Lewes): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Brown: I will first list the difficulties. I promise to give way to the hon. Gentleman when I come to the response to them.

The recession in the far east and the collapse of the Russian economy have increased pressures. While the strength of the pound, particularly in relation to the euro, to which the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Inverness, West referred, is a reflection of the strength of the wider UK economy, it makes agricultural exports more difficult, draws in imports and reduces the real value of support payments to farmers under the common agricultural policy.

Mr. Baker: I welcome the right hon. Gentleman to the House this afternoon and thank him for the statement that he recently made about giving more money to the farmers. That has been very welcome to the farmers in my constituency. May I remind him that there are still major concerns among farmers and that they see the money as a sticking plaster rather than a long-term solution. He may be aware that I have written to his office to ask him to come to my constituency office to meet my farmers. Can he give me an assurance this afternoon that he can fit that into his diary?

Mr. Brown: I am under enormous pressure to make constituency visits and to meet local groups of farmers. I try to meet as many farmers as I can. It has helped me in undertaking my responsibilities to have farmhouse meetings with groups of farmers. A number of Members have invited me to their constituencies. I make no distinction between political party because by and large these issues are not party political, or at least they should not be. I am happy to take the hon. Gentleman's invitation, put it with the other invitations and come when I can. I should like to do so.

Mr. Tim Boswell (Daventry): The Minister adopts a characteristically conciliatory tone. One of the problems is Ministers themselves. Is it more arrogant to act as the Welsh Minister of Agriculture has done and refuse to leave the field even for a veggie burger when she has been given out by the umpire, or to act as he has done in relation to the ban on beef on the bone? He no longer has English scientific advice compelling him to continue with the ban and he is maintaining it simply for the convenience of his colleagues in other parts of the United Kingdom. Is it not legally perilous to withhold trade in circumstances in which he no longer has advice to maintain the ban?

Mr. Brown: I do not agree with the thrust of either of the hon. Gentleman's points. I think that it is right to lift the ban on beef on the bone. I have said consistently since becoming the Minister that I wanted to lift the ban as soon as I could. I have relied on the advice of the United Kingdom chief medical officer, who now tells me that he believes that it would be right to lift the ban for retail sales, but not for manufactured products. That is what I want to do, but I want to lift the ban across the whole of the United Kingdom. It is perfectly rational to allow a short pause for reflection for other authorities with devolved competence to see whether we cannot lift the ban together in a uniform way before Christmas. I hope that that is a complete answer to that part of the hon. Gentleman's intervention.

As for the hon. Gentleman's point about the Ministers with devolved responsibility for agriculture, I have no quarrel with them for exploring schemes to help farmers through difficult times. That is a perfectly proper thing for them to do. I accept, exactly as the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Inverness, West accepts, that it is implicit in devolution that we get different outcomes in different parts of the United Kingdom where there is devolved competence. The fact of the matter is that it is difficult to devise schemes on the supply side that supplement the supply-side measures of the CAP. But why on earth people have fallen to complaining about the Welsh Minister and the Scottish Minister for trying to do so, and for trying to do their best, beats me. Of course, I was aware of the difficulties, and, in our discussions, we candidly discussed them, but the Welsh Minister set out to try to overcome them. The fact that she has tried for farmers but on the specific cull ewe scheme has not succeeded reflects no discredit on her at all. I am surprised that she has come in for the criticism that she has. She has tried to help, and that is a perfectly honourable thing to have wanted to do.

Mr. Swayne: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Brown: This is a Liberal Democrat Supply day. I hope that there will be other opportunities to discuss these matters in the House before long. I do not want to eat into the time of Back-Bench Members, but I give way.

Mr. Swayne: I shall be brief. Can the right hon. Gentleman clear up the confusion? Is he telling the House

that the policy of maintaining the ban on beef on the bone is his policy and is not a consequence of his being driven by the policies of the devolved regions?

Mr. Brown: My policy is to lift the ban in a co-ordinated way throughout the United Kingdom. Because competence in this area has been devolved, clearly the policy requires the consent of others as well; others examine the issue, too.

This is not the consequence of devolution. When the original decisions were taken in government, and when Liam Donaldson's report in January was discussed within government, there were discussions between Agriculture Ministers—those representing Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland—as well as myself as the UK Minister, so there is nothing new in this. Since the early 1980s, with regard to the sale of unpasteurised milk, there has been separate legislation in Scotland from the legislative arrangements in England and Wales. There is nothing new in having different legislation in this respect. We might do so in the future, but it is more desirable that we proceed on a UK-wide basis. That is why I pause before advocating an England-only policy or one for some parts of the United Kingdom and not others.

The fact that there is devolved competence and people can do different things does not mean that we should always want to do different things just for the sake of it. In this regard, it is sensible for us to discuss the evidence and make the decision together; but for the Scottish authorities that has to be consistent with the advice that they receive from their chief medical officers, and the same applies to the other devolved authorities, just as it does to me. If the hon. Gentleman can bear to contain himself for a little longer, we will achieve the outcome that he wants.

Let me return to the farm income difficulties which, in some sectors—for example, the beef sector—it is fair to describe as at crisis point. I take the beef sector first. We have been denied export markets for more than three and a half years and that has had dramatic consequences for the beef industry. Those markets will be hard to recover, particularly at retail level, but now that the ban has been lifted—at least in 13 of the 15 states in the EU, and a 14th is in the process of lifting the ban—exports have recommenced and we are starting to rebuild our markets.

As all hon. Members will be aware, we are pressing the French to lift their illegal ban. I hope that we can come to a resolution soon, but, if we do not, I assure the House that we will press home our claim with all the rigour, vigour and means open to us. Initially, we look to the Commission to defend its decision and our corner in the matter, but that does not pre-empt us from taking other action.

Mr. Malcolm Bruce (Gordon): I am sure that the Minister knows that he has our full support in ensuring that the French observe their responsibilities in lifting the ban. None the less, does he accept that the once prime beef exporters in my constituency are telling me that, whether or not the ban is lifted by the French, we will not achieve the sale of a single kilo of Scottish beef until we can be competitive on prices? Will the Minister undertake to continue to work with the industry to ensure that the costs that have been imposed to deliver the conditions for the lifting of the ban are brought down to a level that will make it possible to develop new export markets?

Mr. Brown: I shall have something to say about the regulatory burden later. I am alert to the point. I work closely with the Meat and Livestock Commission and others with responsibilities for the beef sector, but clearly, a precondition of being able to export is to obtain the lifting of the ban, which was implemented worldwide, which the EU has done, to ensure that our partners in the EU implement that decision where it is enshrined in their domestic legislation—not all countries did enshrine it in their domestic legislation—and then to go out and build the markets. Although the ability to transport through France is not the main issue, it is an important one. The transport ban is important, alongside the actual ban on sales. All we are asking for is the right legally to offer for sale a product that is among the safest in the world and commanded a premium price—this is especially so of the Scottish sector—because it is a premium product. We want to get back to that state of affairs, and I will not be happy until the markets are working normally again as they do in the rest of the European Union. That is my objective.

As we know, the market for lamb is in severe difficulties for the third year in succession. Key problems include the strength of sterling, the apparent decline in export demand and the surplus of cull ewes and light male hill lambs. In the past, there has been good export demand for those animals in southern Europe, but, given the strength of sterling and the loss of overseas markets for sheepskins, it is becoming difficult to find sufficient export outlets. That has meant that the product has spilled over onto the domestic market.

An additional cost is associated with necessary BSE-related controls, which require the splitting of ewe carcases to remove the spinal cord. Given the current state of the market, that is a significant issue because of the proportionate effect on producer margins. I shall take a hard look at what can be done about that within the law and consistent with the need to protect the public.

Similar issues affect the pig sector, which we have discussed on several occasions. The position is grave because prices are depressed below costs and have been for almost two years. I have had three meetings with industry representatives in the past fortnight, and we are working closely on a range of measures to help. I hope to have something to tell the House in the next few days, but similar pressures now exist in all UK agricultural sectors, including dairy, poultry and horticulture.

Mr. Oliver Letwin (West Dorset): Before the Minister leaves the subject of pigs, does he envisage some relief on the some £5 a beast that it costs the industry to undertake the measures inspired by the BSE crisis, which have nothing to do with the pig industry?

Mr. Brown: The hon. Gentleman makes a good case: BSE has no direct connection with the pig industry, but that sector has to bear the costs of the recommendations from the Spongiform Encephalopathy Advisory Committee about meat and bonemeal to protect against the dangers of cross-contamination. I am taking a hard look at what can be done on that specific point.

[Mr. Brown]

The hon. Gentleman offers one way forward. It is not the only possible way, and we are examining whether it is possible to return an economic value to the product by going back to SEAC and examining its objections. The hon. Gentleman will recall that I have done that once already, and SEAC confirmed its belief that the rules should remain in place. It set out its reasons, but I intend to return to SEAC, in a November meeting with the Meat and Livestock Commission, to explore our proposals for meeting its objections. We have also explored informally with the Commission how far the Government can assist in that sector. The news is disappointing, because the initial outcome was not hopeful. Any intervention would constitute state aid in what is otherwise a light regime, but discussions are continuing.

Sir Geoffrey Johnson Smith (Wealden): Will the Minister also take into account the position of the egg-producing industry? My constituency contains Stonegate Farmers Ltd., which has a turnover of £100 million, with farms in Sussex and elsewhere. It is suffering badly. The cage, food and hygiene standards regulations have been imposed on it, but not on those who market eggs from abroad. If that situation continues, the industry will go out of business.

Mr. Brown: Separate issues affect the poultry meat and the laying hen sectors. I shall meet the industry soon for a summit to examine all those issues and to consider what can be done. However, as with the pig sector, the regulatory regime in the European Union—the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Inverness, West rightly pointed out the overarching impact of the CAP on the different regimes—is light, and I can do little by way of direct state aid, which is what people tend to ask for first. However, we shall explore all that in some detail.

I shall take two other interventions, but I am conscious that I am using up the time of the House on what is, after all, an Opposition Supply day. I shall give way to the hon. Members for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) and for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath), and then that is it.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): I am most grateful to the Minister for giving way. A young pig farmer in my constituency—Mr. James King of Cowley farm, Preston Bissett, near Buckingham—expressed concern about the Belgian report on dioxins in Danish and Dutch meat. *[Laughter.]* This is a matter of the utmost seriousness and should not arouse levity among Liberal Democrat Members. What specific representations has the Minister made to Danish and Dutch Ministers about this crucial matter?

Mr. Brown: Nobody takes this important issue lightly, and the Liberal Democrats have devoted one of their Supply days to discussing it.

I can tell the hon. Gentleman that I am looking hard at implementing the advice on labelling regimes emanating from my Department. I hope to have something to say about that matter to the House shortly, but any proposals would deal specifically with the question of country of origin.

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome): I wish to return to the vital issue of how we can help the pig industry. The Minister suggested that any support to deal with what are effectively public health issues would be interpreted as state aid. The Belgian Government's actions in relation to dioxins appear to have been accepted without challenge, so why cannot the Minister act similarly to help our hard-pressed pig industry?

Mr. Brown: The rules allow for action in what the European Commission deems to be exceptional circumstances. In the case of Britain, BSE was deemed to be an exceptional circumstance. The over-30-months scheme is a very good example of the regimes in this country that protect the public. That scheme, which is also a powerful market intervention measure, is a European Union regime that is unique to the United Kingdom. Similarly, the effect of the dioxin crisis on the Belgian markets persuaded the Commission to allow the Belgian authorities to introduce unique state aids to deal with that crisis. However, it will not be possible for me or any of my counterparts in other countries to argue that a sustained downturn in price comes within the definition of a crisis.

I hope that that answers the question. The fact that I know the answer illustrates that I have had a hard look at the problem. I want to do all that I can to help the sector get out of the deep trouble that it has been in for some time. We thought that what we achieved in the spring and early summer, when we secured the 20 per cent. premium in the marketplace, would be enough to lift the industry to the break-even point. Disappointingly, the gap between the UK price and the continental European price narrowed. Worse followed when the price started to fall again.

The problem requires a further considered response from the Government. I am working very hard on it, and hope to have something new and comprehensive to tell the House in a matter of days.

I shall now deal with what the Liberal Democrat motion has to say about farmgate prices and the prices that show up in the supermarkets. The motion alleges that profiteering takes place. The Government's approach to the problem is to rely on the investigation of supermarket pricing by the Competition Commission. However, it is worth noting that, although that investigation will look at prices to consumers, it will also scrutinise trading practices throughout the food supply chain. If market power is being exploited anywhere in the chain, the Government will respond very strongly.

In that respect, I repeat what the House will have heard me say before: I am convinced of the importance of getting all elements of the food chain working together collaboratively and co-operatively. I have set up a food chain group of senior figures from the industry, which will report on how best to improve understanding of the chain and how the different parts can best work together for mutual advantage. Part of the way forward lies in adding value and seeking out market premiums for UK produce.

I shall meet the British Retail Consortium shortly, and have arranged a series of meetings with senior management of all the large retailers and major caterers in the UK. *[Interruption.]* I am being invited to get on with it; I am getting on with it, and have been for some

time. I regularly meet representatives of the retail, processing and distribution sectors as well as representatives of farmers and farm businesses.

The National Farmers Union strongly suggested when I met representatives recently—the suggestion is included in the Liberal Democrat motion—that the burden of Government regulation was making a bad situation worse. In response to that generalised charge, the answer to which will be found in the detail rather than in general charges, I have, in partnership with the NFU, set up an industry-led review of the regulatory burden on agriculture. I hope that that review will go across government, not being confined only to matters for which the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food is responsible. I have the support of my ministerial colleagues on that.

Mr. Gill: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Brown: Let me finish my point and then I shall give way, despite what I said earlier about not taking more interventions. The hon. Gentleman is an old hand at agriculture debates, and it would be wrong to keep him out.

We want to minimise bureaucracy. We want to find out how to do things better and to root out all unnecessary restrictions. I have set up three working groups, chaired by representatives of the industry, to examine what the NFU and I felt were the three most urgent—though not the only—areas for review. One group will consider the operation of the integrated administration and control system and on-farm inspections. The second will look into the meat hygiene rules and slaughterhouse regulations. The third will examine the workings of the intervention system.

Mr. Gill: I am most grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for giving way. He has spoken of understanding the problems of over-regulation and the added burden of costs on the industry. Will he therefore take this opportunity to tell the House that he will abandon the pesticides tax?

Mr. Brown: If I were the Chancellor of the Exchequer—given the promotion of the hon. Member for South Suffolk (Mr. Yeo), there is hope for us all—I would willingly do so. I am not the Chancellor—[HON. MEMBERS: "Split."] I am giving no secrets away here. The whole world knows that I am an opponent of a pesticides tax. Tax policy is, however, a matter for the Chancellor, not me, although my views are widely known and loudly put.

Dr. Godman: In fairness to the Liberal Democrats, I remind my right hon. Friend that the motion welcomes the Government's achievement of significant reform of the common agricultural policy in the interests of producers, consumers and taxpayers. The Minister and his colleagues have achieved reform, but does he agree that the CAP is badly flawed? Among other things, it protects and promotes the interests of richer farmers and presents formidable problems for the enlargement of the European Union.

Mr. Brown: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. As we go into the detail of these matters, we must not lose sight of the fact that the CAP is the overarching policy instrument for agriculture and farmers. The case that my hon. Friend makes for reform is also the Government's case. He is right to put it. Not only does the policy impact on how farm business decisions are taken, but it is bound to influence our ambitions for enlargement of the EU. It favours those who produce most because it is essentially a production subsidy. About 20 per cent. of farmers receive 80 per cent. of CAP subsidies. That is logical because of the way the system is structured: it is intended to be a production subsidy.

The case for reform and for moving away from the crude link with production towards the second pillar of the CAP—the rural development measures—as a way of getting moneys to farm businesses and the rural economy is clearly the right way forward. The Government have made a start on all that. In our negotiations, we secured the largest ever reform of the CAP and, more than that, we got each and every regime moving in the right direction. Should we have done more? Of course, I would like to do more, but I am in the vanguard on all this and I have to carry others with me.

Mr. Lembit Öpik (Montgomeryshire): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Brown: I shall have to call a halt soon, but I will take some interventions and curtail my speech.

Mr. Öpik: Some of the changes to Milk Marque may not be helpful in achieving the Minister's goal. Does he agree that, for a long time, Milk Marque has defended the interests of the small farmer?

Mr. Brown: I worked closely with the Milk Marque leadership through what I acknowledge has been a difficult time for it. I also met representatives of the dairy processing industry and tried to act as an honest broker through a time that was difficult for both sides of the industry, but particularly difficult for the producer side when producer incomes have been low. I yield to no one in my support for farm and producer co-operation in the dairy sector. The leadership of Milk Marque, given the Competition Commission report, which I know farmers do not like, has been right—indeed, brave—to respond in the way in which it has. This is the right way forward for dairy producers.

Mr. John Burnett (Torridge and West Devon): I am delighted to hear that there is to be a review of bureaucracy in agriculture. Will the Minister assure the House that it will consider the introduction of an appeal mechanism against the decisions of the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, which currently acts as judge, jury, prosecutor and defender in giving decisions to individual farmers?

Mr. Brown: It is not for me to tell the review what response I want from it. My understanding is that that issue is being considered, and certainly I have considered it within the Department. The difficulty is that the rules are very rigid and there is a risk of disallowance with substantial penalties if they are not rigidly followed. In our country, there is a tradition, in most aspects of our administrative life, of being tolerant of genuine errors. The European Union rules are much more rigidly drawn because they have to apply across the whole European Union. Within the constraints that the rules place on us, we are looking at what could be done and, in particular, whether it would be possible to operate a workable

[Mr. Brown]

appeals mechanism. However, I do not think that an appeals mechanism under the CAP schemes could ever deliver as much as something devised more generally to suit public administration in the United Kingdom. The constraints are very tight.

I said that I would curtail my speech because I have taken interventions. I think that that is what the House wanted. I do not want to eat into the time of other hon. Members, but it is right to respond to some of the key points made by the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Inverness, West and to the specific ways forward advocated by the Liberal Democrats. They are right to identify the overarching importance of the CAP and the case for reform. The motion is light on advocating specific remedies, although the right hon. Gentleman advocated some in his speech. He mentioned the calf disposal and cull ewe schemes.

I looked hard at the representations that I received from the Meat and Livestock Commission, among others, on the cull ewe disposal scheme proposition. It is being considered by Ministers in other Agriculture Departments, in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Alongside that is the request for a modified calf disposal scheme. Both schemes come up against a difficulty with which many of us will be familiar: the Commission's attitude to extra and unlawful state aids—state aids additional to the CAP. As a general point, we all want to help agriculture to get through what are acknowledged to be difficult times, in some sectors more than in others. It would be better to put our efforts into devising workable schemes on the demand side—I shall say a little about that in a moment—rather than trying to supplement the supply side of the CAP. That is the hurdle at which these ideas have fallen.

The only alternative would have been to reopen the whole calf-processing aid scheme in abattoirs in parts of the country, or perhaps throughout the whole country, until the end of the year. I thought carefully about that, and listened carefully to the representations that I received from the NFU when the scheme was due to close last November, because that was the position that I inherited. Hon. Members will know that I managed to obtain money from the reserve to continue the scheme until April, when I used moneys that I was able to draw together within the Department to continue the scheme, at a reduced rate, for as long as I could. I would have liked to reduce the rate further and to continue the scheme for longer in order to provide a market signal and a period of transition towards the eventual ending of the scheme EU-wide. That will happen at the end of this year. Some EU countries have closed the scheme; others still use it.

The Commission took the view that it could allow only a modest variation in the EU-wide scheme for any individual member state. It relied on the figure of 20 per cent. It would be difficult to get the Commission to agree if we tried to introduce a scheme with a variation of more than 20 per cent., but, in any event, any EU scheme, under the CAP, must be open to all. Under the CAP, it is not possible to bring in partial schemes unless they are specifically permitted. Of course, the calf-processing aid scheme is not such a scheme.

I pay tribute, as I have done before, to the Ministers with responsibility for agriculture in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland for trying to help the industries, in their Administrations, through difficult times. It is wrong for parliamentarians to criticise them for trying.

I have already dealt with other matters that were mentioned by the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Inverness, West—supermarkets and the regulatory burden. I intend to say something about labelling soon; I am currently considering the regulations. In relation to standards abroad and at home, it is not legal to offer for sale goods, whether produced at home or imported, that do not meet our health and hygiene standards. I warn the whole House against trying to go down a protectionist road, with the use of instruments such as article 36—the example that is usually quoted by the Conservatives—as somehow allowing us to ban the import of produce from abroad that does not meet domestic welfare standards. I have sought the best possible available advice on that point, and I intend to put it in the Library so that we can all share it. However, it is clear that article 36 will not serve for that purpose. I intend to put the evidence in the Library; more than that I cannot do.

The right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Inverness, West raised the issue of genetically modified materials.

Mr. Tom King (Bridgwater): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Brown: I really must come to a conclusion.

Mr. King: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Brown: I am a soft-hearted character; I shall give way to the right hon. Gentleman.

Mr. King: Everyone understands the Minister's difficulty in trying to impose a ban on imports from countries that do not share our animal welfare standards. Although we want the highest welfare standards to apply in this country, when any new requirement is introduced is it not important to bear in mind the fact that that requirement cannot be imposed on other countries and that we are unable to prevent imports from countries whose producers do not have to bear the same costs as ours?

Mr. Brown: I made exactly that point in almost the same way at the Council of Ministers meeting that discussed that issue in relation to the poultry sector. I was one of several Ministers who advocated taking forward the trade aspects of animal welfare in the coming World Trade Organisation round, and I received the support of other Ministers in that. Moreover, we got the toughest ever statement from the Commission on the subject of farm animal welfare.

The right hon. Gentleman has correctly identified one of the dangers, which is that we insist on the highest standards, but find that, by so doing, we have exported the industry and so end up with neither a victory for animal welfare nor an industry. In my view, that would be a foolish course of action and I said so at the Council of Ministers. However, I do not conclude from that that we should resile from our ambitions for farm animal welfare. We should fight to obtain a premium for higher

farm animal welfare standards in the domestic marketplace and take a hard look at how farm animal welfare issues can be accommodated within the CAP. The matter will inevitably come up for discussion during the WTO round. It is early days yet, but no one should doubt the line that I shall pursue. In the meantime, I am alert to the impact on the domestic market, especially in a time of difficulties.

The right hon. Gentleman will remember that, in 1991, when we introduced changes in the pig sector, including the stall and tether ban, we allowed an eight-year conversion period. I make no political point: those, including myself, who voted for those measures believed that what we were doing was right in terms of animal welfare and that the industry could accommodate the changes. If we had asked pig farmers in 1995 and 1996 whether the industry could accommodate the changes, they would have said yes, of course, in part because, for a range of reasons, the new production systems were better than the old ones. Now, when margins are pinched or non-existent—producers in the pig sector now sustain losses—the effect of those changes on those who invested and are carrying debt is hard to bear. I want to find a way forward that specifically addresses the circumstances of the pig sector.

The right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Inverness, West raised the subject of genetically modified organisms. He is right to emphasise the scientific impact and the need for the Government to stick to the science and to ensure that we are professionally advised. He is also right to say that consumer confidence has been badly shaken. We are setting up the Food Standards Agency to ensure that the professional advice given to Ministers, including me when I attend policy meetings of the Council of Ministers, is seen to be independent of ministerial or departmental government and to have been cast in an independent and scientific setting. I accept that it will take time, but I hope that the creation of that agency and the drawing together of the public protection work undertaken within government will have an impact on consumer confidence and trust. That trust has been shaken, and it is the duty of Government to restore it.

I have been generous in giving way and I do not want to take up other hon. Members' speaking time, so I shall draw my remarks to a close by drawing the House's attention to some of the ways forward. As I said, we should look more at the demand side and less at the supply side when trying to help the industry through difficult times. There are good prospects for farmers' markets, a movement that is in its infancy in this country. I lay great personal emphasis on the farm assurance schemes, such as the Meat and Livestock Commission's British meat pork mark, which give the consumer the opportunity to purchase goods that have been produced to the higher United Kingdom standards. I should be willing to give my support to marketing schemes that emphasised the advantages of farm-assured produce.

The recent growth in the organic sector, prompted by support from my Department, is welcome. So popular is the scheme that not only is it oversubscribed for the current year, but the waiting list for next year is now oversubscribed. I am considering how we can take that forward. We doubled the support given to the sector, and even that has proved insufficient to meet demand.

There are great possibilities in making use of regional speciality food endorsements and in trying to link the food industry, especially the farmgate food industry, with regional tourism. There are opportunities there, and we can also make use of the European Union legal protection of registered names.

Diversification will continue to be important. About 40 per cent. of all farm businesses have a significant non-farm-based income stream, and I expect that to continue. I do not want to see the eastern part of the country turned into a prairie or the western part into a single ranch, but the trend for farm businesses to merge and grow larger is remorseless, and I expect that to continue. However, we must ensure that it does not become the dominant outcome.

I believe in producer co-operation, and everything that I have said about the dairy sector underpins that. I believe in producer clubs, too, and the joined-up food chain with producers, processors and distributors recognising their community of interest and the long-term nature of the investment that they put into their businesses. In summary, the future is with the demand-side measures, rather than struggling to supplement the common agricultural policy on the supply side.

We are going through a period of change. In 10 years' time, the position will not be the same as it is now. I am committed to working in a non-political way with the industry and others affected by it. Many of the issues are economic rather than political, and it is important that we find a response that is rational and will work and will help the industry through the difficult times that are partly cyclical, but partly structural as well.

I welcome the contribution that the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Inverness, West has made to our discussions of such matters in the past, and the constructive attitude taken by his party towards those issues. Nevertheless, I urge the House to support the amendment.

4.47 pm

Mr. Tim Yeo (South Suffolk): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Inverness, West (Mr. Kennedy) on his elevation to the leadership of his party; I am sure that he will provide us with plenty of entertainment in that role in the months and years to come. I have not tabled an amendment to his motion because I agree with many, in fact most, of the sentiments in it. I shall therefore not ask my hon. Friends to vote against it at the end of the debate.

I welcome the chance to debate the crisis in agriculture and in the countryside, and to examine the solutions that the Government have so often ignored or rejected. I was disappointed by the Minister's speech; it was similar to many of the offerings that we have heard over the past year, and can be summed up as follows: "I'm frightfully sorry about the ghastly mess, chaps, but there's nothing I can do about it."

As usual, we are debating agriculture in Opposition time. In April and July we had Conservative Opposition day debates on agriculture, and I welcome the Liberals' decision to use their first available half-day for that purpose. Only the Government consistently refuse to debate agriculture in their own time, perhaps because Labour policies have made the crisis in agriculture worse,

[Mr. Tim Yeo]

not better—or perhaps because they refuse to recognise the central role of farming both in the rural economy and in the protection of the environment.

Only today we read in *The Times* about a Cabinet Office proposal to end the protection of prime agricultural land. Here is a litmus test for Labour. Any weakening in the restrictions on developing prime farmland will not only be disastrous for the environment, but will send a chilling signal to farmers that the Labour party does not believe that agriculture has any long-term future in modern Britain, and that cool Britannia means covering prime farmland with houses and theme parks.

On 20 September, the Minister announced a package of measures to which he made little or no reference during his 45-minute speech.

Mr. Nick Brown: The only reason that I did not refer to the package of support that I announced for the industry is that I told the House that I would curtail my speech so that I could take interventions, and that was precisely the part of the speech that was curtailed.

Mr. Patrick Nicholls (Teignbridge): That shows what the Minister thinks of the package.

Mr. Yeo: As my hon. Friend suggests, the fact that the package found no place in the Minister's 45-minute speech suggests that he does not attach much importance to it. It is fortunate that I shall now deal with the matter.

Many of the individual measures were very welcome, but as so often happens with the Labour party, the reality did not live up to the spin. The package's cash value to farmers was not as high as the Government implied. Perhaps the Home Secretary had a hand in preparing the figures. Most of the money is European Union agrimonetary aid, paid directly from EU funds, which had been agreed before the announcement. Only £150 million of the package remained, and that consisted partly of a postponement of specified risk material removal charges and charges for cattle passports. In other words, those were decisions not to increase existing burdens on an almost crippled livestock sector for the purpose of swelling the Treasury's already overflowing coffers. The third element was a decision to maintain hill livestock compensatory allowances at the current rate for another year. In other words, that was a decision not to withdraw help from an extremely hard-pressed sector.

Against that background, it is understandable that farmers were less than ecstatic. It is hard to quarrel with the verdict in the leader in the *Farmers Guardian*, which said that the package would not

"make any real difference across the farming industry as a whole."

Mr. Brown: The hon. Gentleman has been a Minister, and he will know that the £150 million is new money. It ensures that burdens that were to be placed on farmers will not be placed on them. There is new money also in the hill livestock compensatory allowances, which are easily the best way to help the livestock sector in the uplands, where the key problem for sheep farmers lies. When I announced the £60 million last year, I said that it was a one-off and that the allowances could not continue in the future. I said that it was a specific programme designed to help people who needed it immediately. As the problem endures—indeed, it is proving to be intractable—the Government decided to make the aid available again. That is new money, which I was careful to ensure people did not anticipate because the allowances were intended to last for one year.

Mr. Yeo: The Minister is a little sensitive on that point. I cannot find many farmers who think that deferring the imposition of an additional charge for cattle passports represents the provision of new money. The Government have decided not to take from farmers as much money as they had intended at a time when the Minister has himself acknowledged that farm incomes are lower than at any time during the 18 years of the previous Government. I welcome that decision, but it does not qualify for the Minister's generous description of it.

A particularly startling aspect of the package is its complete failure to mention pigs. I wonder whether the Minister, when he made his announcement, realised the severity of the problems with which pig farmers are grappling. British pig producers are teetering on the brink of disaster. The British sow herd is contracting, in contrast to the herds of Denmark, Spain, Germany and Holland. British imports of pigmeat from the rest of the European Union are rising. The British pig industry is now being exported, partly to countries that have lower animal welfare standards than ours. Week by week, the Government's policy of malign neglect is destroying the British pig farmer. I urge the Minister to take further action before it is too late.

The first step must be to introduce honesty in labelling. It is outrageous that British consumers are sold items of pigmeat that may be labelled British even though the pigs were reared abroad, under conditions now considered too dangerous or cruel to be allowed in this country. The fact that those imports are produced in ways that are illegal in Britain need not even be disclosed at the point of sale to the consumer. Every food item should be labelled with the country of origin—showing where the food is grown, not where it is processed—and with the method of production, so that those consumers who want to do so can support high standards.

Mr. Brown: What the hon. Gentleman says is very fair, and I am looking very hard at the discretion that I have within the labelling regimes. However, could tell the House the constraints that there were on the previous Government in doing what he now advocates?

Mr. Yeo: I shall tell the Minister the exact position. Under the previous Government, the British pig industry was not being exported. The need for desperate measures has arisen because of the present crisis in the pig sector. If I took the Minister to any pig farmer in the United Kingdom, he would say, "We would love to get back to where we were before May 1997." Desperate measures are now needed as a result of the Government's neglect of the issues, their hostility to the countryside and their contempt for agriculture.

This debate is being listened to extremely carefully by pig farmers throughout Britain, many of whom have been in touch individually with me and with my hon. Friends over the past few days, and they will be dismayed to hear the Minister falling back on a cheap party political point at a time when they will be calculating—possibly even

this evening—how much longer they can continue in business. We now know the truth about how much Labour really cares for pig farmers.

Mr. Keith Simpson (Mid–Norfolk): Hon. Members frequently use the word "crisis" and it becomes almost meaningless, but I fully concur with what my hon. Friend says. This summer in my constituency, I have met dozens of pig farmers who are facing bankruptcy in the next few weeks. What we are looking for from the Minister—I accept that he hopes to announce some proposals next week—are some real, hard proposals to lift this crisis from the pig industry. Good words and phrases will not be sufficient. Many pig farmers will go bust in the next few weeks.

Mr. Yeo: My hon. Friend is absolutely right.

The second step that is needed is to block the imports of food that has been grown in ways that are not allowed in this country. The Minister mentioned that in his speech. I welcome the fact that he will publish the advice that he has received. We shall study it with great interest.

This week, the Minister wrote to me saying:

"Member states cannot introduce a unilateral import ban or impose national standards unrelated to public or animal health".

If our ban on feeding meat and bonemeal is not related to public or animal health, what on earth is it related to?

The third step that is needed is to prevent the public sector from buying pigmeat that does not meet British standards. The Minister has told the House:

"I have on my desk draft letters waiting to go out to the major public authorities—the prisons, the health authorities and local authorities—not via other Departments but directly, urging them to source products of the highest welfare and animal hygiene standards".—[*Official Report*, 1 July 1999; Vol. 334, c. 422.]

Before Agriculture questions in the House tomorrow, will the Minister place in the Library copies of those letters and the replies that, in the past three and a half months, he has received from the recipients of his letters, so that the pig farmers can see precisely which authorities are ready to support them?

Mr. Brown: I shall not do that; I shall make my own announcement in my own time in the next few days.

Mr. Yeo: When the Minister makes his announcement, will he publish those letters so that we may see exactly whom he wrote to and exactly who bothered to reply?

The fourth step that is needed—which has been mentioned—is to help pig farmers meet the extra costs of offal disposal. The Select Committee on Agriculture made a recommendation on that subject in January 1999, and in the past few weeks the British pig industry support group has again raised the subject. That is another burden that many competitors overseas do not bear. Recently, Belgium secured European Union approval for the help that it has given to its pig farmers in the wake of the dioxin crisis, and I hope that Britain will be able to do the same.

The beef on the bone ban was imposed by the Minister's unlamented predecessor, and we know what has happened to him in the past 10 days. The ban has exposed Labour's disastrous combination of weakness and muddle more clearly than any other issue. The Minister keeps saying that he cannot lift the ban because of the scientific evidence. However, last month, as he has acknowledged, the chief medical officer for England said that the ban on the retail sale of beef on the bone could be lifted. Nevertheless, the Minister still will not act. Apparently, this is because officials in Wales and Scotland do not agree with the CMO. Does devolution mean that the UK is a convoy that can travel only at the speed of the slowest ship? Does it mean that unelected bureaucrats in Cardiff and Edinburgh now make the policy that applies to England? Does it mean that the Minister is too weak to stand up for the rights of English consumers? How can he expect the French Government to have confidence in British beef when the British Government do not have it?

It is almost 11 months since the Minister announced to Parliament:

"We have achieved a major objective of our policy towards Europe in the lifting of the beef export ban."—[*Official Report*, 25 November 1998; Vol. 321, c.190.]

On 17 December, the right hon. Gentleman referred to that as

"a major breakthrough reflecting months of dialogue within the European Commission and with our European partners."

He made a confident prediction about the timing. He said:

"I anticipate that we will be able to start exporting deboned beef by the spring of next year."—[*Official Report*, 17 December 1998; Vol. 322, c. 1091.]

That timetable has slipped a bit. However, on 21 April 1999, during an Opposition debate on the crisis in farming, the right hon. Gentleman was at it again. He said:

"We are on target towards the lifting of the beef ban. We are on timetable."—[*Official Report*, 21 April 1999; Vol. 329, c.991.]

Three months later, he was back in the House announcing once again the lifting of the ban. This time we were given a date—1 August. When I had the temerity to suggest that it might be well into August before exports actually started, the Minister slapped me down in a rather uncharacteristically petulant way. He said:

"1 August is the start of August. How can that possibly be grudgingly described 'as well into August?'"

For the record, the first beef to be exported—not sold but taken abroad for a promotional lunch—was on 23 August. For anyone who wondered how this great achievement was secured, the Minister told us, again on 14 July, that

"Labour leadership in Europe and our constructive approach towards our European partners has clearly been shown to succeed."—[*Official Report*, 14 July 1999; Vol. 335, c. 405-07.]

So now we know. However, three months later hardly any British beef has been sold abroad. When the Minister came to Parliament to boast of his success in lifting the export ban, he had not even checked with the French authorities that they would accept British beef.

Mr. Brown: We get used to this bombastic twaddle, but I shall correct one factual point. As the hon. Gentleman says, those who are watching the debate and following what he says may think that he is making a serious contribution. Incidentally, there is not a word of apology from the hon. Gentleman about the BSE crisis nor a reference to the Government who presided over it in the first place. There is not a word of apology from him about the previous Government's misguided and disastrous approach to the negotiations within the European Union when they were in charge.

[Mr. Brown]

As I have said, I shall correct a factual point, which is important to the industry and important also to those who may be following the debate. The fact is that beef on the bone has nothing to do with the export of British beef through the date-based export scheme—the arrangements for which were devised under the previous Government—which is for de-boned beef. The hon. Gentleman knows that because he read it out. He should not mislead people into believing that somehow the two issues are connected. They are not.

Mr. Yeo: I think that even the Minister acknowledged in one of his previous statements on this subject that the agreement of the European Commission was secured on the basis of the terms set out at the Florence summit, when Conservative Ministers were negotiating the details. I welcome the fact that the Minister has been able to continue that process, but I deplore the fact that on several occasions he has raised the hopes of British beef farmers that the export ban was about to be lifted. On too many occasions, those hopes have been dashed.

It is deplorable that the Minister made a statement in the House without having established clearly with France—which, incidentally, abstained at the Council last November, so he was on notice that it would need more persuading than some other countries—that one of our most important markets was ready to take British beef. That had nothing to do with the Conservatives. It was the Minister's statement, for which he must take responsibility, just as Labour must take responsibility for the absurd ban on beef on the bone, which, like it or not, is damaging confidence in a British product at home and abroad.

The truth is that the statements made by the Minister on the subject at regular intervals, just like the statements of the Prime Minister himself, are not designed to help Britain's beef farmers. They have been designed to win Labour headlines, like the rest of the Government's agricultural policy. It is about spin, not substance. The price of that obsession with headlines has been paid week in, week out by Britain's farmers.

To help the Minister to learn the facts of life, I invite him to join me on a fact-finding visit to France in the very near future, to learn at first hand about French attitudes towards British beef and about food standards in France, especially those relating to meat.

Beef is not the only issue on which the Government have been undermining our farmers. That has happened in the dairy sector as well. The Minister will recall that discussions about the common agricultural policy reforms were concluded in March, and that after the settlement the Prime Minister's spokesman was quoted in *The Times* as saying that the outcome was

"not satisfactory as far as we are concerned."

That deal proposed that milk quotas, which currently prevent Europe from responding to growing world demand for dairy products, should continue until 2006. While Britain's milk quota will be effectively frozen until 2003—I know that there is a very small increase—four countries, including Ireland, which is already four times self-sufficient in dairy products, will receive a substantially higher quota next year.

The direct result of that negotiation will be that Britain's dairy farmers, already struggling with low prices and denied the chance to meet the needs of British consumers, will be further undercut by cheap Irish exports next year, while they remain prevented by quota limits from increasing their own production, despite having some of the best dairy-farming land in the whole of Europe.

If that was not bad enough, the Prime Minister, chasing his headlines about Britain's budget rebate, made it clear to fellow Heads of Government at Berlin that farming did not matter to him, so they gratefully accepted the offer to sell British farmers down the river and they extended the quota regime for a further two years, till 2008.

Mr. David Drew (Stroud): I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way. Unless the Opposition have changed their minds over recent months, I understand that it is Conservative policy to end the quota. Given that there is currently a surplus of milk in Europe, how do they intend to keep prices up if the quota regime is removed?

Mr. Yeo: Ending the quota is a necessary objective if we are to allow Britain's farmers the opportunity to compete, as they should, against other dairy farmers. I do not suggest that ending the quota would suddenly have some miraculously upward effect on the milk price. Of course it will not, but it is not intended to do that. It is intended to allow Britain to take advantage of the conditions that we enjoy in this country to compete more freely than we can do at present against dairy farmers in other EU countries.

Labour's milk policy has not ended with the damage done in the CAP reforms. In July, the much delayed Monopolies and Mergers Commission report was published. Labour decided to prevent Milk Marque, the largest dairy farming co-operative in Britain, at least at that time, from doing what other European countries encouraged their dairy farm co-operatives to do—to invest in processing and to use vertical integration to give farmers a chance to benefit from higher value added products. At the very time that it is preaching to farmers about the need to be more market oriented, Labour is blocking dairy farmers from moving in that direction. As usual, Labour is saying one thing and doing another.

In the interests of time, I also shall omit some of what I wanted to say, but I gather from the Minister's remarks that we may get another opportunity to debate these matters in the House before long. I shall touch briefly on three subjects. Badgers and bovine tuberculosis are a growing problem that is a real threat for many farmers. My hon. Friend the Member for South-East Cambridgeshire (Mr. Paice) wrote to the Minister over a month ago asking about the progress of the Krebs trials. He is awaiting a reply. There are worrying reports about laboratories being shut down. Ignoring the problem certainly will not make it go away, and I hope that Parliament will be informed of the steps that the Government are taking to address it.

On abattoirs, the much-delayed publication of the Pratt report on the impact of meat inspection charges confirmed what everyone knew, except perhaps the Minister and his officials. The report states in its conclusions:

"It is clear that . . . the British meat industry is seriously disadvantaged compared to other member states through a whole range of costs to do with meat inspection".

When another slaughterhouse closes down every week, forcing farmers to send animals on ever-longer journeys, and when the costs and burdens on slaughterhouses cut the prices paid to farmers for their livestock, still further action is needed at once. I and many others have warned for months of the damage that over-regulation and excessive costs are inflicting on the industry. The Minister's reaction—the announcement of yet another review—is simply too little, too late.

Mr. Bob Blizzard (Waveney): A few moments ago, the hon. Gentleman said that he would omit part of his speech. Is he planning to omit his solutions to the problems that we have been discussing? All I have heard so far are four proposals for pig farming: two are illegal, one is already being implemented by the Government and one, concerning labelling, was not implemented by his party when it was in government. Then there was a lot of hot air about the beef on the bone ban, which is irrelevant, and criticism for delay—*[Interruption.]* It is irrelevant to the lifting of the beef ban, which he is criticising the Government for delaying. Their policy is an absolute success compared with the policy of non-co-operation in Europe, or "PONCE", that his Government pursued disastrously for this country and which got us into this mess.

Mr. Yeo: I hope that every consumer and farmer in the Waveney constituency notes carefully the hon. Gentleman's statement that the ban on beef on the bone is irrelevant. I was going to omit, but shall now reinstate in my speech, the fact that last November, when the Minister made the first of the many statements about the lifting of the beef export ban, the hon. Gentleman told the House that champagne corks were popping in his constituency. I hope that he will now apologise to those farmers, who are still unable to sell beef on the bone to the customers who want to eat it, for reacting so absurdly and ignorantly.

Mr. Blizzard: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Yeo: Not again; we have had enough nonsense from the hon. Gentleman.

Mr. Nicholas Soames (Mid-Sussex): Will my hon. Friend ask the Minister to prepare a scheme whereby any further regulation in the agriculture sector will be tested against the overbearing and overarching costs that are driving farmers to the wall? I understand that the dairy herd tags are to be changed yet again, putting another obligation on already hard-pressed dairy farmers. What on earth could have prevailed on the Ministry to make it insist on a further change?

Mr. Yeo: My hon. Friend is absolutely right and I welcome his suggestion, which is made with the benefit of his period as a Minister at the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food. We need to test regulations much more carefully for their impact, particularly on the small businesses that dominate the agriculture sector. I also suggest—this arises directly from the Pratt report—that we should stop interpreting these regulations over-zealously. It is clear that even those regulations that we have accepted for perfectly good reasons are interpreted wholly differently in Britain, and usually much more onerously in respect of farmers, than in many other European Union countries.

Mr. Brown: I make the hon. Gentleman an offer: if he can give me a specific example of that, I shall have it looked at, at once.

Mr. Yeo: The ban on beef on the bone and abattoirs. I refer the Minister to the Pratt report. His officials should be following up its recommendations and finding out exactly how the inspection regime is operated in other EU countries. I know that they tried to suppress the report for several weeks, because they were embarrassed about the conclusions, but now it is in the open I hope that there will be a systematic response to find out exactly where we are going further than other EU countries. I shall certainly respond to the Minister's suggestion in more detail after the debate.

The debate is timely because the crisis in agriculture became significantly worse during the parliamentary summer recess. The British pig industry is being destroyed; dairy farmers are being driven out of business; beef farmers suffer as muddle and incompetence put off the day when the task of rebuilding confidence in their product can begin; sheep farmers are reduced to the heartbreaking task of shooting their own flocks; and cereal farmers are threatened with new burdens, though I welcome the Minister's statement about his opposition to the pesticide tax and hope that he will not be forced to resign should the Chancellor of the Exchequer overrule him. Horticulture farmers face an arbitrary and ineffective climate change levy and slaughterhouses disappear week by week, but all he can offer is a package postponing the imposition of yet more burdens and yet another round of consultation and review.

All that has taken place against a background of a recommendation from the Cabinet Office that prime agricultural land should be taken out of production so that it can be used for housing. The Minister needs to understand that his failure to respond to those challenges and Labour's neglect of agriculture and the countryside is leading directly and rapidly to a rural crisis so severe that the damage from it will take generations to repair. Only a change of Government will avert that crisis and, for the sake of the countryside, the sooner that happens the better.

5.17 pm

Mr. Mark Todd (South Derbyshire): It will not be too difficult to rise above that contribution.

In the European context, British farming has many natural advantages, certainly in terms of scale and climate, yet we have a struggling sector. The Opposition's response is that the problem is lack of Government intervention, and that we need further protectionism and cash support. Uncomfortable though it is to say this, I firmly believe that farming needs less Government intervention, rather than more, and that cash support needs to be reduced over the long term and transferred to payment towards social, environmental and welfare goals.

Subsidising production—particularly inefficient production offering no other gain—is harmful to farming. Regulating and organising the sector through state and parastate bodies stifles innovation, discourages market awareness and encourages dependence. Such regulation as

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we require should be constantly reviewed against tests of effectiveness and competitiveness. I shall concentrate on what we are achieving by what we are doing and on what impact we are having on the competitiveness of the sector that we are supposedly trying to help.

Much the most significant feature of the welcome recent aid package was the announcement of a series of joint working groups to examine the weight and cost of regulation in the sector and its impact on competitiveness. That represents a change of stance by the Government. I have pursued this issue relentlessly in my time as a Member. Early last year, I tabled a parliamentary question asking the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food

"if he will publish comparisons of charges made to ensure public health in the slaughter process in the United Kingdom with those prevailing in other EU states",

to which the answer was:

"The information requested is not available"—[*Official Report*, 12 February 1998; Vol. 306, c. *373*.]

The response added that this issue was essentially a concern of individual member states and that it was for the European Commission to pursue any discrepancies. At the end of that month, when I pursued the matter further and asked

"pursuant to his answer . . . concerning charges for veterinary inspection and controls, if he will make it his policy to collect the information necessary to allow comparisons of charges across the member states of the European Union."

the former Minister of State, who is always a straight man, replied:

"No. Given the flexibility of the EC rules"—[*Official Report*, 26 February 1998; Vol. 307, c. *317*.]

He then gave the same explanation, which was that this was a matter for individual member states and the responsibility of the European Commission.

Mr. Letwin: The hon. Gentleman makes a serious and important point. Does he agree that, if the idea of a regulatory impact assessment were being taken seriously, in relation to all the regulations that he describes, the regulatory impact assessment would inevitably also look at the comparative costs of the countries with which we compete.

Mr. Todd: Yes, I agree with the hon. Gentleman. I would extend that view to my experience of regulation in other sectors. I spent my career in the private sector before joining this House, and I have puzzled over the process of regulatory impact reviews and their effectiveness. The hon. Gentleman therefore makes a fair point.

Fortunately, the Government's attitude changed, and in the autumn of last year a review—perhaps partly prompted by my further letters to the Minister saying that the matter needed to be looked at further—produced a study of comparative costs and approaches to regulation within the European Union for the slaughter sector. The study, which lies in the House of Commons Library, reveals that some countries openly subsidise the slaughter sector, and that Government subsidies are available to the various slaughter operators. For other countries, the information was so hazy that it was hard to say exactly what was going on. In Spain, for instance, the study says—it is couched in careful wording—that

"Anecdotal evidence suggests there may be considerable variation in the pursuit of charges. Information received from unofficial sources suggests that charges may not be collected in all regions. Evidence to support this has not been provided."

Sadly, a picture emerged of extremely incomplete information about the regulations and charging structure in that sector, and certainly of substantial variances from the British practice. I am glad to say that that has been built on by further Government research demonstrating that that is indeed the case, and that the matter has been pursued with the European Commission, which is responsible for ensuring that regulations are imposed evenly across the European Union.

That is welcome, but the next step, in which the Government are engaged in their latest review, is to involve the industry in looking closely at how the regulatory burden works, and the costs associated with it in the competitive context, which is the real world of much of our livestock sector. We trade most of our livestock products internationally—although sadly not fully in beef as yet—and we must face the fact that the costs borne by our producers are also experienced in different forms by our competitors. If we choose to levy different burdens, that has an impact on our competitiveness.

That is a welcome and realistic recognition of the significance, in both financial and morale terms, of the perceived inequities in the burdens faced by the sector. Farmers constantly tell me of the burdens which they think other member states' farmers face, and of the lack of regulation in other member states. We need truth and transparency, which is what we are gradually working towards.

I also welcome the hold placed on increased charges in the last package pending a full appraisal of their competitiveness impact and a review of their effectiveness in achieving public health goals. That is an important initiative, which is belittled by Opposition Front-Bench Members, who say that the Government are putting off a charging regime which perhaps should not have been imposed at all. The announcement is much larger than that and looks at deferring the charges and at the effectiveness of the whole regime. That is welcome, too.

I also commend the review of common agricultural policy administration conducted within MAFF last year. That is another subject that produces laughable anecdotes from farmers whom I represent about how inspection regimes operate in other member states. The review highlighted both significant savings that might be available in the administration of the CAP and the potential reduction in the bureaucracy that faces farmers in carrying out their tasks and conforming with the regime.

It is perhaps regrettable that it took that review, which was conducted externally by Coopers and Lybrand, to recommend establishing something as obvious as a best practice unit to identify the best ways to implement the rigours of the common agricultural policy across the various regional centres through which MAFF delivers the CAP process. It is surprising that such an initiative needed to be made and had not been identified previously.

Properly addressing the concerns of over-regulation is one strand of a strategy for assisting farming, but there are others. As parts of farming move progressively from

being regulated and directed, farmers need specific help. The recent MAFF publications on how to use the additional flexibility after Agenda 2000 make some interesting suggestions on how we should develop current initiatives and look at other ways of assisting farmers. Early retirement, support for marketing initiatives, training and retraining for farmers and support for co-operatives all feature, and those are steps that I would commend. I would add to those the encouragement that could be given to joint ventures along the food supply chain, which the Minister mentioned in his speech.

We must consider how to improve the supply chain throughout its length. Let us take milk as an example, and step into a future in which we have no quotas. I agree with the Opposition spokesman that we should move in that direction, although the hon. Gentleman is not sufficiently economically literate to understand its implications in terms of pricing. Nevertheless, efficient and well-organised British farmers would welcome that prospect. We must look at how to take maximum advantage of that freedom and the particular strengths that we have in Britain, which would enable us to have a highly competitive dairy sector. It is crucial to look at the various links in the supply chain, and at the inefficiencies that exist.

There is clearly a problem with the efficiency of our dairy processing sector, whose costs—in raw terms—are probably twice as high as those of its foreign competitors. We could not possibly sustain that in an open marketplace. It would be a burden on our sector and would hinder innovation and competitiveness. We must focus our efforts on attempting to improve our performance. Part of that improvement can come from a bottom-up process of encouraging farmers to move further up the food supply chain and take more responsibility for processing and retailing.

That is one area where further work is required. Let me give a specific example of another way in which we could proceed.

Mr. James Gray (North Wiltshire): If the hon. Gentleman believes that dairy farmers should move up the supply chain as he describes, will he explain why the Government have taken great steps to tell Milk Marque, which produces only 38 per cent. of milk, that it may not be a processor?

Mr. Todd: Indeed. Milk Marque's mistake was to attempt to integrate the processing of milk, in which it was making commendable and intelligent steps through the acquisition of Aeron, for example, and other businesses, with the collection, transport and selling of milk. Obviously, that would place the sector at a disadvantage.

Mr. Paul Tyler (North Cornwall): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Todd: Will the hon. Gentleman allow me first to finish my answer to the previous intervention?

The major purchaser and seller of milk would also be processing the milk in one corporate environment. In discussions with Milk Marque, I suggested to it that it should put the processing sector in a separate co-operative under separate management, thus freeing up the relationship between the purchasing and transport operation and processing. That would have solved many of the problems.

Mr. Tyler: I seek to help because neither the hon. Gentleman nor the hon. Member for North Wiltshire (Mr. Gray) who just intervened were involved in the previous Parliament in producing the legislation on which the decision about Milk Marque was based. It was entirely owing to Conservative legislation that the mess occurred. The failure of milk marketing is entirely due to the previous Government's failure to understand the need to free up the co-operatives to enable them to perform effectively.

Mr. Todd: I welcome that contribution. Perhaps I am insufficiently party political to be able to make such points freely. Essentially, I took them as read—perhaps the hon. Member for North Wiltshire (Mr. Gray) had forgotten that piece of history and I did not want to waste time reminding him of it, but nevertheless it is true.

As the Minister rightly said, the Government have substantially increased the aid given for the conversion of farms to organic produce. Those of us familiar with the sector recognise the problem. Farmers go through a period of no or minimal income as they convert their farms to an appropriate organic environment. Clearly, they have cash flow problems during that time.

What has puzzled me is why the retail sector, which is doing extremely well with organic produce and is seeking more of it, has not been more active in assisting farmers in going down that path. It is assisting farmers by looking at longer-term contracts to try to ensure that those making the change can be confident of a market for their produce later, but the cost of dealing with that gap in production has been left very much to the Government to support, together with the farmers themselves.

I see no reason why the Government should not encourage the retail sector to engage in cost-matching the conversion process. Increasing the amount of organic produce available to customers is very much in the interests of the British retail sector. That is what customers want and, as far as one can tell, the retail sector should be able to achieve good margins from selling such produce. It should be in its interests to move down the value chain to assist that process of change and to make up for the present gap in production. That is my concrete suggestion.

The development of regional economic strategies, which offer huge potential. I particularly commend the east midlands draft strategy, which places the food sector at the heart of the document with an innovative proposal for a university for food to combine the research, educational and industrial interests of the sector. Those regional strategies are developing only as a result of the Government's policies. That particular development is welcomed and has been commended by farmers in my constituency as clear support for the long-term health and success of the food sector in the east midlands. I have also heard of the Welsh food strategy—again, a welcome initiative to highlight and build on the brand strengths of regions.

Those are the ways ahead for agriculture. As hon. Members will recognise, most of them are the responsibility of the industry. Farming has been ill-served

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in the long, if not the short, term—many farmers remind me of the times that they have received aid packages of some scale, which are sometimes not even needed, from Governments. In the long term, farming has been ill served by state controls and misdirected aid.

I have found it puzzling—I have found this in meetings of the Select Committee on Agriculture—to have to defend free enterprise and entrepreneurial skills in farming to the Conservative party, which spends much of its time advocating protectionism, state aid and additional controls. That is a puzzling position, but it is one to which I have become accustomed.

Farming and food need more enterprise and entrepreneurs, not further Government controls or misdirected aid.

5.37 pm

Mr. Oliver Letwin (West Dorset): We seem to have had a general tour d'horizon of some of the ghastly circumstances that we all face and most of the points that need to be made about the crisis have been made. The Minister rightly said that in many respects it can only be described by that term. However, four points have not been covered and I intend to deal with those.

The first matter results from direct experience of farming in west Dorset. Two years ago—even as recently as a year ago—my farmers were complaining and upset, but they had not reached the end of the road emotionally. They thought that they would grit their teeth and get through. I am sure that the Minister must have gained this impression from his visits, but certainly this summer there has been a detectable change of mood. Many of those farmers who have struggled and survived—that includes some who are remarkably efficient when compared with their peers—have come to think that they may have reached the end of the road. That applies in particular in the pig sector, which has been much discussed and to which I will refer again, but it is also true more widely.

One part of the explanation is odd. Having to kill their calves as they emerge, after having spent the night bringing them to birth, has brought home to farmers emotionally something that the economic difficulties they were facing did not.

The Minister spoke—rightly, I am sure—about the likely results of the problems. If nothing is done, a large number of farmers will go out of business. If they do not do so, it will be their children who suffer because they will not take over the farms.

West Dorset is a land not of small but of medium-sized farms of 100, 500 and sometimes 1,000 acres, many of which could survive in an open market under the right circumstances. That will change if nothing is done but there are three ways in which it could change. First, the area could change into a wasteland and I do not think that any of us would welcome that. The environmental consequences would be permanent. We would return to a sort of countryside that this country enjoyed—suffered would probably be a better description—before the 10th century. That is not a realistic prospect for a civilised nation.

We learned the second possibility today and my hon. Friend the Member for South Suffolk (Mr. Yeo) referred to it. The Cabinet Office may be considering it. I never know whether to trust leaks from the Cabinet Office, but from my experience of working in Downing street the leaks are often more accurate than the announcements. Perhaps there are people in the Cabinet Office who think that it would be advantageous if land such as that in west Dorset changed its nature, stopped being agricultural and was used for housing. I do not share that view and neither do the local people. Much more importantly, the country as a whole does not share it because the countryside is not there merely for those who live in it. I suppose that this will sound overblown, but it is our most precious resource. The thing about this country that makes it most tolerable to live here is that we can get out of our necessarily rather ghastly cities—for all their cultural merits, they do not look very beautiful—into a place that feels different. If we lose that, we shall have lost an irreplaceable part of our civilisation.

It is not just a matter of trying in a nimbyish way to protect my constituents against acres and acres of ghastly new housing. Goodness knows under the Government's present policies and, I regret to say, the policies of Administrations past—now, thank goodness, my own party has come to its senses, long ahead of the Government—we have enough housing already. To move to a world in which agricultural land, which is the last land that has been protected against housing, suddenly becomes the new bonanza for house builders is to move to a world that is culturally desperate.

The third possibility is the one to which the Minister gestured. In his usual way, he gestured towards it a great deal more nicely and gently than his predecessor, but his predecessor was very straight about it. On many occasions from the Dispatch Box—it was one of my first experiences on coming to the House—I heard him talk in very robust tones about the necessity to sweep away large tranches of small farms and end up with some big ones which he thought would be efficient. Now it is perfectly true that there has been a secular movement from smaller to larger farms and that we benefit economically, or we would do if it were not for the Alice in Wonderland world of the common agricultural policy, from having on the whole larger farms than many of our competitors.

However, the society of West Dorset—there must be many hon. Members on both sides of the House who have similar constituencies—does not depend alone on having farms. It depends on the numbers of farmers in the place. Rural life would not be rural life as we know it if it consisted of 30,000-acre, huge farm management operations with no farmers. The fact is that farmers are not just farmers. They and their wives are the school governors in my constituency, the people who keep the womens institutes open, who go round and collect for the Royal National Lifeboat Institution, the people who keep the place what it is. If they go, and they really are going now, we will not replace them. We will not have the same kind of place. Yes, there may still be, thank God, open fields instead of housing, if the Cabinet Office does not have its way, but those open fields and the villages and towns that are supported by rural life as we know it at the moment, will not feel the same when the rest of the population goes to visit it, and we will still have lost a precious asset.

Worse, we shall have destroyed the one part of our society that really works. West Dorset is a place that has schools that are schools. They have never had all the nonsense of the 1960s. They are places to which

middle-class people, without having to move and buy expensive houses, are happy to send their children. West Dorset has almost no crime. I exaggerate slightly, but it has one of the lowest rates of crime in the whole of the United Kingdom and always has had. Why? It is because of the character of the society, and that depends incredibly on the existence of a fabric of small and medium-sized yeoman farmers and their families and the network of social support that they provide. One could run a whole university course on the sociological advantages of a farming community. All of that stands to be lost not in the next year or 10 years, but in the next few months. That is what I mean when I say that this a crisis.

Much has been said this afternoon about the beef ban, the ban on beef on the bone, the slaughter of calves and cattle passports. All of those are important, but I should like to draw the attention of the Minister and the House to the long-term problem that the calf sector faces. It is not just a short-term problem. We may get sex-based semen; we may have some new ovulation techniques. I do not know. I do not know how long they will take to be introduced or how far, if the Minister will forgive me, the bureaucrats will let them be introduced. It may be that we do not have a huge pile of surplus calves five years or even two or three years from now.

Barring those developments, something has to be done with the bull calves. We do not have an indigenous veal industry. We do not have the right to export the live animals. I would welcome a scheme to enable us to export them. That would require the Minister to go and do business in places such as France and make agreements which would enable people to check on the survival of the dam six months after the export, or five months if export takes place when the calf is one month old, to ensure that the BSE rules have been complied with. I am sure that that is achievable.

Even if that were done, the amount of live export is never going to be very great. If I can put it in these terms, the sandals brigade, who are actually the poll tax protesters and anti-nuclear protesters repackaged, will be out there throwing stones in the apparent pursuit of animal welfare and making the life of the calves hell as they approach the dock. It will be very difficult to get a live export scheme going again.

So the only long-term solution, unless we can move to sex-based semen or whatever, is an indigenous veal industry. I have not seen any sign of the Meat and Livestock Commission or the Minister putting their hand to the task of trying to develop such an industry. I speak from a vested interest because half of the United Kingdom's veal producers are located in west Dorset, but the whole of the dairy sector would benefit if the Minister directed his attention that way.

Mr. Gray: Does my hon. Friend agree that the likelihood of any such live calf export scheme being introduced by the Government becomes even more remote if one considers the precedent of beef on the bone? Even supposing Europe thought that the Minister's scheme was a good one, he would have to consult his colleagues in the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly, and the likelihood of them giving him permission to do what he wanted seems extremely remote.

Mr. Letwin: I agree that that is a bizarre consequence of devolution. My hon. Friend knows that I spent a large part of the first year of my tenure in the House arguing about devolution, albeit not with this Minister but with others. We never spotted that one of the consequences could be the ruling of England not by a majority founded on Scottish Members—the well-known West Lothian question—but indirectly by Ministers in other parts of the kingdom. My hon. Friend is right. There is a problem.

An indigenous veal industry would not cause such problems. We could create one in England and, I am sure, in the UK as a whole, with universal support. I press on the Minister the need to take that seriously.

Much has been said about pigs this afternoon, and rightly. I want to make one or two ripostes to the Minister's assertion, which I take to be the kernel of his argument, that it would be an improper state aid to do something about offal disposal costs. I understand that it would be a state aid. We must not be confused in debates about state aids by the words "state aid". A state aid is a classification. It is not ipso facto a definition of something that is illegal or improper. Manifestly, the Commission and the treaties allow all sorts of state aid, as is proper, if they are properly notified and fall within certain rules.

The question is whether providing aid for offal disposal costs would be an improper state aid. The Minister said that aid would be introduced only to deal with exceptional circumstances. If the disappearance of our pig industry due to exogenous influences, namely the BSE crisis, is not an exceptional circumstance, I do not know what is.

Mr. Nick Brown: If that is right, why did the then Government not introduce some state aid when the restriction was imposed in 1996?

Mr. Letwin: The honest answer is that I have not the foggiest clue, but I do not think that the fact, if it is a fact, that a mistake was made by legal advisers and by Ministers then, ought to deny us the possibility of rescuing the industry today. I am perfectly prepared to admit—God knows I have to admit—that we made very many mistakes. I do not think that they ought to be repeated.

Mr. Drew: That is a new doctrine.

Mr. Letwin: I believe that we benefit from the splendid doctrine of conceding and moving on. That is exactly what I am doing here. It is in the interests of Britain that we should do that.

Mr. Anthony Steen (Totnes): Is my hon. Friend aware of a draft European directive which could put an enormous additional cost on pig suppliers in Britain in that it sets technical, non-mandatory standards for vehicles transporting livestock, the actual cost of which will fall on the pig producers? Does my hon. Friend agree that the Government should do everything possible to make sure that that directive, which at the moment is voluntary, does not become mandatory, so that additional costs do not fall on our pig producers?

Mr. Letwin: No, I was not aware of that. One of the defects of the Alice in Wonderland world in which we live is that one can hardly live another day without hearing of another proposed directive or regulation. My hon. Friend

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is obviously right. Any additional mandatory burden on pig producers today would be a nail in a coffin to be resisted.

I come to the second part of the Minister's defence against action in this sphere, because it is important. He based part of his argument on the assertion that to subsidise offal disposal costs would be an improper state aid because, in some important way, such a subsidy is not similar to the cattle passport subsidy. Incidentally, I do not quite regard it as a subsidy because I have never been able to understand, on the basis of pocket handkerchief calculations, how the real cost of a cattle passport could be £7. Other countries appear to be able to provide that for £2. I beg the Minister to ask someone in his Department, or perhaps outside it, to investigate how the resource cost of a cattle passport could genuinely be £7. However, that is by the by. No doubt it has a cost and the Minister is subsidising it, which is splendid.

The question is what is the relevant disanalogy between the subsidy of the cattle passport cost and the subsidy of offal disposal costs. Both are regulatory costs which apparently arise for health and safety reasons. We would not have cattle passports if there was no health and safety reason for them. We clearly have a health and safety reason for the offal disposal costs being imposed in the first place. They seem directly analogous, in which case I cannot understand what the relevant disanalogy could be.

I admit that the legal gurus in the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food and in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office will have their views on what is or is not a proper state aid, but I beg the Minister to consider that the whole experience of the UK Government during the past 10 or 15 years is that we have been peculiarly timorous in stretching the boundaries of what we can get away with vis-à-vis state aids, or anything else, in the EU. That is one of our disadvantages.

There is a matter of realpolitik here. If this was an open and shut case, if such a subsidy was clearly an improper state aid, I would not recommend this course of action, but if, as I deeply suspect, there is ground at least for legal argument, and if the Minister were to take the action of funding these costs only for the Commission later to decide to take him to court, it would be one, two or three years down the line before the matter was determined, and by that time we would have a pig industry. In a similar environment in Paris, that would hardly need to be said because everyone would know that that was the way one played the game. But for some reason it sounds odd to English ears.

I welcome that it sounds odd to English ears because I welcome the fact that we still have—although the Government are still trying to destroy it, in co-operation with their colleagues from other countries—an English judicial system and a respect for it. Therefore, we are attuned to the idea of not taking—the Government in particular—the slightest risk. The Treasury Solicitor's Department is peculiarly well organised to help the Government to avoid ever taking the slightest risk. Spiritually, as an Englishman, I welcome that. But here we have a national crisis and a possible means of solving it, and there is a practical way of doing that if the Minister will take it.

Mr. Nicholls: Should we not also pray in aid of what my hon. Friend says the fact that, if the Minister was concerned that, given that legal advice suggested that he probably would not get away with it, he might be at some political risk as a result of an application under article 36 of the treaty, my hon. Friend the Member for South Suffolk (Mr. Yeo) has made it abundantly clear from the Dispatch Box on a number of occasions that, if a challenge under article 36 were to fail, far from criticising the Minister for his venture, we would praise him for the attempt?

Mr. Letwin: My hon. Friend is right, we would, and it would be disgraceful if we did not. Therefore, the Minister has some political choice. I am sure that Liberal Democrats would take the same view. This is a national concern. The Minister was right to say that it was not a party political concern. It is difficult for anyone who has been captured for any Department to see the matter in quite the same way as it appears to the rest of us, and, in this case, the outsider's perspective is closer to reality than that of the insider.

I come now to pesticides and the pesticides tax. The infamous leak from the Cabinet Office suggests that, after all, the pesticides tax, to which the Minister so nobly objects, may be on the agenda. I do not have the slightest idea whether it is or is not, and it may be that the Minister does not either. But for a long while it looked as if it was, and the only person standing out against it was the Minister. That was an odd situation. I cannot recall a time in the recent past when an important member of the Cabinet avowedly opposed something and yet it continued to be spoken of as it was about to be introduced.

Then there was a ray of hope because one of the Minister's colleagues, the Minister for the Environment, was rumoured in the media to have sprung to the astonishing perception that the time was not quite right for the introduction of the new and swingeing tax. Hurrah. It is marvellous that the Minister for the Environment should have spotted it. If the Minister played any part in enlightening him on that, we owe him a deep debt of gratitude.

But now we have the Cabinet Office. Like most hon. Members, I know something about how government works. I have sat for endless hours with that little coven of witches in No. 10 Downing street and I know that when the Cabinet Office, or someone in Downing street, starts to cook up a proposition it is a powerful device. One never knows what will happen next. The Minister might find that the Chancellor has announced a pesticides tax without telling him in a Budget statement that was too secret to be let on about until two hours beforehand.

There is a real danger that we will have a pesticides tax and there is a real problem with it. I apologise for making a party political point, but the Government are brilliant at introducing stealth taxes. The phrase has become so common that someone recently asked me why the Conservatives were not going on about stealth taxes. The phrase has become common property now.

The first characteristic of a stealth tax is that no one notices it until it has happened. A pesticides tax would be like that because most people in the UK do not have the slightest idea that there are pesticides in the first place. In fact, roughly £1,000 million worth of pesticides are used each year, as the Minister knows. Therefore, a pesticides tax qualifies as a stealth tax in that regard.

The second characteristic of a stealth tax is that it almost never achieves the effect that it purportedly attempts to achieve, and this is exactly such a case.

A bizarre feature of a pesticides tax is that it will not achieve a reduction in the use of pesticides. Farmers cannot use fewer pesticides. If the organic aid scheme, instead of being cut off for the next two years, were slightly larger than a pocket handkerchief, farmers might be able to stop using pesticides. However, we have intensive farming. The hon. Member for South Derbyshire (Mr. Todd) made a rational case for a more rationally disposed market—he did not mention that we would have to get rid of the CAP to do it, but I was with him all the way, cheering inwardly—and he said that farmers should be economically rational and that, I regret to say, implies intensivity and, inevitably, pesticides.

Farmers the length and breadth of Britain have to use pesticides. One cannot imagine a farmer using more pesticides than he needed. If farmers had to meet a bill of £1,000 million simply because they liked throwing the stuff around, they would be carted off to a lunatic asylum. Farmers use the least amount of pesticide that they can get away with. The stuff is jolly expensive.

When the tax comes along, when the other Mr. Brown, the Chancellor, the much less nice Mr. Brown, stands at the Dispatch Box to make the pre-Budget announcement on 8 November, or whatever, and tells an expectant House that he has managed to find another £5,000 million of our money with which to swell his coffers in order to do we know not what, yet, £200 million or £300 million of which a year will come from the pesticides tax, he will not say that that is £200 million or £300 million which will come from the farmers without a single drop of pesticide less being used in Britain. That would not be an environmental measure. If the Minister for the Environment had really considered the issue, he would have said not that it is not a good time to impose such a tax but that it would never be a good time. If the Government wish to reduce pesticide use, they would do much better to subsidise organic farming more.

I hope that the Minister will pick up the telephone when he returns to his office and talk to his right hon. Friends the Chancellor of the Exchequer and the Prime Minister. He should say to them, "Whatever you do to surprise me, for goodness sake do not surprise me with a pesticide tax." The farmers will never forgive this Government if at this time, of all times, that tax, of all taxes, is imposed.

6 pm

Mr. David Drew (Stroud): I am happy to follow the hon. Member for West Dorset (Mr. Letwin) because I agree with several of the remarks in the middle of his speech, although less with his causes and conclusions. Several hon. Members have mentioned the supposed leak, which appeared in *The Times*, from the Cabinet Office about a relaxation of Labour's attitude to the countryside—presumably in relation to planning policy.

We can all agree that farmers face difficulties at the moment, and the high price of land is one of the reasons. Of course, agricultural land is measured in terms of development value. I do not suggest that a crash in land price in agricultural areas is what is needed, but it is difficult for farmers to envisage a recovery with land prices so high. That causes many problems, because better-off farmers still seek to buy land, and they keep up the price of land for agricultural use. The alternative is to consider other uses for the land, but the development potential of land keeps the price up. That is an economic argument, not a political or moral one, but it is one of the paradoxes that farming faces and that causes many of the present difficulties. The hon. Member for South-East Cambridgeshire (Mr. Paice) looks quizzical, but it is an economic concept, and not one on which I seek to find argument.

The crisis in farming has a knock-on effect on the whole rural economy, although we must be realistic and accept that farming is now a relatively small part of that economy, and we do not face a rural crisis caused by the decline in agriculture. However, the agricultural situation is not helping the rural economy, and its difficulties, which are caused by a galaxy of different factors, need to be addressed.

We now face the impact of the integration of the supply chain, which was to some extent encouraged by farmers, some of whom have come to rue that attitude. They have started to realise how they have lost control of the food chain and are angered and disillusioned by the way in which that has removed their ability to control what they produce and the price at which they are able to produce it. We need to learn from those mistakes, which go back decades, not just two years. We must learn lessons and reach for radical new solutions.

One factor is the globalisation of the food chain. Different countries are now able to supply this country much more easily. Indeed, until the BSE crisis, we were able to supply internationally, particularly in sectors such as beef. We may understand that point, but doing something about it is more difficult—if only we could wave a magic wand and persuade the French to rethink their position. I am sure that my right hon. Friend the Minister is doing everything that he can, but the problem is not only Governments but the way in which consumers react. I understand the farmers' frustration, but causing a massive upsurge of unrest will not persuade consumers. Instead, it will draw attention to the continuing crisis.

We are indebted to an earlier Liberal Democrat debate on BSE for the realisation that we must also deal with the impact of the north Americans and what they would like to do, as well as our friends across the channel. We know from experience that what starts as a reaction soon becomes a retaliation. The danger is that understandable reactions become retaliatory policies that cost millions of pounds in lost revenue and threaten jobs that have nothing to do with the immediate cause of the dispute. Nobody gains from such situations. However, I do not argue that we should throw in the towel: we should vigorously do all we can to make the French see reason. There is no reason why British beef should not be sold on the continent and throughout the wider world. We have argued our case, successfully so far, with the Commission which has accepted that it is wrong for individual Governments to do what they are doing. It is still true that the negotiations are difficult and tortuous, and I wish my right hon. Friend the Minister every success.

Unlike the Conservatives, I welcome the proposals that my right hon. Friend the Minister made in the summer. It has been argued that they were too little, too late, but the whole package is important. No one has yet argued that the package should be rejected, and certainly all the money will be taken up. The distribution of funds will always be disputed, and I heard an argument—at the conference in Dartington, Devon attended by my right hon. Friend—that lowland farmers also needed help and too much aid went to the highland areas. However,

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we must be realistic and recognise that the crisis is most deeply felt in highland areas. Immediate action was needed to help those farmers at the sharp end at the earliest possible opportunity.

It is recognised on both sides of the House that we should move towards environmental payments rather than producer payments, so that subsidies are not directed at increasing the amount of food produced. Progress in that direction has been disappointing, and the need for that change in farming has been lost sight of in the immediate crisis. I am disappointed that we have not been able to put more money into environmental payments. The issue is one of helping not only the environment but those who farm and manage the land. We have managed to find £100 million to allocate so far, but—and it is difficult to say so—that is not a great sum in terms of the billions of pounds spent on other support measures. However, that is because we do not start with a blank sheet of paper. My right hon. Friend the Minister is nodding, and he knows far better than I do that we are stuck with existing procedures, partly because the previous Administration did not see the issue as a priority.

It does seem daft. One of the things that is wrong with the CAP is that we are always stuck with history: because something was not done in the past, we cannot do it in the present, let alone in the future. That has to be changed, but it explains why it is so difficult to introduce new agricultural and environmental measures. Historical constraints mean that not enough money is available for those purposes.

It is easy to talk about modulation, cross-compliance and the need to find national envelopes that will provide greater flexibility for individual countries to do what they want. However, these are difficult matters as we are locked into the CAP negotiations and cannot simply do our own thing, however much we might wish to.

I hope that I can help my Front Bench colleagues by setting out my personal views about how to move matters forward. As I have said already, the problem is that the whole sector is full of paradoxes. For example, food safety is very important to consumers. That is shown by their reaction to BSE and to the introduction of genetically modified organisms. I too have sometimes been critical of the Government's approach, which I do not believe has always been sufficiently rigorous in its opposition to GMOs. How that rigour might be achieved is a difficult problem, but such matters are part of the attempts by consumers to exert sovereignty over the food that they buy.

Ordinary consumers, however, are also interested in the price that they have to pay for food, which at present has never been lower, in relative terms. Much less is spent on the ordinary person's food budget than ever before, yet we have failed to crack the problem of food poverty—the very poorest people now spend a greater proportion of their income on food than previously. That is another of the paradoxes that remains to be solved.

I very much welcome some of the approaches that the Government have adopted. My right hon. Friend the Minister mentioned farmers' markets, of which the one in Stroud is a successful example. It was founded by a lady called Clare Gerbrands, and her enthusiasm and effort have attracted farmers to participate in the venture. More would be welcome, however.

It is another paradox that, although it is relatively easy to attract people who want to sell craft goods and knick-knacks to such markets, it is hard to attract farmers. That is not because farmers are unwilling to try such markets, but because they lack the ability to market themselves successfully. Also, because they have been so driven towards the centralised food chain, it is difficult for farmers to lock into a localised food chain. We should provide money, help and advice to make it easier for them to make the change to localised markets, because in that way everyone can gain: farmers win by having access to a local market, and consumers tend to trust locally produced food.

Moreover, retailers can also benefit from such a system. My hon. Friend the Member for South Derbyshire (Mr. Todd) is not in his place at present, but he intimated that retailers should provide support for conversion by farmers to organic methods. That is a thoroughly good idea. Those of us who are Christians may not like the idea of shops being open seven days a week, but farmers and consumers alike would benefit if shop space were reserved for locally produced food. My challenge to the supermarkets is that they should set up attractive spaces in which people can see the benefits of locally produced food.

People want good-quality, wholesome food at a price that they can afford. The GMO debate has shown that people are interested in what they eat. Professor Tim Lang, professor of food policy at Thames Valley university, spoke in my constituency a few weeks ago. He said that the threat from GMOs is minuscule compared with that posed by what he called functional foods—for example, foods produced for specific sports or dietary needs. How will we cope with such foods when they enter the food chain?

Perhaps that development will be the solution to all our problems. People may be able to eat exactly what they want to eat, because all their food will have been specially prepared for them. However, the threat is that there will be an even greater centralisation of the production, processing and distribution of food.

Debates on these matters must be held: hon. Members must ensure that farmers can remain in business and that consumer needs are served. Those two aims should not be mutually exclusive. We must therefore look at new structures.

I am a Co-operative Member and a co-operative person, and it gladdens my heart to hear co-operation and collaboration being talked about in this place. Yet how can we achieve such co-operation when 20 per cent. of farmers receive 80 per cent. of the available support? Tenant farmers are always vulnerable and at a particular disadvantage. I mentioned land prices earlier, but they affect tenant farmers too, as they are keen to get the best return from their annual rent. Theirs is therefore a difficult existence. We may need to make a special allowance to ensure that tenant farmers, who are the backbone of the farming industry, can continue to exist. In the main, they are smaller farmers, often in difficult locations. However, they are important because they are the ones who implement the agri-environment schemes and who look to go organic.

If tenant farmers were to disappear, the impact on the countryside would be entirely negative, yet the present structures are especially disadvantageous to them. That is

why we may need to examine measures to ensure their continued existence. The problem is that tenant farmers are not common in Europe. The small farmers tend to be owner-occupiers, or part of co-operatives. How do we persuade our friends in Europe that our tenant farmers are an important part of our social fabric as well as of our agricultural industry? We have managed to skate around that question on many occasions, but now we really must try to find a solution.

I could speak about Milk Marque, but I shall say only that it was set up by the previous Administration. I can tell my right hon. Friend the Minister that I would not wish on anyone the problems that he faces with regard to bovine tuberculosis. That enormous problem is devastating our milk industry, and it can be resolved only by means of science. It may not be as great as BSE, but it will have a big impact on the milk industry unless solutions are found soon. Magic wands and loads of money will not provide those solutions; only science will discover why TB arises in the countryside and how it is spread.

Mr. Owen Paterson (North Shropshire): I am sure that the House endorses the hon. Gentleman's faith in science, but the Government stated that 10 triplet areas were to be set up to study TB. However, so far only two such areas have been established. Is the hon. Gentleman satisfied with that?

Mr. Drew: I am not satisfied, as I believe that the priority is to develop solutions to the problem. However, I want to choose my words carefully. I understand—as I am sure the hon. Gentleman does—some of the reasons why it has proved more difficult than expected to get the trials under way. For example, there has been a great deal of opposition to and, at the same time, pressure for the drastic culling of badgers. Yet the difficult problem of bovine TB, which also affects milk industries in other countries, must be solved.

Mr. Letwin: I accept what the hon. Gentleman says about the difficulties associated with establishing the tests for bovine TB, but does he not understate the case slightly? Bovine TB is approaching the status of a huge crisis. Is not it necessary to ensure that all the stops are pulled out to implement the recommendations of the Krebs report as fast as the science permits? Surely no impediment should be allowed to delay that.

Mr. Drew: I do not disagree. All hon. Members have faith in the Krebs report, and in the Bourne group that has actioned it. However, I have always been somewhat sceptical about the possibility of producing speedy solutions. I wish it were that easy, but it is not—this is a very difficult problem. Although I do not disagree with the hon. Gentleman, I urge caution when it comes to going full speed ahead with the trials. The question of how they should be implemented is not at all easy.

I have covered a wide range of the issues and paradoxes with which we must deal. We have to consider radical solutions, asking whether we have gone as far as we could. Some of us would argue that we have not done so when it comes to the centralisation of the food chain. Is it good, or should we encourage supermarkets to look back towards local supply and sourcing, which could benefit everyone? We must reform the CAP. Dare I suggest that we need to see how it can be reformed for our national needs as well as for Europe as a whole?

We must remember that Europe is changing. In Poland yesterday, I saw some of the ways in which agriculture will seek to feed people in western Europe. Whether that is good or bad, it will happen and it will have an impact on us. I was told that a major processing company is investing in a new plant in Hungary which will dwarf some British processing. Whether or not we want that, it is happening. We cannot persuade ourselves otherwise.

Agriculture is in crisis and there are no short-term solutions. We must consider how to dig ourselves out of the crisis, taking the farmers with us but not avoiding the paradoxes that we must face up to. We can do all that only by travelling the route outlined by my right hon. Friend the Minister. Important wider issues must be taken into account, and I hope that the White Paper due early next year will allow us to put agriculture in its proper context as an important part, but not the only part, of what happens in rural Britain.

6.22 pm

Mr. Alasdair Morgan (Galloway and Upper Nithsdale): I shall be brief because I do not want to take up too much of the Liberal Democrats' day.

One issue not addressed so far is the problem of fallen stock in the countryside. Some weekends ago, the *Sunday Post*—not, perhaps, a mass circulation newspaper down here, but one which percolates into the north of England—carried a picture of a farmer shooting lambs on his farm. We all know why farmers have been dragged into doing that, but the picture and the report omitted the next stage of the process—how farmers get rid of stock that dies or is shot.

Before BSE, the system was that the knacker—there were yards in many areas—would collect fallen stock. After collecting cattle, the knacker often picked up sheep for no charge. The cattle were taken back to the plant and stripped of usable material for pet food and other things. What the knacker could not dispose of, the renderer collected—even, in good times, paying for it. That material went to the renderer's plant to be disposed of as bonemeal or tallow. The system allowed and encouraged sensible disposal of fallen stock without damage to the environment. It also created some employment in rural areas.

Today, of course, the market of the renderers—for bonemeal and tallow—has almost totally disappeared, although some tallow may return. The renderer must now charge the knacker if he is to collect what the knacker disposes of. The knacker, who also faces high investment in pressure cookers if he is to produce for the pet food industry, must charge the farmer for the collection of fallen stock. Meanwhile, farmers are less able than ever they were to pay the charges that the knacker is imposing.

Farmers faced with the lowest incomes in generations—often negative incomes—will bury stock on their farms. As far as I can ascertain, provided that a farmer disposes of stock away from water courses, there is no regulation to stop him disposing of stock on his land, although the practice is banned in most other European Union countries. If fallen stock goes to the renderer, it is

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classified as high-risk material, but if it stays on the farm, it is simply classed as agricultural waste. We may wish to ponder that anomaly.

One consequence is unemployment: knackers have gone out of business, and the one in my constituency closed some time ago. Then, there are consequences for both health and the environment. Other EU countries do not allow such burial. Recently, the Scottish Environment Protection Agency produced a report on the matter, which said:

"Fallen stock does not yet pose a problem but difficulties may be expected in future years due to cumulative effects of increased disposal. In view of the changing circumstances which are likely to lead to more on-farm burials and the unknowns relating to the environmental issues of larger-scale burials, it is recommended that alternatives to on-farm burial are encouraged."

I believe that the agency is being too mild in saying that there will be a problem and that we must do something once it arises. The time to do something is now—a lesson we should perhaps have learned from past agricultural crises.

We should not underestimate the scale of the problem. Figures are not available for the number of stock buried. We have passport and traceability systems, but traceability ends when the animal dies. No one knows what happens to animals then. In Dumfries and Galloway alone, I estimate that we dispose annually of 9,000 cattle and 36,000 sheep. The possible consequences of burying those animals in pits in the countryside are fairly horrible to contemplate.

Even if, suspending disbelief, we assume that we can continue to bury a large number of stock in the countryside without environmental problems, we still have to remember the effect on public perceptions. We are trying to get across the message that we have high-quality agriculture that we want to keep. How can we do that if we are burying large numbers of fallen stock in the countryside? Does the Minister see any prospect of a scheme for collecting fallen stock so that stock is picked up, without payment to the farmer, to be taken away and disposed of safely and in an environmentally sensitive way?

The pig industry receives virtually no support from the CAP. We have one of the world's most modern pig industries, but it is suffering burdens due to events outside the industry and bearing costs that are nothing to do with the industry. People in the industry believe that they face imports from regimes that are less strict, and labelling problems too. All that has combined to mean that pig farmers are going out of business. The remaining pig farmers must believe that the Government want to allow the industry to compete fairly with competitors abroad.

I am glad that we are debating agriculture and that another debate will be held shortly. Agriculture is important to the economies of many of our constituencies. Some 25 per cent. of gross national product produced in Dumfries and Galloway is tied up in agriculture. We heard earlier about structural funds, but the area receives almost three times as much from the common agricultural policy as from structural funds.

Every industry occasionally needs to restructure and to adapt to changed circumstances. In agriculture, however, that process seems to be happening by default, not design. Farms, especially in less-favoured areas, cannot simply be closed, then reopened a few years later when things get better, as if they were factories making widgets. The Government must do more to address the agricultural industry's justifiable concerns.

6.29 pm

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome): In the brief time left, it is not possible to cover all the difficulties of agriculture, but all of us who represent rural constituencies know the depth of the crisis—that is not an exaggeration—that affects not only agriculture, but the downstream industries. That is the crucial point. This is no longer about farmers. The people losing their jobs and going bankrupt in the first instance are the agricultural engineers, the people who do the books for farmers, and those who run the shops. This is fast escalating into a major economic downturn in rural areas.

There has, properly, been a tendency to concentrate on the upland areas, but the crisis also affects the lowland areas, such as my constituency in Somerset, where people do not farm enormous ranches. On Monday, I was sitting at a table with a farmer who farms 40 acres. He has 17 cows plus followers, which is near marginal agriculture, yet nothing is being done to support such farmers.

Mr. John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Heath: No, I do not have time. We have had hours of the Conservatives in this debate.

Our pig and poultry sectors are suffering to the same extent. Pig producers are losing £12 per finished pig and poultry producers are losing £2 a bird. Those losses are not sustainable. Analysing the reasons is not simple; manifold reasons are evident to anyone who looks at the problems. There is BSE and its consequences, such as the lack of confidence. There is the strength of the pound and the imports that displace home-produced material. There are still serious question marks over the attitude of the supermarkets.

On occasion, Government action, not necessarily in the Minister's Department, has made matters worse. We need only consider the delay at the Department of Trade and Industry in producing the Milk Marque report and the conclusions that were reached. That was extraordinary and had a serious effect on the dairy industry in my area. When the newspapers talk of the possibility of the agriculture industry being absorbed by the DTI, we must say, "Nick, please tell us it ain't so." That would be a desperately disadvantageous position in which to put agriculture.

There is also unfair competition. Farmers often tell us about that, and they are right because different welfare and health standards apply in other countries—but there are few barriers to such products reaching our supermarket shelves. We heard earlier about the move away from antibiotics in chicken production in this country and the openness of our markets to birds from Thailand, Brazil and around the world that are not produced under the same amount of regulation.

We have a great deal of regulation in our industry. I hear what the Minister says about the working party that has been set up. It is a welcome approach to the problem,

but it would be more fundamental and useful if the Ministry applied tests before making regulations to determine whether they would have a negative effect on the competitiveness of our industries and could be justified by their result.

We have had a brief discussion of the common agricultural policy. I make no bones about it: the CAP is a disgrace and needs complete remoulding and drastic reform. What happened in the intergovernmental conferences was a very small movement. It is welcome and, as the Minister said, it goes across several sectors, but we have only to look at the results in the dairy sector to see that it is unsustainable. It will not survive the World Trade Organisation round, let alone anything else. It must be returned to time and again.

Further problems with the WTO were mentioned by the hon. Member for Stroud (Mr. Drew): bovine somatotropin and its American corporate backers. I have a long history of battles with Monsanto, whose representatives I met back in 1986 to complain about bovine somatotropin. Nothing seems to have changed. The Americans are determined to foist upon European markets products with which we are not happy.

There is also the Government package. We have not had sufficient debate in this Session on its parameters. I join other hon. Members in saying that it is welcome that the Minister has responded. Equally, few pints of cider were drunk at Frome market on the day of the announcement when people worked out what it meant for areas such as mine. Much of it was deferred gratification, or whatever the reverse of that is, in that it prevented something awful from happening that the Government had had in train. Its prevention was welcome, but it would have been better still had it not been there in the first place. Examining the consequences for lowland farmers shows that there is very little that is of direct benefit in the here and now.

I want to use my remaining five minutes to discuss positive suggestions about what might help. I do not want to deal in the hyperbole of political argument, because that is not the point of today's debate. We are looking for ways in which we can help the agricultural industry and the rural economy. We need what the Government often boast about in other matters—joined-up Government. We are dealing with a crisis of the rural economy that cannot be handled within MAFF. Other Departments must pay the same attention to the rural economy. They must converse with one another and produce cross-departmental thinking that will address the issues.

We need to deal with some of the immediate problems. One matter not mentioned today was the over-30-months restriction. The scheme is reaching the end of its life, but the restriction is still in place. I question the logic of that. If it was right that cattle over 30 months old eight months ago should be caught in that net, surely the limit should now be 38 months. Any logician applying his mind to the matter would accept that. There are dangers in that approach. We could flood the beef market with culled dairy cattle. That is not a sensible solution, but the matter should be examined.

We need to reconsider calf slaughter, which many hon. Members mentioned. The Minister of State, Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, the right hon. Member for Gateshead, East and Washington (Ms Quin), attended the south-west dairy industry dinner with me a few weeks ago. I do not think that it was an entirely pleasant experience for her. There was widespread surprise when she appeared to say that everything was now all right with calf slaughter. I do not think that she meant it, but that is how it was taken. As the hon. Member for West Dorset (Mr. Letwin) said, some people understand the desperation and futility of their industry when they have to spend all night calving a bull calf only to shoot it in the morning. There is no method of disposal and we must address that.

On the pig and poultry sectors, we have already discussed why we do not use the latitude that the Belgians are happy to use in dealing with dioxin to deal with the animal welfare and health restrictions placed on those industries as a result of BSE and other matters. I agree that we need to test the parameters of what is permissible within law. We are far too well behaved in this country on such matters. We do not take a sufficiently rigorous view and so do not find out what we can do to support our industry. I also accept that if, two years down the road, it is proved to be an unlawful act, it is a great shame, but we would have saved our pig industry, and that is the primary responsibility of the Government and this place.

We have mentioned the cull ewes scheme, for which we will continue to argue, but we should also consider specified offals in cull ewes. Was there a scientific basis for that or was it part of the package put together to convince others of the safety of British meat? If there is no scientific backing, let us reconsider whether we are putting an irreducible cost on the industry that bars export possibilities.

We need to deal with the whole question of bureaucracy. I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Torridge and West Devon (Mr. Burnett) about the need to be able to challenge MAFF decisions. We need an agricultural ombudsman who can deal with the issues sensibly.

We need to deal with some of the over-officious regulation that we sometimes see. There is a strong suspicion that, having given green-top milk the all-clear rather banning it, there is now an alternative move to kill it by over-regulation and additional cost. I invite the Minister to examine that matter.

We have already talked about the essential element of labelling in relation to imports. With exports, we must of course lift the beef on the bone ban at the earliest opportunity, but we then have to do far more on marketing. MAFF will not do that well; indeed, MAFF should not do it at all. We need to use marketing experts for generic marketing and for regional and brand-name recognition. In Somerset and the south-west, we have extremely good names for our produce, which are recognised as meaning good produce. We do not make sufficient use of them. We need to examine the corporate structures—to make co-operatives work better so that they are more suitable for the job we want them to do. We need to reconsider agricultural credits.

Finally, if we are to make progress in reforming the CAP in the direction that we want, we need allies; we need a coalition of interests. I invite Ministers to set aside the domestic agricultural aspect and establish bilateral relationships with countries that have similar agricultural profiles to our own—perhaps the countries of northern Europe, for instance, the Swedes—so that we can arrive at a commonality of interests that will win us some of these arguments. One could bet one's life that the

[Mr. Heath]

mediterraneans are doing just that in their councils, but we have always failed to do so. It is essential that we make progress.

The right hon. Gentleman has a reputation as a rational and listening Minister. He has shown that again today. The problem is that we now need much more action. I do not criticise him for some of the things that he cannot achieve, but some things that he can achieve would make life a lot easier for an extremely hard-pressed industry.

6.42 pm

Mr. Colin Breed (South-East Cornwall): We have heard wide-ranging and thoughtful contributions to the debate. I am especially pleased that we have been able to initiate a debate on agriculture so soon after the recess. I do not want to repeat what has been said because I agree largely with all of it; there is much consensus in the House.

We have not touched on one small part of the farming industry, and although it is small, the people in it will not want to be left out. That is the free range egg industry, which has also had its income slashed enormously—up to 25 per cent. The producers have met, continue to meet, and often exceed Government demands on welfare, food safety and traceability, but those farmers now face operating losses. It is not difficult to understand why.

There are no imported free range, farm-assured eggs sold in the supermarkets. There is no evidence of a significant over-supply, yet the contract price for a dozen free range medium eggs with a typical packer has dropped from 69p to 43p in a year. In an industry with capital inputs of about £20 a bird, to meet the high standards that we require, that price cut is absolutely devastating and cannot be sustained. A medium egg, for which the farmer receives less than 4p, can sell for up to 19p in the local supermarket. A mark-up of 475 per cent. between a packer and a supermarket on the sale of an unprocessed product is unbelievable. When the Minister meets industry representatives and the supermarkets, perhaps they could explain where that mark-up goes and who receives it.

These debates are often characterised by what farmers want and by farmers' demands. Perhaps we could concentrate on what farmers do not want. They do not want a continual diet of subsidy and grant to sustain their businesses. That is all right in an emergency or for the short term, but it is now almost continuous. Farmers do not want that. No self-respecting business man wants to be dependent for his whole livelihood on a hand-out, subsidy or grant. Farmers do not want to have to compete with their hands tied behind their back all the time—sometimes even with their legs tied together. They do not want to see a joint of meat with a whopping great union jack on it in their local supermarket, knowing that it has not come from a British animal. That is abhorrent to them.

Farmers do not want any more interest rate rises. The Chancellor may support the tough action of the Monetary Policy Committee, as we read in today's papers, but not only will interest rate rises increase the costs of farmers' bank borrowing, they will further strengthen the pound and there will be another round of uncompetitiveness. Farmers do not want any more regulation or costs in the immediate, foreseeable future; they cannot cope with what they already have.

Farmers do not want to continue in business, getting up every morning in fear of what will come in the post—a letter from the bank or a bill from a supplier—and living from day to day, with their whole livelihoods, their homes and their families under threat. That is what drives so many of them to suicide.

I agree with the Minister that we need to concentrate more on what we should do on the demand side. The industry will improve and will give a secure future by providing a demand side commensurate with what can be produced.

First, we talked about the promotion of farmers markets, which should certainly be considered. However, they are fragile and fragmented—run voluntarily in village halls and so on. We need to be properly organised and licensed so that we can set up farmers markets in appropriate places. What could be more appropriate than many of the markets that are falling into disrepute in our market towns? They would often provide an ideal location. Not long ago, in my town, we tried to set up a market, but we were told that, because of a charter of 1760-something in a nearby city, we were not allowed to do so. That is wholly ridiculous. We need concerted action to provide a framework within which farmers markets can flourish. We need to strengthen co-operatives and farmer-controlled businesses.

Secondly, we need to restore premiums for the quality of the products. At one time, they existed in pigmeat, but they have gradually been eroded. We must find a way to restore those premiums—perhaps as a part of education—for all the hard work and investment that has gone towards attaining the quality that we have.

Thirdly, we rightly referred to the beef ban, but we sometimes tend to forget that our special-relationship friends across the Atlantic still have no intention whatever of lifting their ban on our beef. I should like some pressure to be put on that part of the world market. Instead of suffering their genetically modified products and goodness knows what else, we should push our good beef into their markets.

Fourthly, we talked about labelling. That is a difficult issue, but there must be labelling for ready identification by the housewife, the purchaser and the consumer. It does not need legislation; the supermarkets dictate what is on every part of every label. They can be made to ensure that what is on the label demonstrates what the product really is.

Fifthly, we talked about the organic side. There is no doubt that the organic sector is the one sector that is receiving premium prices for its products. I cannot understand why we cannot expand what is clearly a successful scheme—there is a waiting list. If so many people want to go into it and it is a demand-led route, providing premiums for the work, surely that is something that we can do.

I have referred to five aspects of the demand side, which could start to turn matters around. However, all that will be to no avail if there is no industry; we are talking about weeks, not years. Today, I learned that seven pig producers in Devon and Cornwall went into receivership over the past 10 days. At that rate, there will be no industry to provide those demand-side facilities. I know that the Minister is aware of the crisis and that the Government have the money. We need the will and the action to address it.

6.49 pm

The Minister of State, Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Ms Joyce Quin): Overall, this has been a good and serious debate. I welcome the chance given to us by the Liberal Democrats to debate these issues at such an early opportunity after the resumption of Parliament. There have been many good contributions from both sides of the House—perhaps with the exception of that by the hon. Member for South Suffolk (Mr. Yeo).

As a new Minister at the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, I had not previously heard the hon. Gentleman's contributions to agriculture debates and so was unaccustomed to what my right hon. Friend the Minister described as the hon. Gentleman's usual "bombastic twaddle". The hon. Gentleman's speech was not worthy of the seriousness of the occasion, nor of the fact that we are all looking for ways to address the difficulties affecting the agriculture sector.

The hon. Member for South Suffolk said that our decision to defer the charges for cattle passports for the next three years was unimportant. In my first few weeks as a Minister, that issue was raised with me at every meeting, so I know that the decision to defer those charges was extremely welcome—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): Order. Such interruptions are not worthy of a Front-Bench spokesman.

Ms Quin: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Other hon. Members, among them Conservative Members, have made more measured speeches and interventions than the hon. Member for South Suffolk.

As I said, I could not fail to appreciate in my first few weeks in office as an Agriculture Minister the severity of the difficulties facing several sections of the agriculture sector. The right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Inverness, West (Mr. Kennedy) spoke of the audit recently prepared by the National Farmers Union. I have looked at the figures and at some of the facts that lie behind those figures, especially the stress caused by financial difficulties that is experienced by farmers throughout the country.

In my first few weeks, I have also been struck by the way in which the common agricultural policy has developed in the past 10 years. Ten years ago, when I was a member of the European Parliament's Agriculture and Rural Development committee, the CAP was a monster, but it has become even more complex since then. It does not surprise me that farmers raise with the Ministry problems of bureaucracy and red tape. That is why I attach importance to the review announced by my right hon. Friend the Minister and the short time scale given for it. We do not want that exercise to be long drawn out, but to bring speedy results.

The views of farmers in this country on the common agricultural policy have changed greatly: there used to be far more support for the CAP than there is today. One of the encouraging developments in the medium and long term is the way in which Government and industry can work together to press for the changes we want to be made to the CAP. I welcome the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Mr. Drew) and others on how that policy should develop.

It is no surprise that today's debate has focused on current problems, but we have also looked ahead. The hon. Member for South-East Cornwall (Mr. Breed), whose speech contained many good points relating to our approach to the future, said this morning on "Farming Today"—essential listening for new Ministers—that Ministers had failed to look at the medium and long term. I do not accept that: the consultations on Agenda 2000 and the way ahead signal clearly that we are looking to the medium and long term as well as concentrating on current problems. We have a responsibility to do so, and I accept that responsibility.

Hon. Members have raised many issues which it will not be possible for me to answer in the few minutes allotted to me, but we shall have opportunities to explore those issues in the coming weeks. We have questions on agriculture tomorrow and I expect that there will be further opportunity for debates in the near future. The issues thoughtfully raised by Labour Members give a clear lie to the ridiculous claim which is sometimes made, that the Government are not interested in farming or countryside issues. Since we entered office, there have been many occasions on which that claim has been proved false, whereas the sparsity of Conservative Members present in the Chamber does not indicate huge interest on their part.

The right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Inverness, West did not appear to be aware that we had decided to defer cattle passport charges, so let me make it clear that, as part of the aid package announced by my right hon. Friend the Minister, the Government will not impose such charges before 2002-03 at the earliest. Those charges include the charge that would have been levied at abattoirs for the checking of passports by the Meat Hygiene Service.

It is not surprising that many hon. Members raised the issue of the French attitude toward the lifting of the beef export ban. I am glad that my right hon. Friend stressed so strongly the impeccable legal grounds on which we are objecting to the French action. The French scientific committee has come up with no new evidence and we believe that the Commission has every reason to pursue an action against the French if they refuse to lift their ban.

I have to tell the hon. Member for South Suffolk that we reject the Conservatives' pick-and-mix approach to Europe and their argument that we should apply all sorts of import restrictions even if those are against European law—it was said that we could do that and, even though the European Court might get us in the long run, we should not worry about the consequences. That would be a disastrous approach if it were adopted by all European Union countries, because it would jeopardise the single market. Given that we export a great deal, we could find that, by such action, we had harmed our own agriculture industry as well as many other industries in this country.

Mr. Letwin: Does the Minister not recognise that some of us drew a distinction between open-and-shut cases such as the French ban, in respect of which we should certainly not act in such a fashion, and other cases in which there is wide scope for legal argument?

Ms Quin: I certainly accept that some Conservative Members took a far more measured approach than others, but the official Conservative policy of pick and mix would damage the EU internal market on which we all depend. If

[Ms Quin]

other countries adopted such a policy, the internal market would fall apart. I assume that that is not what the Conservatives want to happen.

The hon. Member for West Dorset (Mr. Letwin) asked about veal production and I assure him that we are working with the NFU and others to build up domestic veal production. We are not ignoring the issue.

Mr. Paterson: I wrote to the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food about the calf scheme on 19 August. On 30 September, I received a reply from Baroness Hayman that revealed abysmal ignorance of why there are so many male dairy calves. Dairy farmers breed calves and cannot choose to produce only cow calves, but the Minister in the other place clearly does not understand that male calves are an inevitable by-product of breeding cow calves.

Ms Quin: We believe that some of the better quality calves are now finding a market. That also answers in part the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath), who said I did not appear to be aware of farmers' difficulty in disposing of calves. I am fully aware of that difficulty, but in the speech to which he referred I was making the point that the better quality calves are now starting to find a market, and we must build on that for the future.

There are many other issues that I would like to talk about, but time does not permit. I shall pick up one point that was made about the importance of regional sourcing by supermarkets, and of giving a boost to regional and local production. Last week I was involved in an initiative of that kind in the south-east of England a supermarket was making precisely such a commitment. That is the kind of initiative that we want to pursue with the supermarkets in the coming weeks and months.

Price is not the only factor affecting the purchase of food. We know that organic produce commands a premium, and that is also possible for regional and speciality food. I endorse what various Members have said about the importance of regional and local branding of products, which can be an important asset in the production of diverse and quality products for consumers to buy.

Several hon. Members rightly emphasised the importance of rural issues as part of the regional development strategies being worked out by regional development agencies. I strongly endorse that. It is vital that RDAs see the importance of agriculture and rural issues, and see the rural economy as part of their regional development packages and strategies. I attach particular importance to that, so it is especially regrettable that the official Opposition are committed to dismantling the regional development agencies, which could play an important part in the regeneration of the rural economy in various parts of our country.

The debate as a whole has shown the Government's commitment to agriculture both as a key industry on its own, and as part of the wider rural economy and the overall national economy. For that reason, and for the other reasons advanced by my right hon. and hon. Friends, I commend our amendment to the House.

Question put, That the original words stand part of the Question:—

The House divided: Ayes 50, Noes 326.

Division No. 274] **[7.2 pm**

AYES

Allan, Richard
Ashdown, Rt Hon Paddy
Baker, Norman
Ballard, Jackie
Beggs, Roy
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Brake, Tom
Breed, Colin
Bruce, Malcolm *(Gordon)*
Burnett, John
Burstow, Paul
Cable, Dr Vincent
Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Chidgey, David
Cotter, Brian
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Donaldson, Jeffrey
Ewing, Mrs Margaret
Fearn, Ronnie
Forsythe, Clifford
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
Harvey, Nick
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Jones, Nigel *(Cheltenham)*
Keetch, Paul
Kennedy, Charles *(Ross Skye)*
Kirkwood, Archy
Livsey, Richard
Llwyd, Elfyn
Maclennan, Rt Hon Robert
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll & Bute)*
Moore, Michael
Morgan, Alasdair *(Galloway)*
Oaten, Mark
Öpik, Lembit
Rendel, David
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Salmond, Alex
Sanders, Adrian
Smyth, Rev Martin *(Belfast S)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Thompson, William
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Tyler, Paul
Webb, Steve
Welsh, Andrew
Willis, Phil

Tellers for the Ayes:
Sir Robert Smith and
Mr. Donald Gorrie.

NOES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Alexander, Douglas
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Armstrong, Rt Hon Ms Hilary
Ashton, Joe
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Battle, John
Bayley, Hugh
Beard, Nigel
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Begg, Miss Anne
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Benn, Rt Hon Tony *(Chesterfield)*
Bennett, Andrew F
Bermingham, Gerald
Berry, Roger
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blair, Rt Hon Tony
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Blunkett, Rt Hon David
Boateng, Paul
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brown, Rt Hon Nick *(Newcastle E)*
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Browne, Desmond
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Butler, Mrs Christine
Byers, Rt Hon Stephen
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell-Savours, Dale
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chaytor, David
Chisholm, Malcolm
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Cook, Rt Hon Robin *(Livingston)*
Corbett, Robin
Corbyn, Jeremy
Corston, Ms Jean
Cousins, Jim
Crausby, David
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunliffe, Lawrence
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Dalyell, Tam
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*

Davis, Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Foulkes, George
Fyfe, Maria
Galloway, George
Gardiner, Barry
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godman, Dr Norman A
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Grant, Bernie
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Grogan, John
Gunnell, John
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hanson, David
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Healey, John
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hewitt, Ms Patricia
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hoey, Kate
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Jackson, Ms Glenda *(Hampstead)*
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Rt Hon Barry *(Alyn)*
Jones, Mrs Fiona *(Newark)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Ms Jenny *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Jowell, Rt Hon Ms Tessa
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Kelly, Ms Ruth
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kingham, Ms Tess
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lawrence, Ms Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Liddell, Rt Hon Mrs Helen
Linton, Martin
Livingstone, Ken
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Love, Andrew
McAllion, John
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McDonagh, Siobhain
Macdonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
McFall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
McNulty, Tony
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Mandelson, Rt Hon Peter
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Meacher, Rt Hon Michael
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michie, Bill *(Sheff'ld Heeley)*
Milburn, Rt Hon Alan
Miller, Andrew
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morris, Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Rt Hon Paul *(Torfaen)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Organ, Mrs Diana
Osborne, Ms Sandra
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Pendry, Tom
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Sir Raymond
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prescott, Rt Hon John
Primarolo, Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Quin, Rt Hon Ms Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Radice, Rt Hon Giles
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Cov'try NW)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rooker, Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Roy, Frank
Ruane, Chris
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Salter, Martin
Sarwar, Mohammad
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Barry
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Shipley, Ms Debra
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Snape, Peter
Southworth, Ms Helen
Squire, Ms Rachel
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stinchcombe, Paul
Sloate, Dr Howard
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Temple-Morris, Peter
Timms, Stephen
Todd, Mark
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Tynan, Bill
Vis, Dr Rudi
Ward, Ms Claire
Wareing, Robert N
Watts, David
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Wills, Michael
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wise, Audrey
Woolas, Phil
Worthington, Tony
Wray, James
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, Dr Tony *(Cannock)*

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Greg Pope and
Mr. Mike Hall.

Question accordingly negatived.

Question, That the proposed words be there added, *put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 31 (Questions on amendments), and agreed to.*

MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *forthwith declared the main Question, as amended, to be agreed to.*

Resolved,

That this House recognises the difficulties faced by agriculture and the wider rural economy as a result of the depressed level of farm incomes; approves of the special measures the Government has taken to assist the industry through three aid packages plus EU agri-monetary compensation worth in total £742 million; endorses the establishment of industry-led working groups to examine urgently the regulatory burdens on agriculture; supports the Government's promotion of collaborative working throughout the food chain to add value and generate the price premium that high-quality United Kingdom produce deserves, while noting that the Competition Commission's investigation of supermarket pricing includes an examination of trading practices throughout the supply chain; welcomes the Government's achievement of significant reform of the Common Agricultural Policy in the interests of producers, consumers and taxpayers; and fully supports the Government's commitment to the future of United Kingdom agriculture as a competitive, flexible and diverse industry, and the use of options available under Agenda 2000 to help secure this.

Transport Safety

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael J. Martin): We now come to the next debate. Madam Speaker has selected the amendment in the name of the Prime Minister.

7.15 pm

Mr. Don Foster (Bath): I beg to move,

That this House notes with extreme sadness the recent Paddington rail disaster and the ensuing injuries and loss of life and extends its deepest sympathies to all those affected; congratulates the emergency services on their outstanding work in very difficult conditions: urges the Government not to respond prematurely but to ensure that swift action follows the enquiry into rail safety systems by implementing the key recommendations due in December 1999; condemns past Governments for failing to invest in an effective advanced train protection system; calls on the Government to remove responsibility for the setting of safety standards from Railtrack; further notes the serious concerns that exist over safety in other modes of transport and draws specific attention to the continuing pressure on safety standards in the air transport industry due to the vast rate of growth in journeys; notes the considerable opposition from all sides of the House to the Government's plans to privatise the National Air Traffic Services (NATS) and the London Underground and the possible effect this could have on safety standards; urges the Government to re-consider its proposals and instead to make NATS and London Underground public interest companies, ensuring safety remains a core priority; further urges the Government to ensure that maritime safety standards are not compromised by the closure of coastguard stations around the country; and calls on the Government to reduce the possibility of road safety incidents by setting national targets for reducing overall traffic levels and encouraging nationwide implementation of initiatives such as "Safe Routes to School".

In this debate on transport safety it is appropriate for me to begin by repeating the sympathies expressed yesterday on all sides of the House for those involved in the tragedy of the Paddington rail crash. I also, as hon. Members rightly did yesterday, extend our congratulations to the emergency services and our thanks to the individuals who were prepared to come and assist at that tragic accident.

I pay particular tribute to the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody) who, as Chairman of the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs Committee, has made very helpful safety recommendations to the House. Liberal Democrat Members support the Committee's recommendation to establish an independent transport safety body. We hope that the recommendation will be accepted by the Secretary of State and his team. We hope also that if such a body is established, it will include people who not only are experts in transport safety, able to bring independent thinking to the issues, but have the courage to speak out on those issues.

I emphasise how much Liberal Democrat Members support the Deputy Prime Minister's remarks, particularly in the past few days following the Paddington rail crash, about the importance of moving from a culture of blame to a culture of safety. As he has rightly pointed out, a number of inquiries can consider who is to blame, but it is important now to learn the lessons from that tragedy and others so that we can think positively about the future, and I hope that the motion and the debate will contribute to that.

The whole House will be aware that concerns about safety on public transport are not confined to rail but extend to all other modes of transport.

Mr. David Chidgey (Eastleigh): My hon. Friend mentioned his concern that inquiries should be followed through, and I believe that he was echoing the Deputy Prime Minister's view. Does he recall that 10 years ago, after the Clapham rail crash, Mr. Hidden conducted an inquiry and issued an authoritative report that made important recommendations for rail safety, particularly for the removal from the system of the old, slam-door rolling stock and for the introduction of the automatic train protection system? There was general, cross-party acceptance of those recommendations. Does my hon. Friend share my concern that 10 years later, we still have thousands—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I cannot allow the hon. Gentleman to make such a long intervention.

Mr. Foster: I am grateful for my hon. Friend's intervention. He is right to say that we must move quickly to ensure that carriages are safe and to introduce the automatic train protection system. I shall return to that issue.

Many of us will have listened to the Deputy Prime Minister speaking on the "Today" programme this morning and noted his comments about the running of the railways and safety legislation. He said:

"I don't think it's being done as good as it could be done. There can be changes."

I believe that we all accept that changes are needed, and I hope that some of my remarks in this speech will be acted on.

The Deputy Prime Minister and the other Ministers present would probably agree with my next remark, although I suspect that Conservative Members will not agree with it. Many of the problems in the railways have resulted from the way in which privatisation was carried out, especially the confusion between safety and the other aspects of the railway—not least the confusion between safety and profit.

Mrs. Eleanor Laing (Epping Forest): Is the hon. Gentleman seriously suggesting that there were no unfortunate and tragic accidents on the railways before privatisation?

Mr. Foster: No. Of course I am not saying that, and we acknowledge that there were accidents before privatisation. However, several incidents have shown that the confusion that has been created by privatisation has left many people uncertain about who is responsible for the various things that have happened. That is one of our real concerns.

Not the least of our concerns arises from Railtrack's continuing responsibility for setting and monitoring safety standards. We welcome the fact that the Deputy Prime Minister is minded to separate out those functions. We believe that it would be helpful for him to say immediately that that is his intention, although we acknowledge that he was right to point out the difficulty of deciding where that responsibility should then be located. He is right to wait until he has received advice on that issue. However, in our view, Railtrack, which is a for profit company, must not be

judge and jury on rail safety issues and, if we are to regain confidence in our railways, Railtrack must no longer have power to set and monitor safety standards.

Responsibilities are confused in several areas. My hon. Friend the Member for Eastleigh (Mr. Chidgey) mentioned automatic train protection. Of course we want a failsafe automatic train protection system to be introduced, but problems arise because responsibility is fragmented.

The House will be aware that ATP has two key aspects—first, an on-board system, and secondly, a system by the side of the track. Some of the problems in the trials have arisen in the interface between those two systems, and it is unclear who is responsible for those interface problems.

There have been other problems with ATP. The tachographs that are attached to the axles, which were intended to have a lifespan of five years, are breaking down after an average of five months because they have to operate on very out-of-date stock and on somewhat bumpy rail lines. We understand that, as recently as last autumn, Great Western Trains was given the right to turn off the trial ATP system because of that old problem of leaves on the track; the wheels were spinning, so the tachographs were giving a false indication of the speed of the train.

It is clear to us that it will be some time before we find a failsafe ATP system, so it is absolutely right that we move ahead with the introduction of the train protection and warning system, as the Deputy Prime Minister is so anxious that we do. So far I have been praising the right hon. Gentleman in this speech but, given his keenness to see TPWS introduced quickly, it is odd that nearly a year passed between the final deadline for comments on the proposal and his giving approval for the go-ahead.

However, given that we are where we are now, I reiterate a concern that I expressed yesterday—that Railtrack has asked the potential contractors to bring forward the date by which they submit their bids for the introduction of TPWS, and yet Railtrack has made no commitment to let that contract sooner. I hope that the Minister will say that he is prepared to discuss that issue with Railtrack, and perhaps to discuss with it another of our concerns—that the trained and skilled personnel may not even be available to introduce TPWS. As a result of the on-off introduction of funding by Railtrack for that type of work, the three main contractors that might be involved in the work have laid off staff in the lean periods, and the majority may not now have sufficient staff to do the work so that TPWS may be introduced in the time scale that the Deputy Prime Minister and we would like.

There is also doubt as to whether sufficient funding will be available for the work to be done in time. We have all heard that Railtrack is to invest £27 billion in the next 10 years. Only £16 billion of that is actually Railtrack's money; the remaining £11 billion will come from various partnership agreements. Much of that £27 billion will be used for routine repair and maintenance, and a lot more of it will be spent on station upgrades. It is unclear whether there is enough money in Railtrack's current budget to provide the sums of money that will be necessary for some of that important safety work.

Mr. Oliver Heald (North-East Hertfordshire): Obviously, a very important inquiry is under way and we must await the outcome. However, would the hon. Gentleman care to comment on the Health and Safety Commission report, "Review of Arrangements for Standard Setting and Application on the Main Railway Network—Interim Report", published in September 1999, which concludes:

"We do not see any cause for immediate concern on safety grounds in the way that"

Railtrack's safety and standards directorate

"has operated its key safety functions"?

In those circumstances, is it right for the hon. Gentleman to be, in a sense, smearing Railtrack and the whole privatisation process, when an independent body says that there is no cause for immediate concern, and when there is an on-going inquiry, which should be given the opportunity to make its findings?

Mr. Foster: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. The Deputy Prime Minister—

Mr. Heald: Who runs the Health and Safety Commission?

Mr. Foster: The Deputy Prime Minister mentioned that report in his remarks yesterday. However, some of us, including Liberal Democrats, believe that, as a matter of principle, the setting and monitoring of safety standards should not take place within a for profit company. That is the key matter of principle.

In other countries, investment in these matters is significantly greater. Germany will spend £27 billion not over 10 years, as Railtrack will, but over three years. In France, twice as much will be spent as in this country. Therefore I very much hope that the Deputy Prime Minister requires Railtrack to include a comprehensive safety strategy policy in its network management statement next year.

As many train operating companies are now seeking an extension of their franchises and will soon be looking to renew them, I very much hope that there will be no opportunity for train operating companies to use what is effectively blackmail on the safety issue. It is vital that no extensions of franchises are granted unless the train operating companies can at the very least show that they are running a safe, efficient and prompt service. There must be no opportunity for blackmail. I note that already Thames Trains says that it will make no further investment unless its franchise is extended. I am sure that that important issue will be taken on board. We hope to hear from the Minister what he is doing on that issue.

Some confusion remains about where funding for some of the safety improvements will come from. The Deputy Prime Minister has said in some comments to the press that when we have the report from Sir David Davies, cost will not be an issue and the Government will find the money; but yesterday, in his response to questions on his statement, he implied that the money for TPWS would come from train operating companies and Railtrack. I hope that we may have clarification as to where the money for those improvements will come.

I shall deal briefly with two other rail issues before I move on to some other areas. I suggest that it would be well worth considering whether there should be a separate and independent rail accident investigation unit. There are such units for maritime and air accidents. We are making

[Mr. Foster]

no criticism of the work of the British Transport police, but in other areas of public transport we have independent investigation bodies and perhaps such a unit could be part of the new independent body proposed by the Chairman of the Select Committee.

It is increasingly clear that among the 25 train operating companies there are enormous variations in training procedures. I hope very much that the Cullen inquiry will examine this issue and make appropriate recommendations. I hope also that it will examine supervision. It is becoming increasingly clear that since privatisation a number of TOCs have significantly reduced the number of their staff who are involved in supervision. It is vital that that issue is considered.

I shall refer briefly to other areas of transport safety, but I hope very much that my hon. Friend the Member for Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale (Mr. Moore) will be able to contribute to the debate and pick up on some of the points with which I have not dealt. Road safety is vital. There have been reductions in the number of road deaths in recent years. We welcome that, but more than 3,500 road deaths in one year is still a significant worry.

It is worth noting that in Oxfordshire, for example, there was one murder over the past 12 months, but 63 people died in road accidents. Although the numbers are reducing and despite the fact that we do better than many of our European counterparts, much work still needs to be done, not least when we analyse the figures and find that perhaps one of the reasons why the number of road deaths is coming down is that fewer and fewer of the most vulnerable road users are using the roads. There has been a significant reduction in the number of people making journeys on foot or by bike. That is all the more reason why we continue to press for road traffic reduction, something that the Minister who is about to respond has professed himself keen to see.

We are totally opposed to the selling off of National Air Traffic Services. That would be an entirely wrong move and one that would run counter to some of the concerns that have been expressed in relation to the Paddington rail crash. We note that 95 per cent. of the staff at NATS are opposed to the proposal. We note also that the pilots are opposed to it. We note especially that 115 Labour Members have signed early-day motion 446 in opposition to the privatisation.

We believe that privatisation is wrong. It could delay the introduction of the air traffic control system at Swanwick.

The Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. John Prescott): There was already an overspend and Swanwick was already more than three years late under the existing system.

Mr. Foster: The Deputy Prime Minister rightly points out that there have been many delays, and I do not necessarily blame him for some of them. However, the right hon. Gentleman will know that the very staff who will be involved in the work to introduce privatisation should be spending their time getting problems solved. Given that there are alternative ways of bringing money into NATS without an impact on the public sector borrowing requirement, such as the setting up of a not-for-profit public interest company, we urge the Deputy Prime Minister to consider them. We are concerned about maritime safety issues and about the plans for the closure of coastguard services.

I have touched only briefly on some issues. I hope that there will be an opportunity for other hon. Members to pick up on them. As I have said, we welcome the Government's review of transport safety. We are certain that there must be quick action when we are aware of the findings. We must move from a culture of blame to one of safety. We must learn the lessons from the past but we must now look to the future. We want to get more and more people on to public transport, but we shall be able to do so only if the public have confidence in all its different forms. We have initiated this debate to begin the process of improving public confidence in all forms of public transport.

7.35 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. Keith Hill): I beg to move, To leave out from "House" to the end of the Question, and to add instead thereof:

"notes with extreme sadness the recent Paddington rail disaster and the ensuing injuries and loss of life and extends its deepest sympathies to all those affected; congratulates the emergency services on their outstanding work in very difficult conditions; welcomes the prompt and comprehensive actions taken since the tragedy at Paddington, which demonstrate how serious the Government are about transport safety; notes the Government's continuing determination to take real steps to make transport safer for the public and the workforce; acknowledges the long-term reduction in fatalities on roads, in the air, at sea and on the railways; recognises specific action taken to improve rail, road, marine and air safety; commends the Government for setting up a comprehensive Transport Safety Review to look at how to improve the organisation of transport safety in the United Kingdom and whether there is a case for a single independent authority for transport safety regulation; and further notes that one of the prime aims of the Government's Public Private Partnerships for National Air Traffic Services and the London Underground is the enhancement of safety by securing high and stable levels of future investment, which are essential for safety as travel increases, and that safety regulation will be kept firmly in public hands in both cases."

Let me begin by thanking the hon. Member for Bath (Mr. Foster) for the way in which he has introduced the debate. I thank him specifically for the supportive remarks that he has made about the response of my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister following the terrible events outside Paddington, under the shadow of which we hold this debate.

I am grateful for the opportunity to set out the Government's policies on transport safety. I propose to address myself to the terms of the motion on the Order Paper. However, I share what I am certain is the unanimous feeling of the House that it is tragic that we should be discussing this subject in the context of the nightmare event at Ladbroke Grove junction outside Paddington station two weeks ago.

Yesterday my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State made an important statement about the Ladbroke Grove disaster and the actions that we have taken since it happened, which include the establishment of the Cullen inquiry into the causes of the crash and the inquiry by Sir David Davies into train protection systems and the means of reducing the number of signals passed at danger. I say to the hon. Member for Bath that we shall expect

Sir David to report to us on the readiness of the rail industry to implement either the train protection and warning system or other train protection systems. My right hon. Friend announced that he has asked for a weekly report to be sent to him on the number of SPADs. He has arranged for a monthly analysis to be placed in the Library. He confirmed that the chief inspector of railways hopes shortly to produce a second interim report on the Ladbroke Grove crash, following his first interim report issued on Friday 8 October.

My right hon. Friend expressed his full support for the action taken by the independent railway inspectorate—in instructing the train operating companies to improve, among other things, their arrangements for driver training and briefing on suspect signals, in issuing three enforcement notices related to the use of signal SN109 in the approach to Paddington and dealing with other signals with a recent history of having been passed at danger.

Mr. Ronnie Fearn (Southport): Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Hill: I shall give way but I wish to lay down a benchmark: I know that many Members are eager to participate in the debate and I will take only a limited number of interventions.

Mr. Fearn: My intervention will be brief. The Minister has mentioned signals. Following the Paddington tragedy, 10 black spots were highlighted. One of them is in Southport at Birkdale station. The situation is urgent because every 20 minutes a train passes the black spot. Is the Minister saying that we must wait for inquiries and for action, or will action be taken this week on the blackspots?

Mr. Hill: I am saying that we have asked the inspectorate to look at precisely that issue, and we expect a report in the near future. We shall certainly be considering all the blackspots, including those in the hon. Gentleman's constituency about which he rightly expresses serious concern. We share that concern and we hope to have a positive result in the nearest possible future.

My right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister was able to confirm both that following receipt of the independent Health and Safety Commission's report, which he initiated last year into concerns expressed about the wide range of responsibilities residing in Railtrack's safety and standards directorate, he has requested the HSC to report on necessary follow-up action, and that the Government are minded to transfer those functions out of Railtrack, provided that that does not result in an increase in risk. Finally, my right hon. Friend announced the convening of a rail safety summit for next Monday.

That comprehensive list of actions reflects my right hon. Friend's total commitment to securing the best possible safety regime on our railway network. Concern for transport safety has been a guiding light of his long and distinguished record in public life. He will be expanding on these matters when he appears before the Select Committee on Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs tomorrow. It is entirely typical, as well as right and proper, that he should be in his place for this debate.

Sadly, we cannot bring back those whose lives were lost in the Ladbroke Grove disaster, but it is my duty as a Minister to make every effort to ensure that avoidable accidents are not repeated, and that we have the safest possible transport system in this country.

Mr. John Smith (Vale of Glamorgan): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way. Does he agree that one of the most harrowing aspects of the Paddington disaster was not knowing for such a long time how many people were in carriage H? Is he aware that there is no numerical limitation on the number of people who can ride across the country in a passenger rail carriage—unlike an aeroplane, bus or any other form of transport? Does he agree that we should examine that as a matter of urgency?

Mr. Hill: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his remarks. It was, indeed, a source of great concern that we did not know how many people were in that carriage. There is no evidence whatever that the number of people travelling in a carriage contributes to accidents, but it is clear that, when an accident occurs and there are a large number of people in the carriages, it can only exacerbate the situation. That is an important point, which I can assure my hon. Friend we will consider seriously.

There can be no more important matter for a Government—any Government—to address than public safety. That is why issues such as crime reduction, public health, environmental responsibility and effective safety regulation are all central to the work of the Government.

Transport safety is at the very heart of policy making in my Department. Transport is essential for the sustenance of everyday life. We all need transport to get to work, to visit friends and family, and to make our shopping trips. We need transport that provides comfort, convenience, reliability and affordability, but above all else, we want assurances that we can get to our destination safely.

Mr. Norman Baker (Lewes): I am grateful to the Minister for his commitment to safety. That matter is extremely important to my constituents, who were shocked by the train crash in my constituency—which fortunately did not result in any loss of life—only two weeks after Paddington. My constituents want to know when the Government will be able to say that a system is in place to prevent trains from passing a red light. That is the question that they have asked me to ask Ministers tonight.

Mr. Hill: The hon. Gentleman is right to raise the disturbing accident that occurred in his constituency on Monday evening. We await the findings, at the earliest possible moment, of the internal railway industry inquiry into the accident, and also the inquiry being carried out by the Health and Safety Executive. We are anxious to move quickly to the institution of a train protection system that is as safe as possible. That is what we have asked Sir David Davies to look at, and we expect his report before the new year. We also expect to start work on implementing his recommendations at the earliest opportunity. I hope that that will reassure the hon. Gentleman's constituents.

There are a number of key considerations that I believe it is important to keep clearly in focus as we address transport safety. First, all public transport operators,

[Mr. Hill]

whether privately or publicly owned, need to make safety their first priority. It would be totally unacceptable for financial interests to take precedence over safety.

Another key consideration is that safety standards should be declared and enforced. That means open information, and effective monitoring and enforcement. The safety culture needs to be intrinsic in every organisation, from top to bottom. It is not good enough to try to shift blame or castigate individual workers. It is the clear responsibility of management at all levels to make sure that a working environment does not develop in which accidents can happen.

Finally, the Government will not let cost considerations alone drive decision making on transport safety. Of course, there must be an assessment of cost-effectiveness when major capital expenditure is required, but we are committed to improving transport safety and we will weigh all the factors necessary to reach sane and sensible decisions.

Mr. Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington): Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Hill: On that point, but this is one of the last interventions that I shall take.

Mr. Brake: Can the hon. Gentleman undertake that the subsidy for rail, which is to fall from £1.9 billion in 1997 to £900 million in 2002, will be increased? Is that what he is saying?

Mr. Hill: I am not saying that, but on the issue that is germane to the debate—rail safety—let me reiterate the clear assurance given by my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister in his remarks yesterday that when it comes to train safety, the money will be found.

Mr. Nigel Jones (Cheltenham) *rose—*

Mr. Hill: Let me continue for a moment. May I say, too, that common-sense safety considerations apply to every single person in the country, not just to workers and managers in the transport industries. Putting safety first is a responsibility that we all share.

I shall deal now with some facts. I do so not with callous intent, and certainly not in a spirit of complacency. I cannot stress strongly enough that the Government are not complacent about safety—very far from it. However, we need to have a rational debate if we are to work together in avoiding future tragedies across transport modes.

Since the Ladbroke Grove disaster, a suggestion has crept in that somehow that accident is symptomatic of a decline in transport safety generally. I have even read newspaper commentators suggesting that it proved that we have a third-world transport system. That is simply not so. There are parts of the world where fatalities among bus passengers caused by badly maintained vehicles, speeding or overloading are almost everyday news. In Britain we do not, and will not, tolerate such levels of transport fatalities. Indeed, it is the relative rarity of major disasters that makes accidents such as Ladbroke Grove so shocking for us.

In any case, we should not focus exclusively on spectacular disasters; that is a media temptation. The truth is that every transport accident that involves death or serious injury is a disaster for those involved.

Let me illustrate with a few facts and figures the gradual improvement in transport safety. For a start, we live in an ever more mobile society. Between the mid-1980s and the mid-1990s, the average distance travelled per person per year in Great Britain increased by 27 per cent. That level of mobility inevitably brings with it increased exposure to risk, yet over the same period, the total number of transport fatalities in Great Britain fell—from 5,296 in 1987 to 3,516 in 1996. That is a fall of one third in absolute terms, and an even greater fall in terms of the increasing amount of travel that we all undertake.

Of course the great majority of transport deaths do not occur in rail, air or maritime catastrophes, but in the daily toll on our roads—yet even on the roads the picture has improved significantly in recent years, as personal behaviour, technology and design standards have all improved. Between 1988 and 1998 the number of people killed on Britain's roads fell from 5,052 to 3,421. The number of child pedestrians killed has more than halved, from 282 to 103 per year. That is still far too many, but the trend is in the right direction, and we are determined to keep it that way.

Let me say it again: every one of those deaths is someone's tragedy, but let us not fall into the trap of supposing that travel in this country is becoming more unsafe. It is not. The figures demonstrate as much.

I believe that the House and the wider public understand that however much we regard safety as the first requirement, in practice absolute safety is unattainable. Comments are made about safer systems overseas, but those are not foolproof either. Planes crash in the United States, high-speed trains crash in Germany, and even nuclear installations in Japan can go wrong.

The House will also be aware that, in road safety terms—roads account for the vast majority of fatalities around the world—Britain is just about the safest country in Europe, and probably in the world. Again, I would totally refute any suggestion that the Government are in any way complacent about transport safety. As I have already acknowledged, my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister is recognised for his very deep and personal commitment to safety, and we arrived in government determined to take substantive steps to make transport safer for the public and the work force.

That commitment was made absolutely clear in our White Paper on the future of transport in July 1998, which had much to say on the subject of travelling safely, and set out some of the many actions that the Government are taking to improve transport safety.

The list of our initiatives is long, and I will not delay the House by reciting them all, but let me cite a few examples. On the subject of railways, we announced in August the introduction of the train protection and warning system, which is a huge improvement on the existing automatic warning system and would have prevented the Ladbroke Grove junction disaster had it been installed on the Thames Trains commuter service. It was intended that that system would be in place across the entire network by the end of 2003.

We have brought forward by two years the removal from the network of all remaining mark I slam-door carriages and launched the secure stations initiative. Last year we commissioned, and have now received, the Health and Safety Commission report on Railtrack's role in safety and standard setting. We are following up with an urgent review, minded, as we are, to transfer the main functions of the safety and standards directorate out of Railtrack.

We have also launched a review and restructuring of London Underground's safety case. There are few, if any, transport systems more suffused with a safety culture than London Underground. Under the proposed public-private partnership, public sector London Underground Ltd. will continue to have responsibility for the railway safety case for the whole underground, and the PPP will simply not go ahead unless it can be shown to contribute to improved safety.

In the air, we have subjected our aviation safety oversight system to a rigorous audit by the International Civil Aviation Organisation. We were the first major aviation country to do so, and were pleased to receive an excellent report. We have intensified our programme of ramp checks of foreign aircraft coming into UK airports and a number of actions have been taken against unsatisfactory operators.

Against that background of proactive concern to improve safety, it was absurd for the hon. Member for Bath to suggest, in what I thought was the weakest part of an otherwise good speech, that the Government would be willing to compromise on air safety in pursuit of their proposal for a National Air Traffic Services PPP. I find it bizarre to describe as privatisation a share proposal that will leave the Government and the work force with a majority of shares, with the Government's 49 per cent. shareholding underpinned by golden share powers. That is emphatically not a privatisation. It is a public-private partnership that is designed to lever in from the private sector the vital new capital—£1 billion over 10 years—that is necessary to ensure that NATS maintains the highest standards of safety in a constantly expanding aviation market.

The hon. Member for Bath should also be aware that responsibility for aviation safety does not lie with NATS, which is the service provider, but with the Civil Aviation Authority. To be precise, that responsibility lies with the CAA safety regulation group, which has wide-ranging powers and ample experience in the UK of regulating the safety of private air traffic control services with no suggestion of a problem.

Indeed, as part of the PPP, we propose to reinforce the separation of safety regulation from service provision. That will ensure that those two functions are undertaken in two separate organisations, which is an objective that airspace users, the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs Committee and the former Monopolies and Mergers Commission have long recommended.

Safety in the air will always be the Government's overriding priority. We have placed the same high priority on safety on the seas. We have reopened the investigations into the Derbyshire and Gaul sinkings, merged the former Marine Safety and Coastguard agencies to form a new integrated Maritime and Coastguard Agency, and established the Thames river safety inquiry.

On the roads, we have given local authorities the power to impose 20 mph speed limits without recourse to the approval of the Secretary of State, undertaken a major review of speed policy and championed the development of crash testing of cars for consumer information to standards higher than those set by regulation. In addition, we have reviewed our road safety strategy and targets with a view to introducing demanding fatality reduction targets by 2010. We will make a major announcement about our road safety plans shortly.

That is no more than a brief summary of some of our transport safety initiatives. I could offer the House many other examples and I should emphasise that none of the actions I have mentioned is an any way directly related to the Ladbroke Grove rail disaster. These are actions we have been taking ever since we entered office, which demonstrates beyond any question that transport safety is an absolute priority. However, the Ladbroke Grove crash forces us to re-examine everything we have been doing and to redouble our efforts to achieve the safest possible transport systems.

I remind the House that we are investigating wider structural questions in relation to transport safety. We have under way a transport safety review, which was launched at the end of last year in response to recommendations from the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs Committee. The review, which has undertaken consultations and an analysis of transport safety structures overseas, is nearing completion. It will advise us on whether the structure of transport safety regulation and accident investigation in Britain is balanced correctly.

I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody)—my mentor, whose knowledge of and concern for transport safety is unrivalled in the House—is waiting keenly for the review's conclusions. I want to assure her that we are working hard to complete the task by the end of the year and that we will benchmark our conclusions against the lessons from Ladbroke Grove.

I want to pay tribute to people involved in transport safety in this country. The detailed inquiries that we have set up may find fault with the actions or inactions of individuals, but I know that many people in the transport world who have devoted their careers and lives to safety issues will be feeling very bruised by association with the Ladbroke Grove disaster. I emphasise that it is not the intention of the Government to find scapegoats. It is all too easy for politicians and journalists to point the finger when they do not have to take the critical life and death decisions that they are debating. I hope that the House will therefore join me in commending the important safety work done by many people in all sectors of transport, on which we all rely for our safe journey home.

The House will note that, like the hon. Member for Bath, I have sought throughout my speech to refrain from trying to score party political points. That was very much the spirit of the House during yesterday's exchanges, which took place in response to my right hon. Friend's statement, and it was also largely the approach taken by the hon. Gentleman. The safety of the British people is far too serious a matter for petty political squabbles. The whole country expects everyone involved in transport—whether they be company directors or train drivers, politicians or civil servants—to work together to ensure that we have the safest possible transport systems.

[Mr. Hill]

Safety is far more important than old arguments about ownership. I believe that we can make Britain the safest place in the world to travel, whether for work or pleasure, but sometimes, tragically, we have to learn the hard way. Ladbroke Grove causes us all to reflect on what more we can do to enhance safety and prevent the recurrence of such a terrible tragedy. I trust that every Member of the House will join the Government in working constructively on the ideas and solutions that will save lives now and in the future.

7.58 pm

Mr. Shaun Woodward (Witney): All Conservative Members and Members across the House continue to share the sense of appalling loss that the Ladbroke Grove tragedy has created. Nothing can bring back those men and women who perished in the accident and the terrible fire that followed in seconds.

The public are worried about safety on our trains, and I very much want to associate myself with the opening remarks of the hon. Member for Bath (Mr. Foster). We definitely want, and believe that it is in the public interest, to move away from a culture of blame to one of safety. The Minister's remarks, which paid tribute to those involved in transport safety, were well judged. They do a terrific job—under terrific pressure, sometimes—and we fully acknowledge the role that they play, but we must also recognise that the public want urgent answers to vital questions. They want to know why and how the accident happened and they want to be reassured that such a tragedy will not be allowed to happen again.

The public also want to know whether lessons that all those responsible for rail travel should have learned before 5 October were relevant—lessons that might have meant that the Ladbroke Grove disaster could have been avoided, and obvious lessons in common sense, which might have been drawn without waiting for the conclusion of the Southall inquiry.

An obvious common-sense lesson is how to stop trains going through red lights. People want to know whether enough on that issue was done, not only by the train operating companies, Railtrack—which has received an extraordinary amount of attention in a culture that is apparently not about blame—and the HSE, but by those charged with governmental responsibility for ensuring safety on the rails so that red lights on the track mean that trains stop.

Over the past few weeks, Railtrack has come under close scrutiny. Lord Cullen's inquiry will doubtless produce a verdict on just how much responsibility it should bear. It will not escape the House's attention that, in Railtrack's evidence to the Transport Sub-Committee of the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs Committee in March 1998, the company said:

"We believe Paddington to be the best protected major terminal station anywhere in the world."

We shall see whether it is the best protected. Judging by the events of 5 October, it is not protected enough.

Anyone who reads last year's Select Committee report on railway safety, which must include Ministers, will find that such a judgment about Paddington was, at best, in doubt. It does not take more than a cursory glance at the daily diet of our newspapers to recognise that the public feel that action to promote railway safety could, and perhaps should, have been taken many months ago.

Let me deal with the issue of red lights. Information about trains going through red lights is collated by Her Majesty's railway inspectorate, which is part of the Health and Safety Commission. Those figures go to the Government. Figures for trains passing danger signals make alarming reading. They were higher in 1991, when 944 trains went through red lights. Those who have jumped to the hasty and premature conclusion that a railway system in private ownership means that safety will be compromised must acknowledge that, since the railway system passed out of Government ownership, the number of danger signals passed has declined. In 1997–98, the figure had fallen to 593—still, in the judgment of many, far too high.

The Health and Safety Commission report of 2 September 1999 says that, of those incidents, 42 could have had

"potentially severe consequences where the train passed the overlap, and there are connections ahead, over which another train may be passing."

The public are understandably concerned to know that Ministers were told that in 1998–99—figures which we know from Lord Macdonald's recent statement were in the Department's office in August this year, two months before the disaster—the number of trains passing through red lights

"no longer followed a downward trend".

Last year's figure of 593 had increased to 643. Worse, the number of incidents which the Health and Safety Commission defined as

"having potentially severe consequences"

also rose by 25 per cent. on the previous year to 52.

As Lord Macdonald acknowledged, those incidents "over-ran safety margins". In straightforward terms, once a week, what may well have been the major contributory factor that caused the Ladbroke Grove disaster was, and perhaps still is, being repeated across the country.

I acknowledge the remarks made by the Deputy Prime Minister in his statement yesterday, in which he said that safety was his primary concern. I am sure that safety is the primary concern of every member of this House. We are all concerned about safety, but we must be certain that any changes to those charged with responsibility for safety will improve standards, not imperil them. In the past few weeks, Railtrack has provided an all-too-easy target for that criticism. However, there is concern and we can all understand why. The public want us to be not only concerned about safety but, when safety may be at risk, they want us to take responsibility and action, where and when appropriate. They will not and should not tolerate undue delay or the failure to assume that responsibility.

There certainly should be concern about the length of time taken for the official response following the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs Committee report on 4 March 1998. Nineteen months ago, on 4 March 1998, the Select Committee report on the Strategic Rail Authority first recommended the transfer of the standards and safety directorate out of the hands of Railtrack. Whether that is the right decision is another question; the crucial question was one of safety, which presumably is why that recommendation was in the report.

Two weeks after the report was published, the then Minister of Transport asked the Health and Safety Commission to commence the proposed review of railways standards arrangements to include consideration of the extent to which Railtrack's current role in enforcing standards might be transferred elsewhere. I remind the House that that was 19 months ago.

It is perhaps not surprising, therefore, that the public have begun to ask why the response seems to have taken so long. Some months after its first report, the Select Committee returned to that issue. It is noteworthy that eight months after that first report in November 1998 it said that

"the present regulatory system gives Railtrack's Safety and Standards Directorate too much responsibility. The directorate needs to be free-standing and should pass to an independent safety authority, as already recommended."

The Select Committee said that nearly 12 months ago. What action did the Government take? How did those responsible respond?

The Government asked the Health and Safety Commission to respond. Its response did not, in either timing or substance, indicate a serious or immediate enough concern for the issues raised. Four months after that November report, the Health and Safety Commission produced a four-page special report, which said that the HSE

"is conducting a thorough review of Railtrack's role"

and would be expected to produce a report in the spring for the Minister of Transport containing a range of options. That report did not come in the spring. The report, called the Tansley report, came several months later—this October. That was 19 months after the issue was first raised by the Select Committee.

The Tansley report was not the only report about railway safety that was sitting on Ministers' desks in October. There was another, which was specifically about signals being passed at danger—the so-called "SPAD" incidents. It was published on 2 September and should have alarmed any Minister. It was highly critical of elements of rail safety. As well as reproducing figures about rail safety that showed a rise in SPADs, it made recommendations—22 in all—to deal with the problem of signals passed at danger.

After the rise in SPAD figures, the report should surely have been referred to Ministers. Can the Minister tell the House when officials first saw that report? When did the Secretary of State first see the report on SPADs published in August?

A number of questions arise that concern not only Railtrack, whose role in safety had already been seriously questioned by the Select Committee 19 months ago, but what action was being taken within the Department during that time, who assumed responsibility for it and who did they meet. The public want to know what happened when the HSE figures landed on Ministers' desks in August of this year showing the dramatic rise in figures. Were they referred to Ministers and what action did Ministers take? Following the HSE report on 2 September, which further drew attention to those figures, what action did officials and Ministers take and whom did they consult?

In his statement yesterday, the Deputy Prime Minister said that the Tansley interim report reached his office on the day of the Paddington crash. Will he confirm that that was the same day that it reached officials in his Department?

The right hon. Gentleman rightly said that the report raised

"serious concerns about the rail industry, largely relating to priorities and decisions on safety standards".

Undoubtedly, there are questions to be asked not only on the priorities and safety standards but on decisions and priorities in the Health and Safety Executive and the Department itself. The public will want to know whether Ministers think that, 19 months after the Select Committee expressed serious doubts about rail safety, the production of not a full report but only an interim report with no firm conclusions demonstrates that the Government made an appropriate response, especially in the light of the Southall disaster.

Secondly, the public will want to know why, within five days of the publication of the Tansley interim report, the Deputy Prime Minister should make a statement in which he said that he is

"minded to transfer the main functions of Railtrack's Safety and Standards Directorate",—[*Official Report*, 19 October 1999; Vol. 336, c. 268-69.]

out of Railtrack. That decision is particularly surprising because the Tansley interim report, to which the Deputy Prime Minister referred and for which he had asked, states:

"any decision on the way forward should be taken in the light of a wider and more formal sounding of views in the industry . . . we would recommend this as the next step."

Therefore, the public will want to know—and indeed have a right to know—why Ministers and the Deputy Prime Minister specifically rejected that advice and with whom the right hon. Gentleman consulted before making his views known on the Saturday following his rail summit with the Prime Minister.

Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody (Crewe and Nantwich): I have been listening carefully to the hon. Gentleman. I hope that he will forgive me, but I am not sure whether he is in favour of an independent safety authority. Would he make that clear?

Mr. Woodward: The hon. Lady's point is extremely well made. I am in favour of the Government getting on with the task—*[Interruption.]* The Deputy Prime Minister does not like it. He delegates responsibility to others to produce a decision, yet when he has to make a decision, he flies in the face of those who advise him otherwise. He may not like to be reminded of his decision, but he made it—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I cannot have hon. Members and, for that matter, right hon. Members shouting across the Chamber.

Mr. Woodward: It is odd, is it not, that for 19 months—

Mr. Heald: Does my hon. Friend agree that the Health and Safety Commission is an independent safety commission? Is it not extraordinary that the Deputy Prime Minister should ignore its viewpoint?

Mr. Woodward: It is not only extraordinary but astounding.

It is odd, is it not, that for 19 months it seemed impossible for the Government to reach any firm view other than to continue calls for further reviews. Suddenly, following the

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disaster, it seems that a decision can be reached in a few days—even hours—even though that view flies in the face of those independent people who told the Deputy Prime Minister:

"any decision . . . should be taken in the light of a wider and more formal sounding of views in the industry."

Mr. Prescott: We will answer and respond to many detailed questions in the debate or by letter if they need to be answered. The hon. Gentleman asks when I was concerned about signals passed on red. Yes, I was—not just now, but last year. I ordered the Health and Safety Executive to bring in an automatic train protection system, which the previous Government had put off because they said that they could not afford it.

Mr. Woodward: That is not exactly what the right hon. Gentleman has been saying, but perhaps he is now telling us that he took action in August when he had those figures. We would be delighted to hear this evening what action he took this August when he realised that serious incidents had increased by 25 per cent. It seems tragic that it took a rail disaster to force sufficient attention to be paid to the issue, which had been flagged up 19 months before in the Select Committee report.

During those 19 months, great priority was given to the decisions that were required to deal with the Railways Bill, as well as discussions about punctuality, performance and investment levels. That certainly occupied Ministers and officials. During that time, was equal attention given, and by whom, to the serious questions about safety that had been so blatantly flagged up by the Select Committee—the August figures, the HSE report of September and now the Tansley interim report? What was going on in the Department during August and September?

As the Deputy Prime Minister seems so keen to rise to his feet, perhaps he will tell the House at which point he had a meeting to discuss the rise in SPAD figures, about which he would have received notice in August.

Railtrack's role has borne and will continue to bear considerable scrutiny, but others must bear responsibility as well. We now know that both the Health and Safety Commission and Ministers have long been aware of the dangers courted. We need to know, and the public have a right to know, what action the Department and Ministers were taking during the summer when those figures dramatically changed.

The calls for freedom of information have been much heralded by this Government and yet they have been remarkably secretive about information on some aspects of Railtrack. The Government have been conducting negotiations with Railtrack to award it a contract to run a number of London's tube lines. Yet when pressed on the conditions and terms of that contract, the Deputy Prime Minister refuses to make the information public or to put the contract out to tender. Whatever the merits of the case, what is surely clear now is that the Government have a duty to make all that information publicly available—information on Railtrack, including the secret deals that the Deputy Prime Minister has been conducting regarding the future of London Underground.

Mr. Ivan Henderson (Harwich): Was the hon. Gentleman aware, when the Conservative Government were in control of our railways, that employees in the industry were afraid to speak up about safety concerns because they were afraid of losing their jobs and of being disciplined in an era of job insecurity? During that time, that Government did nothing to allow those people to speak out about their safety concerns in the industry.

Mr. Woodward: That is an important point because part of the culture of British Rail was that it was difficult to speak up and there is still a culture in which it is difficult to do so. We welcome the fact that people are speaking up and revealing malpractice—of course, that is right. Whatever the merits of the case, one person we want to speak up is the Deputy Prime Minister. We want him to tell the House and to publish the terms and conditions under which Railtrack will be given the underground lines. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will agree that the interests of the House and the country would be better served if the Deputy Prime Minister did not conduct those negotiations in secret, but published the details.

Confidence in transport safety needs to be restored, but it will not be in a climate of secrecy. A culture of safety rather than one of blame, requires—

Mr. Peter Snape (West Bromwich, East): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Woodward: No, I am about to finish. Such a culture requires the Government to be wholly transparent in their dealings with Railtrack and other transport companies. If, as is true of their dealings with the overground, the Government are transparent about the underground, the public will be reassured. Perhaps tonight the Deputy Prime Minister, who seems so keen to intervene from a sedentary position, will agree to publish that information and allow all the public to see his plans for the underground and his secret deals with Railtrack.

8.19 pm

Mr. Peter Snape (West Bromwich, East): I must declare an interest as a member of the National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers, and someone who spent his working life in the railway industry. I am also a director of a National Express subsidiary, which is exclusively a bus company.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Bath (Mr. Foster) on the way in which he introduced the debate. He did it non-controversially and briefly, for which we are grateful in such a short debate. I welcome my hon. Friend the Member for Streatham (Mr. Hill) to the Dispatch Box. I always thought that I was his mentor, but he has given that job to my hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody)—*[Interruption.]* Whichever one of us is responsible, we have done a pretty good job, given his performance tonight. He was both lucid and informative, and I am sure that the House looks forward to hearing from him again.

I am afraid that my congratulations end there. This is the second time that I have heard the hon. Member for Witney (Mr. Woodward) speak in recent weeks. He and I addressed a meeting of the Railway Development Society a few Saturdays ago here in London. He demonstrated on that occasion the same weakness that he has demonstrated tonight. If one turns up with a pre-prepared speech, it is a bit hard to ad lib. At that meeting, he accused me of

saying various things that I had not said because they were on his brief. Tonight he accused the Government of various things that they had not done because they were on his brief.

How would it be possible to conduct negotiations with Railtrack about the future of the London underground—not that this has very much to do with transport safety—in the full glare of publicity? I do not think that the hon. Gentleman knows very much, given his track record, but I presume that he knows enough about business to be aware that a certain confidentiality must be observed. To accuse my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister in the way that he did was deplorable—it suggests that the person who prepared his brief does not know any more about business than he does.

As for the other accusation that the hon. Gentleman made, I find myself, like my hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich, confused. I am not sure whether he was complaining that my right hon. Friend had spent all the time since the preliminary report first appeared in spring last year not doing anything or that he acted precipitately in making his decision post-Paddington. He did not make clear which of the two things he was complaining about, but perhaps that is not surprising given the confusion of his speech.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned signals passed at danger. He was right to point out that such incidents had increased in the past 12 months. It is fair to point out that the number of trains on Britain's railways increased by about 1,000 a day in the past 12 months. Given those circumstances, perhaps it is not surprising that the number of SPADs has increased.

Mr. Bernard Jenkin (North Essex): The hon. Gentleman is complacent.

Mr. Snape: I am accused of complacency by the sidekick of the hon. Member for Witney. He is another one I would not trust to wind up a Hornby 00 on the nursery floor. The number of SPADs has always been fairly high. The difference between the old days and the present day is that they are impossible to conceal. Present day signalling sensors produce their version of a black box so if a driver passes a signal by a few yards, it is automatically recorded.

In the days of oil lamps and steam locomotives, we kept these things quiet to avoid reporting each other. Those days are now gone, perhaps happily, and the vast majority of SPADs are comparatively insignificant matters, although the ones to which the hon. Gentleman tried to draw the House's attention may well merit further investigation. SPADs ought to be seen in the context of the number of train miles. The appalling tragedy at Paddington ought to be seen in the context of other modes of transport. We are rightly horrified by what took place at Ladbroke Grove junction, but two and a half Paddingtons take place on our roads every week of the year in terms of fatalities, largely without the hysteria—I choose my words carefully—that greeted the latest accident.

I know that it is not a fashionable thing to say, but I shall risk saying it. I hope that I do not get too much odium for it. The final responsibility for driving a train lies with the driver. Drivers at Paddington, Southall or Lewes do not suddenly come on red lights, whether they are concealed by overhead gantries or whatever. Drivers get a preliminary caution and a caution signal beforehand, both of which must be acknowledged, as must the approach to the red light. Sadly, both the drivers at Paddington paid the ultimate price for whatever went wrong. It appears that the driver of the Thames turbo passed a signal at danger. The fact is that we pay drivers to drive trains.

I took part in various radio programmes following the Paddington accident. One or two former drivers who called in said that they wondered how the present crop of drivers would have handled trains into and out of Paddington in the old days when they were signalled by oil lamps and automatic train control on the Great Western trains. Great Western was more advanced than any of the other train companies. It was operated only on semaphore distance signals. The general view expressed on the radio was that the problem with driving trains today is that it can be seen to be too easy. People become complacent because they sit in the warm environment of a cab pressing the automatic warning system cancellation button in built-up areas all too frequently. Eventually, the inherent weakness of AWS is demonstrated. Drivers press the button approaching a red light, having pressed it passing cautionary signals, whether double yellow or yellow.

The answer is not to rush into spending £1 billion on the advanced form of automatic train protection. The time to spend that money was after the Clapham disaster in 1988. Railway safety and signalling structures and safety measures have moved on since then.

The hon. Member for Witney demonstrated the unfitness of the Conservative party to be in opposition, let alone in government. The Conservatives criticise the Government for what they term their tardy reaction to the Select Committee report. Let me remind the House that my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister and I were the Opposition transport spokespersons after Clapham in 1988 when Cecil Parkinson, as he then was, pledged as Transport Secretary that £1 billion would be spent and ATP would be provided throughout Britain's railways.

I cannot remember the number of Transport Secretaries between 1988 and 1997.

Mrs. Dunwoody: Seven.

Mr. Snape: They came along more frequently than some of the trains did in those days, as my hon. Friend reminds me. The pledge so publicly given in 1988 was never implemented by the Conservative party.

Mr. Woodward: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Snape: Although the hon. Gentleman refused to give way to me, I will demonstrate that I am a little more mature by giving way to him.

Mr. Woodward: I am extremely grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way; he has demonstrated his maturity in spades by doing so. I draw to his attention the remarks made by the Labour Minister for Transport in another place. He said on only 6 October this year:

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"to be fair to the previous administration, they weren't able to take action on introducing new systems because other alternatives weren't available."

Does he disagree with the Minister?

Mr. Snape: The hon. Gentleman quotes out of context. He makes a clever public school debating point that has no relevance to what took place between 1988 and 1997. That pledge was given publicly and never implemented. There may well be good reasons why it should not be implemented now. I have tried to explain some of them.

Railway signalling and safety practice has moved on considerably since 1988. The hon. Gentleman shakes his head, but let me tell him that on the west coast main line, when it is ever modernised—someone said that in a good week its modernisation is announced twice and there is a press conference to follow—ATP will not be of any value. For much of the line, the visual signals will presumably be removed. We will have the continental system of signalling in which the maximum speed for that stretch will be shown to the driver, and if he exceeds it, the brakes will come on automatically. But that is not ATP; we have moved on from there.

I hope that Sir David Davies will not seriously say that we should spend £1 billion on yesterday's technology, given the changes that are likely to transform railway signalling practice in the years to come.

Ms Claire Ward (Watford): Is my hon. Friend aware that TCS, the continental train control system to which he referred, is part of the contract for the updating of the west coast main line?

Mr. Snape: I am sure that that is the case. Tilting trains will not work to their proper capability without it. In the meantime, we cannot go on, year after year and, in some cases, month after month, having drivers pass signals at danger.

I do not want to prejudge the results of the inquiry into the Lewes accident, but it appears that a driver set off from a platform against a signal at red. That is a pretty common phenomenon in recent years. Mr. Stanley Hall, who was British Rail's safety expert, wrote a book about train accidents in recent years. That phenomenon is known as "ding, ding and away". It happens so often that, on much modern railway stock, including, as I understand it, the Connex South Eastern trains which were involved at Lewes, an additional safety system is fitted—a driver's reminder device—which, if the signal controlling the exit from the platform is at danger, should be applied in the cab to remind the driver not to pull away if the station staff give him the proceed indication. If that was the case on this occasion—my information is that it was, but I do not wish to prejudge the inquiry—spending £1 billion on ATP is not much good if drivers are incapable of doing the basic part of their job, which is what that particular case amounts to.

Some of my hon. Friends believe, as the papers did in their hysterical reaction to Paddington, that the disaster was all down to privatisation. There are some aspects of privatisation and railway safety about which the House should be concerned. The number of interfaces between the various people involved in railway safety is far greater than it ever was with a publicly owned railway system, but it is not in the interests of Railtrack or the train operating companies to have rail accidents. To put it bluntly, they are bad for business. They will not wish such situations to arise.

Those of my hon. Friends who believe that the Treasury would have provided ATP—it did not provide it under a Conservative Government from 1988—should take a train up to Manchester. The hon. Member for Witney heard me recount this story at the Railway Development Society meeting. Before they get to Manchester, they will pass through Stockport where they will see a signal box where I used to work nearly 40 years ago. That was supposed to be removed as part of a modernisation scheme, but it is still there.

Let no one be kidded into believing that the Treasury will provide unlimited funds to modernise Britain's railway system. The privatisation argument is over. We must ensure that there are no further Paddingtons which can be attributed to the number of people who have to be consulted before fairly basic and simple changes are made to the railway network. The fact is that the Treasury never provided for railway safety under successive Governments, Labour and Conservative alike. We are where we are today, and we must go forward on the basis of the private operators and Railtrack.

I hold no particular brief for Mr. Gerald Corbett. I am told that he has lots of share options and has made lots of money, but that does not mean that the press should hang him at dawn because two trains collided outside Paddington. Given some of the hysteria in the press against Ministers and Railtrack bosses, it is no wonder that people are inclined to keep their heads down when anything goes wrong if that is the way in which the press conducts itself following a tragedy on the scale of the one we saw two weeks ago.

My final word concerns my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister. In the years that we spent working together, I probably fell out with him more often than any other hon. Member, but I never lost my admiration for the fact that his concern for the railway and for transport safety generally was always paramount. I am confident that the decisions that he has taken so far during his term of office and the decisions that he will take in the years to come will give us a better railway system, something that all three parties represented in the House tonight should want. But, listening to what is laughably called the official Opposition, I sometimes wonder exactly what sort of railway they want and exactly who they want to blame for tragedies such as the one that we are discussing tonight.

8.34 pm

Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (Cotswold): I start by commiserating with those of my constituents who were in any way involved in the Paddington crash and also with its victims. We hope that they will make a speedy recovery and that everything possible is done to ensure that our railways are safer in the future. That involves some short-term and some long-term measures, but before I go into those I want to nail one or two misconceptions. It is utter nonsense to say that somehow the safety of the railways has been prejudiced by privatisation. It is also

utter nonsense to say that the safety of the railways was in any way prejudiced by the current health and safety regime.

In the short term, it is odd that one of the country's leading signal experts should say that there are still signals at Paddington that are partly or totally obscured by metal girders. Such problems should be put right tomorrow, not next week, next month or next year. Some measures could be put in place immediately. It is completely wrong that each year there are 52 serious incidents, one a week, of drivers passing red signals—SPADs. That requires immediate tough action. There should be a proper investigation of every SPAD incident. All drivers involved in such incidents should be properly accountable for them and should be properly trained so that they do not take them as lightly as they have done in the past.

Another common misconception is that somehow the previous Government did not introduce the proper train protection and warning systems, or the ATP system. *[Interruption.]* It is all very well Labour Members saying that they did not do it, but the ATP system was fitted to this particular train and it is thought to have been on—that will be confirmed by the current investigation—so it does not seem to be the system that was at fault.

Before rushing to conclusions, we should consider the Tansley report, paragraph 46 of which states:

"We therefore think it important that any decision on the way forward should be taken in the light of a wider and more formal sounding of views in the industry".

Those are the short-term measures that should be taken. Meanwhile, apart from the measures that I have outlined, the Government are rightly speeding up the introduction of the train protection and warning system. I welcome that, but it will take four or five years to introduce, so short-term measures must be taken now.

One particular aspect of the Tansley report which has not been referred to this evening, but is worth looking at, relates to the further report of the Select Committee of 9 December last year. Referring to the Health and Safety at Work, etc. Act 1974, it said:

"In common with all areas of commercial endeavour, the prime responsibility for ensuring safety on the railway must rest with the party who is in control of the activity."

Therefore, whatever the Government do to alter responsibility for ensuring safety standards, safety as such will always be a matter for those involved, and that will be either Railtrack or the train operating companies. We cannot take away that responsibility. The question then is who should set the standards—the British Standards Institute or the Health and Safety Executive—and who should ensure that they are met. One aspect of that must be the proper training and supervision of the drivers. That is a short-term measure that could be taken immediately.

Tonight we have heard a lot about railways, but the Liberal Democrats' motion is wide, so I want now to deal with the possible sale of National Air Traffic Services. I do not care whether the Government call it a public-private partnership or whatever; I shall be delighted if they bring new badly needed investment into Britain's air traffic control system. It is a highly complex matter which needs new investment. Our already hugely overcrowded sky needs the most advanced information technology systems available. In that respect, the sky over Heathrow is, at certain times of the day, and even with the most sophisticated IT systems available, too overcrowded. I urge the Minister to develop a better regional airport structure. There is no reason why we should not make better use of regional airports. Birmingham, for example, is under-utilised at present. In any event, I welcome the Government's proposals to bring badly needed private investment to the air traffic control system.

Mention has been made tonight of road safety. Although the number of deaths on our roads has fallen dramatically—as the Minister has confirmed—2,421 deaths is still too many. The Minister is nodding; that point is, and should be, uncontroversial between us, but the Government propose to cut the road building programme to shreds. We will not get rid of cars and motorists by cutting the road building programme and it will not improve road safety.

Mr. Hill: The key aspect of improving road safety is maintenance and I wish to point out to the hon. Gentleman that the Government have put an extra £400 million into road maintenance.

Mr. Clifton-Brown: Yes, that is part of the solution, but some severe accident black spots still require capital investment. I am grateful for the Minister's intervention because it makes my point. The A417/419 runs through my constituency. It is an arterial road that forms a strategic link between the M4 and the M5 and is a modern dual carriageway that has been upgraded so that one can drive from Sicily to the north of Scotland. However, on one small stretch of the road—the Nettleton Bottom link—in my constituency, the dual carriageway is missing and fatalities have already occurred in that area. The Government say that they cannot afford capital programmes, but how many more fatalities will my constituents have to suffer? How much more misery and congestion will my constituents suffer from the motorists who are funnelled in from every direction to that strategic chicane?

We must get our priorities in order. A senior official from the Highways Agency described that stretch of road as one of the worst bottlenecks in the country. Every fatality on our roads costs £1 million, with the inquest and other procedures. How many more fatalities must we have on that road, with the grief and misery caused by every serious accident? An accident is waiting to happen, because the pub at the bottom of the worst bit of the road holds public functions. It needs only another lorry to shunt a car into that pub and many fatalities will result.

I see the Minister nodding again, and I will write to him on the issue. Last week, we had a public meeting in the village hall, which was full; and people even stood outside to listen at the window. It is a serious issue for my constituency and for the nation, because that road links the north and the south, and London to the midlands because it cuts off the Bristol link. I appeal to Ministers not to slash the roads programme. Instead, roads should be improved to make them safer for motorists—who should not be penalised by severe petrol and diesel increases either; they simply make life a misery for those in rural areas.

Another aspect of transport safety affects schools and schoolchildren. Accidents happen every day involving schoolchildren crossing busy roads, with too many cars driven by a single adult coming to drop off and pick up

[Mr. Clifton-Brown]

children. That is environmental nonsense. I wish to suggest to the Minister and to the Deputy Prime Minister, if only he were listening instead of talking, a good scheme that was pioneered in my constituency 15 years ago. The dial-a-ride bus is a good model for the rest of the country. *[Interruption.]* I wish that the Deputy Prime Minister would listen to what I am saying about a sensible system that works, instead of muttering. A group of mothers could dial up the bus instead of all driving their cars singly. *[Interruption.]* The Deputy Prime Minister sighs, but I do not know why he is making such a fuss about the suggestion.

Mr. Prescott: The scheme has been going for 25 years.

Mr. Clifton-Brown: That may be true, but it is a good system and should be extended elsewhere. If the Deputy Prime Minister would provide more than the paltry amount he has allocated for rural buses, perhaps it could be extended. It could reduce school accidents and it would be beneficial for the environment. The Government could do far more for road safety.

8.45 pm

Mrs. Ann Cryer (Keighley): I thank the Liberal Democrat party for devoting its valuable parliamentary time to debating the increasingly important subject of transport safety. My brief contribution will be mainly about the future of safety on our rail network, and I make no apology for narrowing the debate to that issue. We railway enthusiasts must repeat, wherever and whenever possible, that rail is still the safest way to carry people or freight from point A to point B.

When the driver of a local train went through a red signal near Ladbroke Grove junction on 5 October, 30 people were killed and 245 injured in the carnage that ensued. That was bad enough, but the tragedy may have caused thousands of people to move back to using their cars due to services terminating at Ealing Broadway, and the ripples of anxiety extend well beyond the Thames valley. When commuters resort to their cars for travel, their chances of suffering death or injury are 15 times greater.

I therefore welcome wholeheartedly the actions of my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister. He has speedily put in place a thorough investigation of what went so terribly wrong that fateful morning two weeks ago. He is also determined to put matters right and, where necessary, to make available the money needed for essential improvements to the system. Lord Cullen is to look into the precise causes of the Paddington disaster. His inquiry will go much wider, and examine the safety of our rail network in general. It will also consider whether the privatised industry has the correct safety structure.

It was such a very great pity that the previous Government were so keen to sell off British Rail on the cheap that, through British Rail and Railtrack, they invested £548 million of taxpayer's money in the hiring of accountants, barristers and City experts to promote the sale. I believe that that money could have been invested in the promotion of safety on our railways, possibly through the installation of train protection and warning systems throughout the network.

Sir David Davies, the president of the Royal Academy of Engineering, has been asked to assess the efficiency and costs of train protection systems, so that the Government can formulate an action plan to reduce the incidence of signals passed at danger. By that means, it is hoped that future disasters will be avoided.

Apparently, the interim report from the chief inspector of railways, compiled immediately after the Ladbroke Grove crash, suggests that it could have been prevented had the train protection and warning system been installed and functioning, both on the track and on the Thames train.

Mr. Snape: Does my hon. Friend agree that it is important that Sir David Davies bases his conclusions on engineering factors, rather than on financial considerations? As he is acknowledged to be an expert in engineering, will not his conclusions show whether it is sensible to go forward with TPWS, or some alternative system?

Mrs. Cryer: Yes, I agree with my hon. Friend. Clearly, the matter of cost will have to be considered, but that should be of negligible importance in comparison with considerations of railway safety.

The three enforcement notices that have been issued by the railways inspectorate are welcome, if somewhat belated. One prohibits the use of signal 109 at Paddington; the second requires Railtrack to introduce, within the next three weeks, additional controls at the 21 other signals passed at danger most frequently. The third will reduce risk at all remaining signals with a recent record of being passed at danger.

The Government's policy of getting people out of their cars and on to trains—or buses for short journeys—and of encouraging the movement of goods by rail freight rather than by heavy lorry has my full support, as I believe that it will prevent injuries and loss of life and improve the environment. However, to achieve those changes, passengers and the movers of goods must have confidence that the alternatives being promoted are cheap, reliable and safe.

If any of those three essential elements are lacking, our battle for the hearts and minds of commuters, families on the move and manufacturing industry will be lost, and the carnage of Ladbroke Grove will be repeated time and again on our roads. There may not be the same visual impact but, every day, families will be bereaved and individuals terribly injured. There must be a severe conflict of interest when an organisation is under pressure from shareholders to make profits and yet also has a duty of care for the safety of its passengers. I trust that the measures already announced and the advent of the Strategic Rail Authority will remove the possibility of such a conflict. I also hope that the Government will reconsider—even now—their commitment to the privatisation of national air traffic control in the light of the Paddington tragedy.

Mrs. Laing: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Mrs. Cryer: I am sorry, but I have finished.

8.50 pm

Ms Claire Ward (Watford): Like all hon. Members I want to offer my condolences to all those involved in the Paddington rail crash. I was shocked to hear of the crash: just two years after Southall, we were once again faced with a crash that would bring the safety of our railways into question. What dismayed me most was that the tragedy in Watford in 1996 seemed not even to have been taken into account, given what happened at Southall and Paddington. I have been further disappointed by the debate tonight; in all the speeches that I have heard about reports, about signals passed at danger—SPADs—and about safety, there has been not one mention of HM railway inspectorate's report into the Watford accident, a report that makes fascinating reading.

I was working in the constituency when that crash occurred, and I called for a public inquiry. I do not repeat that call; I am well aware that it is no longer realistic. However, I hope that the recommendations made in the Watford report and the circumstances of the Watford crash in August 1996 will be taken into account. I have made representations to the chairman of the Southall inquiry, and I hope that the report will be taken into account in the Paddington inquiry. Any recommendations made after Paddington and Southall should be tested against the circumstances of the Watford crash.

From what we know so far about Paddington, the similarities between that crash and the one in Watford are striking. People whose knowledge is much greater than mine suggest that those similarities are greater than the similarities between Paddington and Southall. Paddington and Watford had in common multiple SPADs—judging from the speculation that we have heard so far about Paddington. On 8 August 1996, a driver passed a red signal on the route from Euston to Crewe. The signal had been passed at danger several times. The crash resulted in the death of one person and injuries to 68 more. How must my constituents and the families of those who were involved in that crash feel about the fact that the subsequent recommendations of the inquiry report have not been acted on?

The report was published in April 1998, and I refer hon. Members—particularly my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions—to its recommendations. One of the issues regarding SPADs was that the British Railways Board group standard was superseded in March 1995 by the Railtrack group standard, which clarified certain duties and obligations that Railtrack and train operators were meant to put in place. That became effective in April 1995.

One of the key changes was a requirement that Railtrack should convene signal siting committees wherever a signal had been passed at danger more than once in 12 months or three or more times in a three-year period. Those circumstances certainly applied in the case of the Watford crash.

I want my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State to question whether a signal siting committee was in operation in respect of the Paddington crash and whether previous SPADs reported at that junction had led to the convening of a signal siting committee. If they had, the committee might well have found that the signal was not easily seen by drivers. That was one of the issues that came out of the Watford crash. The report recommended that Railtrack should review its procedures to ensure compliance with its own group standard in respect of the convening of signal siting committees. It was further recommended that the standard itself be reviewed so that following multiple SPAD incidents at any given signal, the SSC could assess all risk factors that could contribute to a SPAD incident. Had that happened after previous SPADs, we might not have got into the situation we now face with Paddington. I cannot overstress my disappointment that the recommendations following the Watford crash do not appear to have been implemented by Railtrack yet.

I want to draw attention to other issues relating to the Watford crash. It was recommended that train drivers who repeatedly passed SPADs should have special training from the train operating company. I would be interested to learn whether my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State believes that that policy has been adopted by the TOCs since the recommendations were produced.

Her Majesty's inspectorate recommended that the TOCs audit their SPAD management systems to ensure that driving briefings are effective and that signal issues that concern drivers are pursued vigorously with Railtrack to provide satisfactory solutions. Over the past two weeks, several train drivers have said in the media that they have repeatedly reported signals that are difficult to see and where there are continual problems. I am concerned that, yet again, a recommendation that came out of the Watford crash that may well have prevented the Paddington crash has not been implemented. I would be interested to hear my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State's views on that.

This is a serious issue for my constituents. They faced the problems of the Watford rail crash and saw the deaths at the Southall and Paddington crashes. They wonder how many times this has to happen. How many reports, how many inquiries, how many different recommendations do we have to hear before something is done? I know that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has been working hard on these issues but I would like a specific answer on this report. If he cannot provide it to the House in his reply, I would like to hear from him in writing. Like most hon. Members, I will have to respond to my constituents, who are concerned that despite the crash in Watford, there are several similarities with the Paddington rail crash that have not yet been dealt with and recommendations that have not been implemented.

Of course, other issues are raised by the Watford rail crash and the report—especially the fact that nobody has been blamed for the crash. The driver was prosecuted and acquitted, but nobody—Railtrack or the train operating companies—has been called to account. The inspectorate made several recommendations, some of which have been implemented by Railtrack and the train operating companies. However, at the end of the day, no one has been held to account for the 68 people who were injured and the one woman who died in that accident.

I want to raise some wider safety issues with my right hon. Friend. During the past two weeks, we have heard much about whether Railtrack should continue to be responsible for safety. Railtrack cannot remain responsible for controlling all safety matters. As a result of the crash, public confidence in Railtrack is low.

I want to make one point about where that responsibility should lie. It has been suggested that it should go to the Health and Safety Executive. I have some

[Ms Claire Ward]

concern about that possibility. As we know, even if the HSE were responsible for setting those new safety standards, it would, through the railways inspectorate, investigate the circumstances of a crash. In the event that the safety standards were not fulfilled, the organisation that set them would end up investigating itself. Will my right hon. Friend carefully take that point on board?

So much blame is put on individuals—whether they are train drivers or company management. People who have been involved in crashes want to know two things: what happened and why it happened. Most important, they want to know that it will not happen again. We can blame a range of people—Railtrack or drivers—but we must all work together to ensure that these types of tragedy do not happen again.

I want to raise with my right hon. Friend the safety of our railway tracks and of our trains generally. On Saturday, I was on a train from my constituency to Manchester—unfortunately following Watford football club on its trek to Manchester United and the rather disastrous turn it took there. On the trip to Manchester, the Virgin train was subject to an attack by some mindless idiots who threw something from a bridge, hitting the power cables of the train. In the light of the Paddington rail crash—we did not yet know of the crash in Lewes—hon. Members can imagine the fear that struck the passengers when they heard an almighty crash on the roof of the carriage and one of the power cables smashed into the glass on the side of the carriage.

Unfortunately, we were stranded six miles from Nuneaton for an hour and a half while we waited for a diesel engine to take the train to Nuneaton before we could regain some power. Of course, the people travelling on that train automatically thought about what had happened two weeks before. However, in relation to safety, I am also concerned as to how we secure our lines and trains from those mindless idiots who throw things from bridges. Unfortunately, that is becoming all too common an occurrence—objects thrown at trains or on to railway lines that could derail trains, or the general access to tracks by children in school holidays, who put their own lives at risk as well as those of train travellers. I have written to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions on that subject. I urge him and other hon. Members to consider ways in which we can improve security along our railway tracks, for the sake of all concerned.

9.5 pm

Mr. Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington): I shall confine myself to asking two brief questions of Ministers, the first of which relates to the public-private partnership for London Underground. One of the main criticisms of rail privatisation is that the proliferation of companies involved in providing rail services has led to, for example, communication problems, the culture of blame mentioned several times tonight and to insufficient investment by Railtrack in the rail network. How will the Government ensure that the same communication problems and culture of blame will not arise in an underground system that is split into three separate companies plus one company running the train services, with Railtrack a major player in the system?

My second question is about National Air Traffic Services. The Minister stressed repeatedly that safety is paramount and I accept that he believes that that is so, even if many Labour Back Benchers have expressed their concern by signing an early-day motion on the Government's proposals. I seek confirmation that the Government have assessed the impact of NATS' part privatisation in relation to the implementation date for the Swanwick system. The Minister must know that, if that system is further delayed, there will be an impact on safety—there can be no dispute about that.

I want to be reassured that the Government have considered that issue: the Minister must confirm that it will not affect the implementation date and cause it to slip even further. The Deputy Prime Minister has already said that the date has already slipped a long way and I hope that he was not suggesting that it could slip further still. All I seek tonight is reassurance on those two key questions.

9.7 pm

Ms Rosie Winterton (Doncaster, Central): I am grateful to have the opportunity to speak on an issue that is of great immediate concern following the tragedy of the Paddington rail crash.

The Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, my hon. Friend the Member for Streatham (Mr. Hill), whom I congratulate on his appointment, set out several of the initiatives that the Government are taking to ensure that the highest safety standards are adopted throughout our rail system. We are doing as much as possible to prevent similar accidents from occurring.

There is no doubt that most people living in our modern society expect to be able to travel quickly, easily and safely. There are far greater demands on our transport system than ever before and our economy and businesses depend on good, safe transport to succeed. The development of that transport system has brought greater mobility for individuals, but it carries inherent dangers. Other speakers have referred to the need to improve safety in the rail industry, but, as the hon. Member for Bath (Mr. Foster) and my hon. Friend the Minister have said, it is also important to consider what we can do to improve road safety.

I remind the House of some of the statistics on road fatalities. Each year 3,500 people are killed and 150,000 people are injured on our roads. It is not only the cost in terms of human tragedy that could have been avoided; those accidents cost about £11.5 billion in real terms—money that could be saved if we did more to prevent them.

We all welcome the decrease in road accidents in recent years. We now have the lowest rate of road deaths among the main industrialised nations, and that is most welcome, but we must constantly try to find out what we can do to bring those figures down even further.

No doubt reducing speeding could play a vital part in improving safety on our roads, and I welcome the fact that, as the Minister said earlier, the Government are reviewing their speed policy. I know from my constituency experience how strongly people feel about reducing speed limits in residential areas. I am sure that all Members here will have been to meetings at which their constituents complain constantly about the danger to

their children caused by speeding in residential areas and outside schools, which causes enormous problems and makes parents worried about their children's safety. The hon. Member for Cotswold (Mr. Clifton-Brown) mentioned that subject.

The Minister said that the Government had recently given local authorities the power to introduce 20 mph zones without having to seek the consent of the Secretary of State. That is welcome, especially because a recent Transport Research Laboratory study showed that the average number of accidents in areas in which 20 mph zones had been introduced had been cut by 60 per cent., and the number of accidents involving child pedestrians and cyclists had fallen by 67 per cent.

The Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents has estimated that inappropriate speed is a factor in about one third of road accidents, which cause 1,200 deaths a year. We know that the severity of accidents, too, is linked to speed. Five per cent. of pedestrians hit by a vehicle at 20 mph will die, whereas if the vehicle is travelling at 30 mph the proportion of deaths increases to 45 per cent.; 85 per cent. of people hit by a vehicle at 40 mph will die.

The powers granted to local authorities could play a vital part in reducing accidents. Will the Minister tell the House to what extent local authorities are taking up the new powers, and whether there is anything else that he could do, perhaps by encouraging councils to exchange best practice in setting up 20 mph zones? I know from my discussions with local authorities that they would like guidance from the Department about where such zones have been set up to the best effect. They would also like to know whether the Government intend to set targets for local authorities, and monitor the effectiveness of the zones and the reduction in accidents that may result.

Mr. Gerald Bermingham (St. Helens, South): Does my hon. Friend agree that there could be a programme to educate motorway drivers, including those who crawl along in the middle lane and cause bottlenecks, accidents and deaths? Would not that, too, bring about an overall cost saving?

Ms Winterton: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. That needs to be considered, and I hope that the Government will include such a programme in their forthcoming safety review.

I now wish to refer to funding for speed cameras. A report by the police research group reveals that serious accidents decrease by 28 per cent. where speed cameras are sited. There are now about 2,000 speed camera sites throughout Britain, but the cost of installing and maintaining them means that some police forces will have perhaps only one in eight of the devices working at any one time. Drivers then begin to realise that if they speed past cameras they are unlikely to be fined or otherwise penalised, which is clearly unsatisfactory.

The police and local authorities have asked the Government to allow them to use a percentage of the money raised from fixed penalty motoring fines or to impose on the fine an additional charge to pay for the cameras. That money could then be diverted to police forces and local authorities to assist them with the cost of installing and maintaining speed cameras. The Government said in their transport White Paper that they were reviewing the funding arrangements for speed cameras. Will the Minister assure me that his Department is pressing for such hypothecation so that the revenue from fines can be returned to the agencies that maintain and install the cameras?

I take this opportunity to address transport safety for blind and partially sighted people. I recently met representatives from the Royal National Institute for the Blind who raised the issue of train travel. It is hard for those of us who do not have sight problems to imagine how difficult it must be for blind and partially sighted people to access public transport, particularly for train travel. The Government should consider the RNIB's suggestion of having announcements on trains about, for example, which side of the train the platform is on, particularly in areas where the old slam-door carriages are used. Announcements could be made also when there is a large gap between the train and the platform, as on the London underground, where there is a "mind the gap" announcement. That would greatly assist blind and partially sighted people and would have the added benefit of encouraging more of them to use public transport.

Mr. Brake: Does the hon. Lady agree that one of the key problems is the need to ensure that train operating companies—in my constituency, Connex South Eastern—provide the escort service that they say they will provide to blind and partially sighted passengers? That service would escort passengers from the station to the train and from their destination station to a taxi rank or bus station.

Ms Winterton: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. That was another point made by the RNIB. The key is to ensure that there is consistency. The greatest problem is that one company may offer a good service to help passengers off the train and to a taxi or bus or help them with their luggage, but passengers cannot rely on that help throughout the system, so they cannot have the confidence to make the journey. I hope that my hon. Friends will consider the RNIB's suggestions, because it would be to the advantage of us all to ensure that rail travel was made easier.

I know that the Government are giving the highest priority to improving transport safety, and I very much agree with the remarks of my hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich, East (Mr. Snape) about the personal commitment of the Deputy Prime Minister to doing so. Especially important has been the setting up of the comprehensive transport safety review, mentioned in the Government amendment. However, I hope that Ministers will consider some of the issues that I have raised tonight, so that we may make travel safer and reduce the misery of the deaths and accidents that have afflicted so many people in this country.

9.21 pm

Mr. John Heppell (Nottingham, East): I shall not speak for long, but I thought that, as an ex-railway person and ex-chairman of an airport, some titbits of my personal knowledge might help the debate.

I shall start by trying to put things in context. It is important to recognise that in almost every mode of transport—bus, rail, aviation or the car—safety has improved significantly, not only in the two years since the Government came to office, but since 1987. That improvement cannot be attributed to any one Government.

[Mr. John Heppell]

I believe that it results from the fact that people have become more safety-conscious in many respects, and from new technology.

We should always aim to make things safer. When I worked for British Railways, there was what was called the failsafe culture. It was drummed into everyone that safety was the most important thing, which must be kept at the back of one's mind—not timetables or profits, only safety.

Everything had a back-up. Then we had the automatic warning system and the dead man's handle. Now that automatic train protection and the train protection and warning system are being introduced, we should not think of any of those things as exclusive. We should not suppose that any single thing will make trains safe, because it will not. The automatic warning system never made trains completely safe. What was called the dead man's handle—it was actually a foot pedal—never made trains safe although it was supposed to. None of the systems that are to be introduced will ever make trains completely safe.

It is a tragic fact that almost all the changes that have made railways safer have resulted from a major disaster.

Mrs. Laing: I do not disagree with anything that the hon. Gentleman has said, but does he agree with his hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich, East (Mr. Snape), for whose expertise on transport matters I have great respect, who rightly said that it would be pointless for any organisation—public, private or a mixture—to spend a large amount of money on any system unless and until it was proved that that system would certainly work?

Mr. Heppell: No system will work 100 per cent., and it is a false economy to decide not to introduce a system because it would prevent only two thirds of accidents. My hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich, East is correct; there will always be driver injuries and unforeseen circumstances. Even when we have ATP, there will be a way to isolate that system on every train. It is impossible to have ATP without a way of isolating it. Otherwise, if the system goes wrong, the engine is effectively stranded. If that happens on a main line, an accident will be waiting to happen. It is necessary to get trains off the line if a safety system has failed.

Individual drivers or signalmen will always make mistakes, but that should not rule out the introduction of safety measures. Indeed, we should bring them in as quickly as possible. I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister in that respect. We do not need a crystal ball, because the record book sets out what has happened. In 1997, my right hon. Friend was calling for the Health and Safety Commission to produce proposals on rail safety. In March 1998, the Government were asking the HSC to accelerate its review of Railtrack's role in the setting of safety standards. I think that it was in July 1998 that my right hon. Friend signed the orders that will allow mark I stock with slamming doors to be dealt with, and the train protection and warning system to be introduced as soon as possible; I think decisions on those matters were brought forward by two years. We shall have none of the mark I stock in use after 2003. Similarly, TPWS will be in place by 2003.

It should be understood that TPWS is not perfect. It will not always be the answer to eliminating disasters. However, if we are to believe the technical advice that my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister has been given, TPWS could prevent about two thirds of signals passed at danger incidents, which will mean a significant decrease in the number of rail accidents.

I congratulate my right hon. Friend on taking a decision on TPWS. However, it should not stop us examining even more advanced train protection systems. New systems will come on to the market but they will take longer to develop than TPWS. We cannot wait for those systems to be developed. Instead, we must act now and introduce available protection systems. We must then try to ensure that more advanced systems are introduced as they are developed, and as it becomes apparent that they will work. Clearly we do not want to spend public money on things that do not work.

The Government's record on the railways has been exemplary. I am merely stating a fact and not trying to curry favour with my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister. However, it would be nice to see a smile from him every now and again.

There are other important issues apart from rail safety. We must recognise that the number of people killed on our roads is still significantly higher than we would like it to be. As has been said already this evening, there are still more people killed on the roads than in railway or aviation accidents. Our roads are still the most dangerous places in transport terms.

I hope that the Opposition will not try to play political games in terms of the pro-car and anti-car debate. I drive a car and so does my right hon. Friend, although my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary does not. Most of us drive cars and we want to be able to continue using them. However, we must recognise that we cannot continue using our cars as we do at present.

A significant point has been made by the hon. Member for Cotswold (Mr. Clifton–Brown) about people who use their cars to take their children to school. I pass a school every morning on my way to the office in my constituency. If there is going to be an accident, it will be there, outside the school, where cars jockey for position to park right by the school gates. That cannot continue. There are other options, such a dial-a-bus. Some of the alternatives seem daft, but they are feasible. One suggestion is for people to pick up children on the way to school and take a trainload of them to school. All such ideas could help and should not be ruled out.

The real anti-car policy would be to do nothing. It would be bad for the car driver, bad for the pedestrian, bad for my children's lungs and my grandchildren's health—I do not want any of them to suffer because of the pollution being emitted into the air—and bad for the world. Everybody has heard of global warming.

Mrs. Laing: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way again; it is very kind of him. Will he encourage the Deputy Prime Minister to build roads that make towns and villages safer by building more bypasses to take dangerous trucks, lorries and fast cars out of villages and towns through which they should not pass in the first place? That is what the Deputy Prime Minister should be doing with the transport budget.

Mr. Heppell: I shall not take the simplistic view. Building more roads does not mean that people will be safer. In general, building more roads means that more

people will be killed because there will be more cars on the roads, but there are areas where bypasses should be built. In some cases it is common sense to build bypasses to protect small villages and make them safer. If my memory serves me well, the Government built more bypasses in one year than the Conservative Government did in the previous seven, so we shall take no lectures from Opposition Members. We are not against bypasses—but I return to the issue of safety.

We cannot continue the Conservative policies of removing obstacles from roads. In 20 mph zones and where there have been sleeping policemen and other real obstacles that have made drivers physically slow down—not just a sign showing a speed limit of 30 mph—there has been a reduction in the number of children killed.

I am quite happy if Opposition Members have to spend another 10 or 20 minutes, half an hour or even two hours on their journeys if that means that children's lives are safe. I do not want to be party political, but I am pleased that the Opposition are returning to the views of the earlier Conservative Government on transport, rather than the views expressed by their shadow Secretary of State in his paper on transport, which were crazy and a recipe for killing children on our roads.

My final point relates to the argument about the National Air Traffic Services. Much of the argument is fuelled by a misunderstanding about how air safety operates. NATS is not responsible for safety. That is the responsibility of the Civil Aviation Authority. I am quite happy with the suggestion that 46 per cent. of the assets that are currently in NATS should be sold off to the private sector, but control of that body should be retained to ensure that the public interest is protected. The Deputy Prime Minister has given an undertaking that safety will remain with a public body and will not be allowed to go into the private sector.

I think that the same undertaking works for Railtrack. I shall not argue that we should renationalise the railways. Although I have a sneaking fancy to do that at some time—not necessarily in the near future—I recognise that the billions of pounds needed for renationalisation are not available. We can, however, have the same safety measures by ensuring that the safety aspects at present undertaken by Railtrack are carried out by a public body. The same applies to NATS, and we must not confuse the arguments about assets and about safety.

9.35 pm

Mr. Michael Moore (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale): Transport safety is clearly of great concern to Members of the House and to the country at large. We have discussed a range of air, sea, road and, in particular, rail issues and, very sadly, we have done that in the context of the Ladbroke Grove rail crash. Like many other Members of the House, I extend my condolences to all those who have been directly affected by the crash and the many others who are still injured and suffering as a consequence of it.

The debate has been sombre as well as wide ranging, although the contributions have been extremely encouraging, and the tone in which the majority of it has been conducted is welcomed by Members on the Liberal Democrat Benches. The speeches of the hon. Members for West Bromwich, East (Mr. Snape) and for Nottingham, East (Mr. Heppell), who have detailed knowledge of the rail safety environment, were clearly informed by their own experiences and concentrated on issues that are of real concern to everybody. The hon. Member for Watford (Ms Ward) made an important contribution about the lessons of the Watford rail accident. Many other speeches, including that of the hon. Member for Doncaster, Central (Ms Winterton), broadened the discussion and took in important aspects of the debate on road safety.

The essential principles that we have been discussing, which are at the core of all the debates about and different aspects of transport safety concerns, come back to public safety and the need for us to address it seriously. I agree with the Minister's opening comments, which were supported by the hon. Member for Witney (Mr. Woodward), about the efforts of the many in all the different sectors of our public and private transport systems who dedicate themselves day after day to maintaining public safety and trying to ensure the highest possible standards.

Closely linked to public safety, however, is public confidence, which routinely takes a battering when tragic events such as the Paddington rail crash occur. We have concerns about safety. Regardless of everybody's best efforts to achieve the highest safety standards, we need to ensure, in all circumstances, that there is public confidence. We have to do that in the context of a rapidly changing world in which the need for modern infrastructure—be it for our airlines, for the railway system, on our roads or on the sea—requires adequate and proper investment and funding. Otherwise, we cannot hope for a properly safe, effective and efficient transport system.

At the root of those concerns, many of which have been expressed this evening, is the matter of where the profit motive and concern for safety come into conflict with one another. Many people recognise that it is not necessarily the first desire of companies such as Railtrack and others to have responsibility for setting and policing standards. My hon. Friend the Member for Bath (Mr. Foster) made our party's concerns about the conflict of interest within the way in which Railtrack operates clear at the outset of the debate. We on these Benches do not think that that built-in dilemma and the serious conflicts of interest between the need to generate profit and to establish safety should be maintained.

We welcome the Deputy Prime Minister's comment, which was echoed by his colleague, that he is minded to remove responsibility for safety and setting standards from Railtrack.

However, I should like to reinforce a point that many others have made: although responsibility for setting standards should be removed from Railtrack, we must not develop the notion that Railtrack will have no responsibility for safety. People at all levels, whether they work in the rail service, on airlines, at sea or on the roads, are responsible for safety, and we must develop that culture.

Time and again, we must return to the core issue of funding. The sums discussed ever since the Clapham rail disaster, and many other tragic incidents since, have brought us back to the issue of funding. The Deputy Prime Minister has said on numerous occasions that funding is not an issue, but we need clarity about who will provide

[Mr. Michael Moore]

that funding. Will it be Railtrack or the train operating companies concerned, or will the Government support developments in safety with further infusions of cash?

We have had a wide-ranging debate and I wish to deal with the issue of the National Air Traffic Services and the dilemma that the Government now face. This is where the need for new infrastructure and the problems of public safety come into sharp contrast. Demands on air services are increasing and new technology is undoubtedly required, but the question of who should fund the expansion then becomes an issue. Is Treasury nervousness about the cost of the new technology driving the whole issue of privatising NATS? The Liberal Democrats have their suspicions, and we have seen little to make us believe otherwise.

Future costs and investment are significant, but the proceeds from the sale of NATS formed a crucial part of earlier Treasury calculations. The most recent calculations and projections, and regular comments from the Government Benches, highlight the fact that the public finances are now in good shape. In the context of a public debate about the future of public safety and other transport issues, it is now time to refocus and reconsider the proposals being put forward.

Few people believe that privatisation, partial or otherwise, of NATS is a good idea. It causes concern to pilots, air traffic controllers and the public. Moreover, despite the Minister's comments about proceeding on a non-partisan basis, I remind him that an early-day motion has been signed by more than 100 of his colleagues, who are very concerned about the proposals. Even today in Prime Minister's questions, the right hon. Member for Edinburgh, East and Musselburgh (Dr. Strang) raised the issue and urged the Government again to ensure that they do not rush ahead before proper consultation has taken place. If the consultation is as thorough as it should be, I believe that the responses will be overwhelming and the privatisation will go no further.

Demands on the service are growing seriously. We have already seen operational problems in Swanwick, which was due to open in 1996 but was delayed due to a catalogue of problems. However, the question must be asked how privatising the service would help that process, not as a result of funding but, much more seriously, because of the distraction that privatisation would cause to senior managers in the service at a critical time of growing air traffic. There are alternatives. The service does not need to be privatised. The Select Committee chaired by the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody) proposed some real alternatives, not least the successful Canadian model, where private bond funding has been found. We already know that the cost of the service is recovered from those who use it and we believe that that principle can be extended.

Briefly, on other areas and the sea in particular, Liberal Democrats are greatly concerned that the campaign to preserve coastguard stations, which has been running for many months, has not resulted in a change of Government opinion or approach. Again, public safety is critical to the issue. Surely the safety of seafarers must come first in this debate. Yes, we accept that more has to be done in telecommunications, but closing coastguard stations smacks more of a need to save money and to fund the new technology, rather than to prioritise safety. The National Audit Office said as much in a report in 1997–98. Another report produced by the Transport Sub-Committee pointed out that local knowledge is essential. Coastguard stations and coastguard officers are a fundamental tool in ensuring safety at sea.

This evening, we heard comments about London Underground from my hon. Friend the Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Mr. Brake). There are concerns. At a time when we are highlighting the fact that the fragmentation of the rail system may be a contributory factor in the worsening conditions on our railways—indeed, it is seen that way by most people—the Government are going ahead with plans similarly to fragment London Underground. That is a matter of serious concern. Surely the Government will now reconsider it.

This is an important debate on public safety. Major concerns have been raised on both sides of the House. As the Deputy Prime Minister and the Minister have said on other occasions, it is important that we all look for solutions as swiftly and practically as possible. Once again we point out that, if we do not move from a culture of blame to a culture of safety, we will have failed those involved in Paddington and elsewhere.

9.47 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. Chris Mullin): On the whole, this has been a serious and thoughtful debate, in keeping with the gravity of the issue. The hon. Member for Bath (Mr. Foster) struck just the right note when he moved the motion, as did his colleague in replying to the debate. I was disappointed—I put it no higher—that the hon. Member for Witney (Mr. Woodward) lowered the tone of the debate somewhat and, perhaps inadvertently, generated more heat than light. I will do my best to deal with some of his questions.

First, I welcome the widespread recognition that there are no simple, knee-jerk solutions to the problems that we face with transport safety. Most of those who spoke acknowledged that fact. Indeed, the chairman of the shadow Strategic Rail Authority, Sir Alastair Morton, rightly warned only today that if we go for quick solutions we may repent at leisure. As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State said yesterday, if we are to order new safety systems, it is our responsibility to ensure that they work properly.

As everyone understands, there is no scope for complacency. The Government have demonstrated by their actions, both before and after the disaster at Ladbroke Grove, that they are not complacent. Indeed, as a number of those who spoke acknowledged, any fair-minded person would have recognised that my right hon. Friend has a long and honourable record of interest in transport safety, which long precedes his occupation of his present post.

I shall do my best to respond to some of the many points that hon. Members have made. If there is time, I will deal directly with some of the issues in the Opposition motion, some of which were touched on by the Under-Secretary, my hon. Friend the Member for Streatham (Mr. Hill), who opened the debate. Inevitably, I am unlikely to get round to replying to all the points made, so I will look carefully at *Hansard* in the cold light of day and write to hon. Members about those that I have not answered.

First I shall deal with some of the matters raised by the hon. Member for Witney. There have been rather a lot of reports on transport safety one way or another and there is scope for getting one muddled with another or getting the dates confused. It may well be that I shall have to write to him setting out the precise sequence of events. However, I think that I can deal with some of the points that he made. He asked when the SPAD report was seen by officials and then by Ministers. It was seen by officials and Ministers a day or so before publication in August. Lord Macdonald of Tradeston issued a press statement endorsing the actions that the HSE recommended fairly soon after that. The Tansley report was seen by Ministers and officials on the day of the crash.

It grieves me to have to make this point about SPADs because I recognise that the issue is more complex than the cold dates suggest. If we are talking about action and inaction, the previous Government decided in March 1995 not to fit automatic train protection nationwide on the grounds that it was not justified on cost. As my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister said yesterday in his statement, we do not want to make a political issue about that because we recognise that there were other factors, but the hon. Member for Witney raised it in a contentious way.

In August 1997, before any of this became public, my right hon. Friend ordered a safety paper on trains passing through signals at danger. He did so at a time when the number of SPADs was declining. There was no panic on and there was not perceived to be a crisis, but he acted as long ago as August 1997. He started a consultation procedure on the precise action to take in early 1998. The consultation ended in August 1998. Final recommendations were available by December 1998 on the train protection system and slam-door trains.

In July 1999—well before the disaster at Ladbroke Grove—my right hon. Friend signed the regulations to introduce a train protection system by 2003. In doing that, we shall take into account whatever conclusions Sir David Davies arrives at in his study of the technical matters.

Mr. Woodward: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Mullin: I am reluctant to do so as I have limited time. Perhaps I will not give way in the light of the hon. Gentleman's earlier comments. I have only eight minutes left and I do not want to get bogged down in who said what to whom when. It does not strike me as all that helpful to the debate.

My hon. Friend the Member for Watford (Ms Ward) asked what happened to the recommendations from the report on the Watford crash. Some have been acted on, but the HSE has commented critically on the way in which some of the recommendations have been followed up by the industry. The HSE's comments are in its report for 2 September 1999—the report on SPADs—and a copy is in the Library. I shall ask the HSE for a report on progress in implementing the recommendations following the Watford crash and pass them on to my hon. Friend as well as place a copy in the Library. She was right to draw that to the attention of the House.

The hon. Member for Cotswold (Mr. Clifton-Brown) expressed support for the Government's plan for air traffic control. I welcome that and look forward to his voting with us in the Lobby when the time comes. I acknowledge the good sense of the point that he made about the better use of regional airports. If he was suggesting—perhaps he was not—that we need lots more investment in new roads, I am afraid that I am not entirely with him on that. As my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary said in his intervention, what counts in making roads safe is maintenance and traffic-calming measures.

Mr. Clifton-Brown: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Mullin: Forgive me, I have only six minutes left.

The hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Mr. Brake) asked about London Underground and wanted to have the Government's position set out. I am grateful to him for giving us an opportunity to put the Government's position on record.

First, we will take account of any lessons learned from the Southall and the Ladbroke Grove disasters. Secondly, there is no question of entertaining any public-private partnership deal which does not contribute to improved safety, and that applies to Railtrack as much as to anyone else. Thirdly, it is vital that London Underground continues to have responsibility for the safety arrangements for the whole of the underground. Fourthly, all the public-private companies will take over existing safety arrangements, as agreed with the railways inspectorate. Finally, I repeat, the public sector London Underground will remain a single guiding mind on safety matters.

The hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington also asked about the timing of the NATS public-private partnership, and whether that would have any effect on Swanwick. The Government have commissioned studies into the new Swanwick system which confirm that it is a good system which will work. It is on schedule to become operational most probably in the winter of 2001-02, and NATS is meeting all its target milestones along the way. By the time that we are talking to potential strategic partners about the public-private partnership the state of the project will be further advanced, and there is no question of the public-private partnership delaying Swanwick.

My hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster, Central (Ms Winterton) asked about the funding of speed cameras. She was particularly interested in having the revenue hypothecated. The Treasury has accepted the principle that fines be used to fund the operation of speed cameras as long as it improves road safety rather than revenue collection. We are currently working on a mechanism for meeting Treasury criteria. A project group has been formed involving representatives from all interested parties, including the police, local authorities, magistrates courts and the relevant Government Departments, and we expect to appoint a project manager soon. The group's role will be to offer advice on the financial and organisational arrangements which will be necessary to meet Treasury criteria.

My hon. Friend also asked about the take-up by local authorities of the new powers to set 20 mph speed zones. Because local authorities were given those powers only this summer, it is too early to form a view on take-up. Local authorities are required to set casualty reduction targets in their local plans.

My hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham, East (Mr. Heppell) talked about the need for consensus with regard to the problems caused by cars. I strongly agree

[Mr. Mullin]

with him on that. This is a serious problem which, in some respects, threatens the survival of the planet. About 500,000 people a year are killed worldwide by cars, and it is difficult for one political party to take measures to reduce the use of the car and to contain it and ensure that it is used sensibly if another of the major political parties is pronouncing itself to be the party of the car and appealing for votes on the cheapest possible basis. I hope that it will be possible to reach some sort of consensus.

I echo what others have said during the debate in paying tribute to the work of the emergency services in their response to the terrible event at Ladbroke Grove, and I wish a speedy recovery to all those who have been injured.

Mr. Paul Tyler (North Cornwall) *rose in his place and claimed to move,* That the Question be now put.

Question, That the Question be now put, *put and agreed to.*

Question put accordingly, That the original words stand part of the Question:—

The House divided: Ayes 46, Noes 329.

Division No. 275] **[9.59 pm**

AYES

Allan, Richard
Ashdown, Rt Hon Paddy
Baker, Norman
Ballard, Jackie
Beggs, Roy
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Brake, Tom
Breed, Colin
Bruce, Malcolm *(Gordon)*
Burnett, John
Burstow, Paul
Cable, Dr Vincent
Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Chidgey, David
Cotter, Brian
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Ewing, Mrs Margaret
Fearn, Ronnie
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
Harvey, Nick
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Jones, Nigel *(Cheltenham)*
Keetch, Paul
Kennedy, Charles *(Ross Skye)*
Livsey, Richard
Llwyd, Elfyn
Maclennan, Rt Hon Robert
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll & Bute)*
Moore, Michael
Morgan, Alasdair *(Galloway)*
Oaten, Mark
Öpik, Lembit
Rendel, David
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Salmond, Alex
Sanders, Adrian
Swinney, John
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Tyler, Paul
Webb, Steve
Wigley, Rt Hon Dafydd
Willis, Phil

Tellers for the Ayes:
Sir Robert Smith and
Mr. Donald Gorrie.

NOES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Alexander, Douglas
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Armstrong, Rt Hon Ms Hilary
Ashton, Joe
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Battle, John
Bayley, Hugh
Beard, Nigel
Begg, Miss Anne
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Benn, Rt Hon Tony *(Chesterfield)*
Bennett, Andrew F
Berrningham, Gerald
Berry, Roger
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Blunkett, Rt Hon David
Boateng, Paul
Borrow, David
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brown, Rt Hon Nick *(Newcastle E)*
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Browne, Desmond
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Butler, Mrs Christine
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell-Savours, Dale
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chaytor, David
Chisholm, Malcolm
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Corbett, Robin
Corbyn, Jeremy
Corston, Ms Jean
Cousins, Jim
Crausby, David
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunliffe, Lawrence
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Dalyell, Tam
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davis, Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Foulkes, George
Fyfe, Maria
Galloway, George
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godman, Dr Norman A
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Grant, Bernie
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Grogan, John
Gunnell, John
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hanson, David
Harman, Rt Hon Ms Harriet
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Healey, John
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Hoey, Kate
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, Alan *(Newport E)*
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Ingram, Rt Hon Adam
Jackson, Ms Glenda *(Hampstead)*
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Rt Hon Barry *(Alyn)*
Jones, Mrs Fiona *(Newark)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Ms Jenny *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Kelly, Ms Ruth
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lawrence, Ms Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David

Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Liddell, Rt Hon Mrs Helen
Linton, Martin
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Lock, David
Love, Andrew
McAllion, John
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McDonagh, Siobhain
Macdonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
McFall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
McNulty, Tony
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Mandelson, Rt Hon Peter
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Meacher, Rt Hon Michael
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michie, Bill *(Sheffld Heeley)*
Milburn, Rt Hon Alan
Miller, Andrew
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Mowlam, Rt Hon Marjorie
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Rt Hon Paul *(Torfaen)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Organ, Mrs Diana
Osborne, Ms Sandra
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Pendry, Tom
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Sir Raymond
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prescott, Rt Hon John
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Quin, Rt Hon Ms Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Radice, Rt Hon Giles
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Cov'try NW)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rogers, Allan
Rooker, Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Roy, Frank
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Salter, Martin
Sarwar, Mohammad
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Barry
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Snape, Peter
Southworth, Ms Helen
Spellar, John
Squire, Ms Rachel
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr Howard
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Temple-Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Timms, Stephen
Todd, Mark
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Tynan, Bill
Vis, Dr Rudi
Ward, Ms Claire
Wareing, Robert N
Watts, David
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Wills, Michael
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wise, Audrey
Woolas, Phil
Worthington, Tony
Wray, James
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, Dr Tony *(Cannock)*

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. David Jamieson and
Mr. David Clelland.

Question accordingly negatived.

Question, That the proposed words be there added, *put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 31 (Questions on amendments), and agreed to.*

MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *forthwith declared the main Question, as amended, to be agreed to.*

Resolved,

That this House notes with extreme sadness the recent Paddington rail disaster and the ensuing injuries and loss of life and extends its deepest sympathies to all those affected; congratulates the emergency services on their outstanding work in very difficult conditions; welcomes the prompt and comprehensive actions taken since the tragedy at Paddington, which demonstrate how serious the Government are about transport safety; notes the Government's continuing determination to take real steps to make transport safer for the public and the workforce; acknowledges the long-term reduction in fatalities on roads, in the air, at sea and on the railways; recognises specific action taken to improve rail, road, marine and air safety; commends the Government for setting up a comprehensive Transport Safety Review to look at how to improve the organisation of transport safety in the United Kingdom and whether there is a case for a single independent authority for transport safety regulation; and further notes that one of the prime aims of the Government's Public Private Partnerships for National Air Traffic Services and the London Underground is the enhancement of safety by securing high and stable levels of future investment, which are essential for safety as travel increases, and that safety regulation will be kept firmly in public hands in both cases.

Ricky Reel

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Sutcliffe.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): I ask the hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (Mr. McDonnell) to wait a moment before opening the debate. Would those hon. Members who are not staying for the debate please leave quickly and quietly? *[Interruption.]* Would the hon. Member for Waveney (Mr. Blizzard) conclude his conversation?

10.15 pm

Mr. John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington): I wish to raise once more in the House the case of the death of my constituent Lakhvinder Reel, known affectionately to his family and friends as Ricky. I applied for this debate at the request of the Reel family, and everything that I say tonight reflects their views and is said with their permission.

Sadly, this week we commemorate the second anniversary of Ricky's death, yet two years on we still do not know how he came by his death on that tragic night of 15 October 1997. He went out that evening with his friends to Kingston and was racially attacked and, a week later, his body was found in the Thames. When someone goes missing in suspicious circumstances, it can often be difficult to discover exactly what happened to them. Mr. and Mrs. Reel and I accept that. However, I believe that our system failed, and continues to fail, the Reel family in their search for the truth about how their beloved son met his death two years ago. The purpose of this debate is to learn some of the lessons of the mistakes of the past two years and to seek a way forward in assisting the Reel family in finding the truth and coming to some understanding of what happened to Ricky.

There are two issues that I wish to address. Given the concerns expressed by many hon. Members about this case, I appreciate their wish to intervene. The first issue is the failure of our policing system to respond to the needs of a family experiencing possibly the most traumatic event that can be visited on any family—the loss of a family member. The second is the continuing failure of our legal system to assist the family adequately in their search for the truth of what happened to their son.

Let us examine the policing failures. No matter how unpalatable it is for us to accept, I fear that we must now acknowledge that our policing system has failed the Reel family. This is not an attempt to scapegoat, single out or blame individual police officers or to dismiss the support and hard work of many police officers in the investigation of Ricky's death. I pay tribute to them. However, there were admitted failures in the original investigation of Ricky's death and in the way in which the Metropolitan police service responded to the Reel family. As important, the culture of defensive secrecy that still pervades our policing system clearly undermined, and continues to undermine, the confidence of the Reel family in the capacity of the police to appreciate and respond to their needs.

Let me explain. Over the past decade, the Metropolitan police has changed the way it describes itself from "Metropolitan police force" to "Metropolitan police service". The translation from force to service is intended to symbolise the acknowledgment that our police are not some body of force set above society but a service responsive, and responsible, to our community. Police officers are employed to serve members of the public, but the refusal of the Metropolitan police to operate openly and transparently during this investigation demonstrates that secrecy is still deeply embedded in the Met and that there is an institutional reluctance to accept that the Met is the servant of the public and should therefore be accountable to the public that it is serving.

This continuing culture of secrecy also undermines the potential for building confidence in the Metropolitan police following the Lawrence case and the Macpherson inquiry. The culture of secrecy is best exemplified in this case by the refusal of the Metropolitan police to publish the report of the inquiry of the Police Complaints Authority into its initial investigation of Ricky's death. The recommendations of the Macpherson report state clearly the need for openness and transparency. Recommendation 10 stated:

"investigating officers reports resulting from public complaints should not attract Public Interest Immunity as a class. They should be disclosed to complainants, subject only to the 'substantial harm' test for withholding disclosure."

The PCA report into the Metropolitan police's early investigation of Ricky Reel's death was instigated as a result of a series of formal complaints lodged by Mrs. Reel on 21 November 1997. The PCA appointed officers from the Surrey police in December 1997 to investigate the complaints. That was unusual in that the complaint was being investigated by the Surrey police while the Metropolitan police investigation was continuing. The PCA investigators examined existing and fresh evidence and re-interviewed family, friends, witnesses and police officers involved in the investigation.

From July 1998, the Reel family have sought access to the completed PCA report and its publication. The Metropolitan police are the owners of this report, and it appears that it is their decision whether and to whom it should be released. I find it extraordinary that a matter of such public interest should be left to the decision of the very service that is being investigated.

In 1998, the Reel family, their solicitor, representatives of the Southall monitoring group and I met the Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis to seek publication of the report. That was refused. Some information was provided confidentially, but that was deemed to be useless by the family and was returned. Following meetings with the Home Secretary—I am grateful for the support that he has given us throughout this matter—the report was released, in confidence, to Mr. and Mrs. Reel and their solicitor, but not to myself or to their family advisers. We discovered later that the report had been given to a Metropolitan police advisory group—a group of civilians. The family contest that they were ever informed that the report would be distributed in that way.

Even now, the Metropolitan police refuse to release the report publicly, advising the Home Secretary that it is covered by public interest immunity. We have contrary advice, based on the case of the Queen *v.* Chief Constable of West Midlands Police ex parte. It was established

"that there was no general public interest immunity in respect of documents coming into existence during investigation into a police complaint."

I believe that that defence no longer exists.

In more recent advice to Home Office Ministers, the Metropolitan police repeat the incorrect assertion that the courts have ruled that investigating officers' reports attract public interest immunity. They now pray in aid the coroner, who is concerned that any disclosure of witness statements will affect the inquest into the death of Ricky Reel in November. Does that mean that the PCA report itself will not even be available at the inquest? It is bizarre and tortuous logic to maintain this culture of secrecy. However, so as not to offend the coroner, I shall not draw on any witness statements and I shall name no names in this debate. I simply want to place before the House some of the findings of the PCA report. Lessons must be learned from that report. The House has an important role, which is to learn those lessons and to ensure that all our public services also do so.

The conclusions of the PCA inquiry are multiple. I draw upon some of them. In respect of communications with the Reel family during the initial police investigation, the need for clear, careful and considerate communication with the family was critical in investigations of that kind—as was learned from the Lawrence inquiry. In the investigation, we discovered that

"Mrs Reel and other members of the family were visited or contacted by telephone by a total of 10 different officers, from 3 different areas"—

in the space of two days—

"Each of them delivering slightly different messages."

The report concluded:

"This situation led to Mrs Reel being provided with conflicting information; being unaware of who was co-ordinating the investigation; believing that there was a conflict"—

between two police divisions, and—

"being unable to gain accurate knowledge of what action was or was not being taken."

The report states that the identification and interviewing of witnesses was vital to the lines of inquiry. It acknowledges that Mrs. Reel herself identified and located some of the witnesses. The inquiry also revealed that, in some instances, no records were checked by the Metropolitan police to confirm or support witness accounts; cross-referencing of information did not take place; and some witnesses were not found until the PCA investigating team found them. Witness information was sometimes not passed on from junior to senior officers. The PCA report states that there were "no debriefings", which would have been

"common in investigations of this nature; as a result, potentially important information was lost."

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney, North and Stoke Newington): Does my hon. Friend agree that this is an especially sad case, particularly in light of the Lawrence case from which the House had hoped that some lessons had been learned? I have had sight of the report, which has regrettably been kept secret. One of the things that it reveals is that property records at Kingston police station showed that a videotape from British Rail at Kingston had been seized by a policeman and deposited in the property store. The tape was not viewed. Its existence was not drawn to the attention of investigating officers, and on 17 November 1997 the tape was destroyed. Does my hon. Friend share my shock that the police should treat so lightly such vital evidence?

Mr. McDonnell: I can give confirmation on that matter and add to my hon. Friend's remarks. The PCA inquiry reveals that all video evidence from shops was not seized promptly enough to provide information. The PCA states that videotapes from two restaurants

"may have provided information to the investigation had they been seized promptly",

but they were not. The British Rail tape was indeed seized, not viewed and destroyed.

Regarding photographic evidence, the three friends of Ricky Reel were never shown any photos of known racist offenders or offenders who had previously been involved in racial incidents in the area, in an attempt to identify the youths involved in the racial attack on the group.

Mr. Peter Bradley (The Wrekin): Can my hon. Friend confirm that it is standard practice for police to hold photographs—rogues' galleries—so that when, say, a victim of burglary makes a complaint to the police, he or she can be shown photographs and asked whether they can identify the perpetrators? Would not that practice have helped inquiries in the Reel case? Would it not have helped to secure justice for the victim's family? What happened appears to have been a flagrant dereliction of duty.

Mr. McDonnell: I believe that the PCA investigators considered that that was important. The PCA found:

"The Met did not initiate this type of inquiry at a timely point in their investigation."

The police did not at any time choose to show the photos of known local racist offenders to Ricky's companions on the night. I believe that that was a dereliction of duty and lessons must be learned for future investigations.

On forensic information, the PCA inquiry revealed that no clothing or personal items retrieved from Ricky's body were subject to forensic examination. Details of his clothing were not recorded and the PCA concluded:

"given the high priority accorded to the search for Ricky, the decision to call a special post mortem and circumstances before his disappearance, the way in which forensic evidence was dealt with is difficult to justify".

Mr. John Cryer (Hornchurch): Can my hon. Friend confirm whether it is normal police procedure to make such records and to carry out forensic examination? I should have thought that in almost all murder cases, such evidence forms the cornerstone of the investigation.

Mr. McDonnell: The key issue is that the investigation was into a missing person report, but that the link between the racial attack earlier in the evening and Ricky going missing was not made soon enough. Not only was insufficient forensic evidence taken, but, as the PCA states, it is hard to justify why independent expert judgment was not sought on some issues.

On the post mortem, the report makes it clear that no one was clear about who was in control of the post mortem examination and who should have been asking the right questions. On verification at the scene, the report reveals that no forensic analysis was conducted at the area

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where it was assumed Ricky entered the river; no fingerprint examination was made of the railing nearby and no foliage was taken; and there was no examination of the concrete block, although photographs were taken. The report concludes that forensic examination of the bank would have been helpful: it might or might not have substantiated the claim that the incident was an accident, but it would at least have challenged that theory.

The PCA report states that a key element in the investigation was identifying the means of escape used by the earlier attackers. The inquiry highlighted the role of the No. 281 bus, which the attackers may well have boarded. The Metropolitan police did not check the records of work or tickets on the No. 281. The report states that the No. 281 was

"the most likely line of inquiry to lead to identification of the youths or other witnesses."

The failure to follow up that line of inquiry was described as "a significant omission".

The PCA considered that there was no evidence that the Met progressed lines of inquiry into other potential witnesses from crime reports, arrests, fixed penalty notices on the night, accident reports, or racial incidents reported since 1997. In its general inquiries, the Met made no inquiries in respect of, for example, Ricky's mobile phone usage that evening. The PCA had to investigate the medical evidence relating to Ricky itself. On the involvement of the community in Kingston, the report states the PCA's belief that active and earlier involvement of the racial equality council would have been helpful to provide lines of inquiry in the area.

Overall, the report condemns the investigation because it lacked focus, it eliminated the racial incident earlier in the evening too readily, it lacked thoroughness, and there was a failure to initiate an early reconstruction of what happened that night. There was also confusion over the ownership of the investigation of the racial incident. The investigators came to the conclusion of accidental death before there was corroboration, and there was a failure to adopt policies that would have ensured that professional standards were maintained in the detail of the investigation.

The purpose of the PCA inquiry was to examine the complaints from the family, but it is clear that almost as soon as it became involved, the PCA team took over the investigation and ran it. The PCA inquiry is the basis on which the Met determined what action to take on that specific case and what general lessons to learn for future practice.

One action that stemmed from the early demands of the family was the introduction of a fresh investigation team, and I commend the Metropolitan police for bringing in that new team. However, in addition, the inquiry set out in some detail a series of recommendations for the reform of policing practices, and the problem now is that those recommendations, commendable though they seem, are part of the PCA report, which the Met keeps secret. That completely misses the point of the Macpherson report into the Lawrence case.

Public confidence can be restored and maintained in any public service only if mistakes, when they occur, are honestly admitted, and any remedial action is openly and honestly displayed. In this instance, the failure to publish the PCA report means that we cannot allow for an honest admission of mistakes. More important, it provides no opportunity for the Met to display what lessons it has learned and what improvements have been made. It thus misses completely an opportunity to regain the confidence of the community in our police service.

Such has been the anguish of Mr. and Mrs. Reel over those events that I appreciate why they feel that only a public inquiry can bring into the open what happened to their son, what went wrong with the investigation and how such problems can be avoided in future. I ask the Home Secretary to consider that request.

The inquest will start in November, and the Reel family are asking for financial support to secure their legal representation. I urge the Government to provide that assistance and to do all in their power to provide the family with the resources to determine the truth about what happened to their son.

I believe that we can all learn lessons from the case—lessons about respect, openness and accountability, and about the relationship of public service to the community that it serves. By highlighting the case again—this is, I believe, the eighth time that I have raised it in the House—we may not only help to discover what happened to Ricky that terrible night, but learn the lessons that will help to prevent further tragedies such as Ricky's death. I certainly hope so.

10.33 pm

The Minister of State, Home Office (Mr. Charles Clarke): I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (Mr. McDonnell) not only for securing the Adjournment debate but for the way in which he put his case, with a restraint and clarity to which I pay tribute. My hon. Friend has raised important points, and he identified at the beginning of his speech the issues related to the failure of the policing and legal systems, and finished by talking about the need for respect, openness and accountability. Those are appropriate words in this context.

I shall begin where my hon. Friend started, by going through the facts and describing the present position. At the outset, I ought not only to pay tribute to the way in which my hon. Friend made his case, but express the sympathy of the whole House for the Reel family following Ricky's death.

As my hon. Friend said, the circumstances of Ricky's death will be considered fully at the inquest, which begins on 1 November. As he also said, any criminal investigation within the Metropolitan police district is a matter for the Commissioner, Sir Paul Condon. As the law stands, Ministers do not have powers to intervene—although I understand that Assistant Commissioner John Grieve's racial and violent crime task force inquiry team is investigating Ricky Reel's death.

The case has been widely featured publicly—for example, in the BBC's "Crimewatch UK" programme on 12 October, with an appeal for further witnesses. I take the opportunity to associate myself and the rest of the Government with that request for further witnesses to come forward. I understand that a number of inquiries are being followed up as a result of the programme of 12 October. The on-going investigation is an operational

matter for the Metropolitan police and I cannot comment in detail on that, although I shall refer to some of my hon. Friend's points later in my remarks.

The disclosure of the Police Complaints Authority inquiry report is a matter for the Commissioner. As I said, Ministers have no powers to intervene. My hon. Friend is right to say, following his meeting with the Commissioner, that the Commissioner does not propose to publish the report. As my hon. Friend said, the Commissioner agreed to disclose the PCA inquiry report to Mr. and Mrs. Reel and their solicitor on a strictly confidential basis. The Commissioner has informed me that his decision was taken on an exceptional basis and the purpose of the disclosure was to assist the investigation of Ricky's death by helping to ensure that every avenue of inquiry had been pursued. The Commissioner's view is that the disclosure struck the right balance between pursuing the investigative aim and minimising any jeopardy to the forthcoming inquest.

My hon. Friend accurately described the coroner's position. The Metropolitan police specifically sought the views of John Burton, the coroner who will conduct the inquest, on wider disclosure. The coroner has expressed his concern at the prospect of wider disclosure because of the potential effect on inquest witnesses.

As my hon. Friend said, sections of the PCA inquiry report were shown to members of the lay advisory panel to the Metropolitan police. The panel's purpose was to review the investigation to help to ensure that no opportunity or link had been missed. The Commissioner's view was that the PCA inquiry report was relevant to the lay panel's role and that the purpose of disclosure was to assist the investigation.

I understand that Mr. and Mrs. Reel's perception is that they were not consulted about the Met's intention to disclose sections of the report to the panel, and they felt that that was wrong. I am advised by the Met that on 15 February this year, Mr. and Mrs. Reel and their solicitor, Suresh Grover, met two members of the lay advisory panel. The Met's view is that the meeting agreed that the lay panel would recommend that the full PCA inquiry report would be made available to the family and the panel. The lay panel has told the Met that it is concerned about suggestions that Mr. and Mrs. Reel were not consulted about that, but I understand that that is an outstanding concern for all parties.

I come now to recommendation 10 of the Macpherson report concerning disclosure of investigating officers' reports, to which my hon. Friend referred. The Home Secretary made it clear in his response to the Macpherson report that the Home Office will consider, in consultation with interested parties, how to overcome the current situation whereby investigating officers' reports attract public interest immunity as a class.

We have set up a Home Office working group to examine how recommendation 10 can best be put into practice without compromising the integrity of the complaints process. We intend to announce our conclusions by the end of the year, so that we can further develop the policy. There are different views on that matter, but it is important for us to assess the recommendation and to make our position publicly clear, which we shall do by the end of the year.

I shall not now go into all the implications of the Macpherson report. My hon. Friend correctly assessed the report's purpose, which is to establish confidence. That requires important changes in a wide variety of procedures and approaches.

Those are the basic facts and they confirm the essential points of my hon. Friend's description of the situation. I turn now to his substantive points. First, he referred to a culture of secrecy that affects the way in which these matters can be discussed. He has raised valid issues. The Macpherson report and other inquiries have concluded that everyone will gain if we have a proper process whereby people fully understand the state of affairs. As I said in an Adjournment debate earlier today on a different case, I believe that the criminal justice system is opaque in too many ways, and that individuals cannot properly understand what is happening to them and how it happens. I am sure that constituents have expressed that feeling to all hon. Members at different times and in different ways.

At the start of his speech, my hon. Friend raised an especially important point of substance—the issue of communication with the family about the process that takes place as it moves forward. We are actively considering a range of proposals to ensure a far better quality of communication with the family.

The Crown Prosecution Service is currently running a range of pilot schemes. We hope that, as a result, by the end of the year 2001 there will established throughout the country a process by which, in all serious cases—as the case of Ricky Reel obviously is—there is proper communication between the prosecutors and the victim about decisions that are taken. One of the greatest sadnesses that people have is the failure to understand why decisions to prosecute are or are not taken in certain circumstances.

I know that my hon. Friend appreciates—because he has paid close attention to the matter—the difficulties in achieving a balance on that aspect, but the Government and the Crown Prosecution Service have a strong commitment to establish a form of communication that would give victims the information that they need to understand how the process operates.

Now is not the time to enter into greater detail on a range of areas where we hope to support victims and witnesses. As my hon. Friend said, there are major issues in ensuring that witnesses feel able to stand up or are able to stand up and develop the situation directly, and it is also important, in that connection, that the victim's views about the process can be part of the legal process. We are actively considering ways in which they may be.

My hon. Friend and my hon. Friends the Members for Hackney, North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott), for The Wrekin (Mr. Bradley) and for Hornchurch (Mr. Cryer) made important, serious points about the way in which the police have conducted the inquiry. I cannot, in my position, comment on the precise nature of the police inquiry or on the detailed points that my hon. Friends have made about that inquiry.

I believe that the fundamental point was raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington when he said that he felt that the police investigation lacked focus and thoroughness. I apologise for poaching the

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words that he used. He also said that there was a need to reform police practices to ensure that those issues were addressed in the most effective and powerful way possible. My hon. Friend made his point clearly and strongly. I know that people will study his words extremely carefully to establish how the processes may be improved.

A great many of the issues will be resolved openly and clearly at the inquest, which starts on 1 November. On the more general issues that my hon. Friend has raised, I say only that it is necessary and important to deal, in the way that he has said, with the issue of public interest immunity as a class in this case. That is a profound and important issue.

I conclude by giving my hon. Friend the assurance that I believe that he is seeking—that the Government position on that matter will be absolutely clear before the end of 1999.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at sixteen minutes to Eleven o'clock.

House of Commons

Thursday 21 October 1999

The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

The Minister was asked—

Advisory Committee on Animal Feeding Stuffs

1. **Mr. Peter Atkinson** (Hexham): When he proposes to set up the Advisory Committee on Animal Feeding Stuffs; and if he will ensure that it considers the issue of feeds containing genetically modified material. [93385]

8. **Mr. Alan W. Williams** (East Carmarthen and Dinefwr): If he will make a statement on the requirements governing the labelling of animal feeding stuffs containing genetically modified crops. [93392]

The Minister of State, Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Ms Joyce Quin): The Advisory Committee on Animal Feeding Stuffs held its first meeting on 24 September. It will have an important role in considering both the safety and labelling of genetically modified material in animal feed.

Mr. Atkinson: I thank the Minister for that answer and welcome her to the Dispatch Box in her new role. It is nice to see the north-east gain yet more power in the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food.

Is not the issue of genetically modified material in animal feed vital, particularly for the British pig and poultry industries? A threat to ban it, would be the last straw for those industries, which would then face substantial extra costs getting a separate supply of GM-free soya, which is used for animal feeds. Will the Minister ask the committee to consider this matter urgently and to state that there is not a shred of evidence that this material is in any way injurious to human health?

Ms Quin: First, I thank the hon. Gentleman for his kind words at the beginning of his supplementary question. Secondly, we attach importance to the work of this committee, which we feel will be able to examine the different aspects that the hon. Gentleman has raised. As a new MAFF Minister, it seems to me that it was a failing of the previous Government not to set up such a committee when they could have done so. I am glad that it began its work recently and that my noble Friend Baroness Hayman, the Minister who deals with these issues, was able to attend the first meeting and thereby show the importance that Ministers attach to its work.

Mr. Williams: I congratulate my right hon. Friend on her new responsibilities and wish her well. She will know that a large fraction of the United States production of soya and corn is from genetically modified crops and that large quantities are exported unsegregated to the European market for incorporation into animal feed. Should not all animal feeds containing GM crops be labelled as such? Will she confirm that there is no independent, publicly funded research in Britain into the safety of feeding GM crops to animals?

Ms Quin: I thank my hon. Friend for his opening remarks. We believe that labelling is a major aspect of this issue. I pay tribute to my predecessor, my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Perry Barr (Mr. Rooker), for the work that he did on labelling and giving these issues prominence, not just here in the United Kingdom, but within the European Union. Because of that we are making progress within the European Union towards proper labelling.

My hon. Friend mentioned the question of separation. There seems to be increasing pressure now on suppliers in the United States to separate crops. Therefore, in future it will be much easier to tell the source of these products—whether they come from a GM or non-GM source. The wider work that is being done on labelling in Brussels today is an important part of that pressure. We believe in examining all aspects of these issues. Indeed, the committee to which I referred will certainly be able to look at safety and other issues.

Mr. Norman Baker (Lewes): May I press the Minister a little further? Does she agree that farmers have a right to know what they are buying, and consumers what they are eating further down the food chain? Will she guarantee that any animal feedstuffs containing GM material will be labelled so that farmers know what they are buying, and have the right to segregate the supply of non-GM material should they so wish?

Ms Quin: As the hon. Gentleman knows, from the outset this Government have had a commitment to consumer and producer information so that people know what they are buying and will not be misled into buying products which turn out to be different from what they thought. We have pursued that both in the European Union and at home. Although we are pressing for animal feeds to be labelled in the European Union, in the meantime—because of the length of time that it takes to get those arrangements agreed—we are also pursuing a voluntary labelling system within this country.

Common Agricultural Policy

2. **Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours** (Workington): If he will raise with his European counterparts the incidence of fraud in the common agricultural policy. [93386]

The Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mr. Nick Brown): The Government take every opportunity to raise this issue with other member states

and with the European Commission, in order to build support for measures both to reduce fraud against the CAP budget and to improve the financial management of the budget.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: Does my right hon. Friend agree that the introduction of the animal traceability scheme through the establishment of the British cattle movement centre in my constituency by this Labour Government, will not only help to resolve at an early stage the crisis of BSE, but will help to secure safeguards against fraud under the European Union beef regime? Can we have an assurance that schemes such as the one operating in Workington will be introduced throughout the European Community?

Mr. Brown: I agree with my hon. Friend—Workington is leading the way in Europe. The introduction of traceability is not only an important protection and reassurance to consumers but an important safeguard for the public purse on the beef premium regimes.

Mr. Michael Jack (Fylde): When the Council of Ministers announced the lifting of the beef ban and the resumption of British beef exports to Europe, many farmers thought that the statement was correct, but they now consider it a fraudulent declaration. It was a hollow statement; it clearly did not open the door to British beef exports, particularly to France. Many farmers will think that the French are now acting fraudulently because they are not adhering to that European agreement. What practical steps will the Minister now take to open the door, beyond simply registering his discontent at Tesco supermarket with an empty trolley? So far, his words about getting beef back into France have been as empty as his trolley.

Mr. Brown: That is an ingenious attempt to link the French failure to lift the ban to the use of the word "fraud" in the question asked by my hon. Friend the Member for Workington (Mr. Campbell-Savours). If the right hon. Gentleman had been a little more assiduous and paying attention, he would have noticed that I intend to answer Question 10, which deals directly with that matter, at the end of Question Time.

Mr. Bob Blizzard (Waveney): On the question of the fairness of the common agricultural policy, does my right hon. Friend find, as I do, that most farmers are in favour of Britain's entry into the single currency because it will bring stability to the fluctuating payments that they receive under that policy? Arable payments alone amount to an injection of some £55 million into Suffolk's rural economy. Would not a path that led to withdrawal from the European Union defraud our farmers of those valuable payments?

Mr. Brown: My hon. Friend is right to draw attention to the importance of the exchange rate in agriculture and, by implication, to the importance of the agrimonetary regime. The Government's approach to the broader question that he raised is the right one, and I shall certainly not add any remarks to what has already been said on that subject.

Livestock Producers

3. **Mr. Archy Kirkwood** (Roxburgh and Berwickshire): What plans he has to support the profitability of hill and upland producers of livestock; and if he will make a statement. [93387]

The Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mr. Elliot Morley): We have committed an extra £60 million to next year's hill livestock compensatory allowance scheme. Upland producers will also benefit from the other measures we have announced recently to ease pressure on the livestock sector.

Mr. Kirkwood: Will the Minister concede that the profitability of hill livestock producers has collapsed recently? It has done so to the extent that, for the first time, thousands of families in the hills who produce livestock, have dependent children and have capital assets of less than £8,000 are eligible for the working families tax credit. Surely it is in no one's interests that people have to rely on the benefits system to supplement agricultural wages. I acknowledge what the Government have done, and the £60 million is welcome, but we have had £60 million a year on a one-off crisis basis since 1996. Is it not time that we had a long-term strategy for the future viability of livestock producers which does not sentence them to starvation incomes?

Mr. Morley: We concede that there are difficulties in the hill livestock sector, which is why we have found the extra £60 million for that sector. That money is on top of the £700 million that is already going to beef and sheep producers in the sector. There are long-term issues, and that is why we are discussing the reform of the hill livestock compensatory allowances system into area-based payments. We have allocated environmentally sensitive area payments and stewardship payments. We are also talking to groups such as the National Sheep Association about the future of livestock. There are complex issues about prices and markets and there has been a considerable increase in the size of the national flock, which has risen by 1.27 million in the past year alone.

Charlotte Atkins (Staffordshire, Moorlands): Is not one of the problems the profiteering of the supermarkets, which buy cheap and sell expensive?

Mr. Morley: There is certainly an issue of sales and markets which must be addressed. However, my hon. Friend will be aware that supermarkets are currently subject to investigation by the Competition Commission.

Mr. David Maclean (Penrith and The Border): Does not the Minister recognise that it is not a matter of "just some difficulties out there", to use his words? The whole farming industry is in crisis, and the Government are presiding over the devastation of our upland areas, with huge environmental consequences unless we get action from the Government soon—and more action, not just a promise from the Minister not to drink Beaujolais Nouveau in future.

Mr. Morley: The right hon. Gentleman does not seem to have noticed the £150 million aid package recently

announced by my right hon. Friend the Minister. There certainly are difficulties in the agricultural sector. Some of those difficulties are the result of short-term cycles, but some of them are much more persistent and are caused more by structural problems. The upland sheep sector falls into the latter category.

Mr. Elfyn Llwyd (Meirionnydd Nant Conwy): I remind the Minister of the crisis in the sheepmeat industry. Will he consider very carefully a ewe cull system, which is urgently required? If the only objection to a calf cull system in Wales is the fact that it would be treated differently from England, why do not we have a UK-wide calf cull system?

Mr. Morley: On the first point, the ewe cull system must be subject to state aid rules, and it is unlikely that it would be approved by the European Commission. Indeed, the Commission has already made an announcement on the proposals by the Welsh Assembly.

We have no plans to introduce a calf cull scheme. The date for the end of that scheme was made very clear. The scheme has been extended twice already, and there are signs that a market for cull calves is establishing itself in the meat sector.

Mr. Tim Yeo (South Suffolk): Does the Minister agree that the lifting of the ban on beef on the bone would be one of the best things that could happen to livestock producers? Why is policy in England now being made by unelected bureaucrats in Cardiff and Edinburgh and not by the elected Minister? How much longer will it be before English consumers are allowed to eat beef on the bone, as the chief medical officer for England has now recommended it is safe to do?

Mr. Morley: My right hon. Friend has made the position clear several times. We have always said that we shall advance on the basis of independent scientific advice. I am very surprised that the hon. Gentleman has made it clear that the Conservatives, apparently, would ignore the advice of chief medical officers, no matter what it was. Surely it is much more sensible to approach the issue on a UK-wide basis. That is why discussions are taking place with the devolved assemblies to try to reach agreement on that. That is a sensible way to proceed on this issue.

Mr. Dennis Skinner (Bolsover): Does my hon. Friend agree that one of the problems about handing out these subsidies is that, for example, in the last year during which the Tories were in power, nine separate agribusinesses got £1 million each in subsidies? The system has been skewed towards the big business farmers, as opposed to hill farmers and all the rest. Now that the Government are waging war against the forces of conservatism, when are we going to see the back of this common agricultural policy?

Mr. Morley: My hon. Friend is absolutely right in that one of the problems with agriculture is the distorting effect of the subsidies from the common agricultural policy. We have made it clear that we want to progress with reform of the CAP, to move away from production-based subsidies and to direct that money towards the rural development programme, agri-environment and the broader rural economy. That is the way forward for a long-term future for agriculture, and we intend to pursue that as part of our strategy.

Food Imports

4. **Mr. Nicholas Winterton** (Macclesfield): If he will make a statement about his powers to ban importation of foods whose production standards are illegal in this country. [93388]

12. **Miss Anne McIntosh** (Vale of York): What plans he has to ban the importation of meat that does not meet United Kingdom standards of hygiene and welfare; and if he will make a statement. [93397]

The Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mr. Nick Brown): Food produced within the European Union must be produced to common hygiene standards, and imports from outside the European Union must meet the same, or equivalent, standards.

It would be incompatible with the treaty of Rome and with World Trade Organisation rules to ban imports of meat because of the animal welfare standards under which it had been produced. We are actively seeking to improve EU-wide welfare standards.

Mr. Winterton: I think that this House is at its best when it is courteous, and my question to the Minister will be courteous. Does he agree that falling farmgate prices and retail prices are hitting the pigmeat industry in this country? Does he not further agree that the pigmeat industry in the United Kingdom contracted by 12 per cent. last year—unlike the pigmeat herds in Germany, Spain, Denmark and Holland, which expanded during the same period? Does he agree that we are importing into this country pigmeat that is reared by methods so cruel that they have been banned in this country?

Why will the Minister not put a block on pigmeat imports into this country from those countries that are using methods that are so cruel that they are banned here so as to help our pigmeat industry, as it so justly deserves to be helped?

Mr. Brown: I agree with a great deal of what the hon. Gentleman has said. I thank him for his courtesy, which I assume is intended as a lesson to those on the Opposition Front Bench. I hope that I have not got him into any more trouble with his Front Bench than he is habitually in.

Can we use article 36—it is a proper question—to ban the import of pigmeat that is produced either with meat and bonemeal or in stall-and-tether systems, which are banned in this country? I have taken the best possible legal advice and I am told that I cannot impose such a ban. I am today placing this legal advice in the Library so that all Members can see it for themselves.

Miss McIntosh: If the Minister will not ban beef products, will he respond to a plea from the heart from me and from farmers in the Vale of York, who have never suffered such dire financial straits in the history of farming? If the right hon. Gentleman is prepared to ban the use of meat and bonemeal for fear of cross-contamination, does he accept that there is an equal danger of cross-contamination in other countries where it

is fed, and that we should not import that meat? Does he agree that the stall-and-tether ban should be imposed much earlier in the European Union, and will he use his good offices to ensure that that happens? If he is not prepared to introduce a ban, will he at least encourage the labelling of feedstuffs so that the consumer can decide where the best hygiene and welfare conditions are met—in the production of meat in this country?

Mr. Brown: I agree with what the hon. Lady says about labelling. I am currently having a hard look at labelling regulations and I hope to have something to say to the House on that topic within a matter of days. The hon. Lady is absolutely right to say that here in the United Kingdom we impose higher welfare standards on the industry than those that are imposed elsewhere. Back in 1991, we introduced an eight-year changeover period in response to public pressure. It is up to the public to back the higher welfare standards that they clamoured for us to introduce. It is incumbent on each and every one of us to stand the UK industry's corner on this matter. When I return to the issue in the next few days, I hope to have something to say about how together we can help in achieving that objective. As I have said, I shall be returning to these matters soon.

The hon. Lady referred to cross-contamination, and it is only fair to give a complete answer. We have rules because of BSE. There is not BSE in the pig herd, but there is a danger of cross-contamination in terms of meat and bonemeal. With officials in my Department I am again approaching the Spongiform Encephalopathy Advisory Committee to ascertain whether we can find a way to meet its legitimate concerns about the commercial use of the material, rather than imposing an absolute ban. The hon. Lady follows these matters closely and will know that I have tried to do so once already and received a dusty response from SEAC. The Department, along with the Meat and Livestock Commission, will return to SEAC. We hope to have a meeting in November.

Mr. William Thompson (West Tyrone): If the Minister cannot ban food coming into the United Kingdom that is of a lower quality than our product, will he at least ensure that all catering contracts that are let by the Government, public bodies and the security forces insist that the food is of the same standard as that which is required of the United Kingdom product?

Mr. Brown: The hon. Gentleman and some of his colleagues and I are due to meet at 1 pm today to discuss these matters further, particularly in respect of Northern Ireland, and I hope to explore them in detail with him then. I hope to be able to give him a response on the specific point in the next few days. However, I cannot issue instructions to other public sector purchasers regarding their purchasing regime. What I can do is to draw their attention to the strong case that can be made for the UK pig sector, and I intend to do that.

Mr. John Swinney (North Tayside): Bearing in mind all that the Minister has said in reply to numerous questions on the subject, and if legal advice prevents him from banning imports of substandard produce, are there measures that the Government are prepared to take to relieve the enormous hardship suffered by pig producers throughout the United Kingdom, and to compensate those producers for the investment that they made in order to deliver a superior animal welfare regime at the request of the public and the House?

Mr. Brown: Any attempt by the UK Government to compensate for the investment in the animal welfare element would undoubtedly fall foul of the state aid rules, but I am looking hard at everything that has been proposed to me—believe me, there has been a wide range of suggestions—to see what more can be done.

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome): Will the Minister follow the precautionary principle and prevent the import of meat if he or his officials cannot be satisfied that the veterinary and hygiene inspection in the country of origin is up to the standards that we require? If he cannot even do that, can he at least address the issue of labelling? Is it any wonder that people are confused when St. Ivel yoghurt is made in France, and Carte-D'or ice cream is made in Gloucester? Can we have proper labelling of country of origin and production methods, so that the consumer is not confused and the producer has fair competition?

Mr. Brown: On the hon. Gentleman's first point, we already do that. Food that does not meet our hygiene or health standards does not get into the food chain. It is banned; it is unlawful. On his second point about the animal welfare element and the country of origin, I am taking a hard look at the labelling regimes. I agree that the example that he cited is clearly misleading.

Mr. Tim Yeo (South Suffolk): If it is not safe for British pig bones to be fed by British farmers to British pigs, why can those same British pig bones be exported abroad, used by continental pig farmers to feed to their pigs, and the pigmeat from those pigs sold back to British consumers? Why is that safe?

Mr. Brown: The hon. Gentleman should know the answer. If he had read the last response from SEAC, he would understand that it is trying to protect against cross-contamination in the UK chain and the possibility of the fraudulent mixing of pigmeat and bonemeal with cattle and other meat and bonemeal, and that getting into the market and breaching the powerful public protection measures that we have uniquely in the UK to protect against BSE.

Battery Hens

5. **Mr. Ivor Caplin** (Hove): What steps he is taking to improve the welfare of battery hens. [93389]

The Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mr. Elliot Morley): A new EU directive on the welfare of laying hens was agreed on 15 June. It requires all member states to ban the conventional battery cage from 1 January 2012 and to apply improved standards to its use in the meantime.

Mr. Caplin: I thank my hon. Friend for that reply and congratulate him and other Ministers on the success of those negotiations. I draw to his attention the excellent campaign run by Compassion in World Farming over many years to end the rearing of battery hens in the EU.

Can he reassure me that during the next 10 years of negotiations, the Government will ensure that third-country imports to the EU do not lessen the important animal welfare improvements that we have made by ending the rearing of battery hens in cages?

Mr. Morley: My hon. Friend is right. I pay tribute to the work done by CWF, the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals and other groups, which put forward a strongly argued case on scientific and welfare grounds on such issues as battery cages. It is encouraging that the European Council of Ministers has embraced animal welfare issues on a Europe-wide basis, which is different from some of our discussions on the pig industry, for example, which were unilateral. Addressing such issues in Europe is one thing, but we must also address welfare standards in the World Trade Organisation talks. I am pleased that that was in the minds of Ministers at the Agriculture Council. I believe that welfare standards and labelling will feature in the forthcoming talks.

Mr. Christopher Gill (Ludlow): I believe that I am correct in saying that, yesterday, the House was told that a plant in the far east had been licensed to supply poultry products to this country or to the European Union without even an inspection. There is a great deal of hypocrisy here. How will the Government be sure that food imported from third-world countries complies? If it does not, and they cannot give a categoric assurance, does it not make a complete mockery of all that has been said in answer to previous questions this afternoon?

Mr. Morley: Plants which export to the EU have to meet EU standards and they are inspected by EU Commissioners. The delegation which inspected Thailand included a British vet. The EU is bringing forward a report on the standards of poultrymeat from third countries. That report is overdue, but we are pressing for it to be made available as quickly as possible so that we can see its conclusions.

Organic Food Production

6. **Mr. David Borrow** (South Ribble): What action his Department is taking to assist farmers wishing to produce organic food. [93390]

The Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mr. Elliot Morley): We have allocated more than £16 million of aid under the organic farming scheme, we are funding the organic conversion information service and we are spending more than £2 million this year on organic research and development.

Mr. Borrow: I welcome the Government's increased spending on the organic farming scheme and the review announced last week or the week before into that scheme. Given that more than 70 per cent. of organic food consumed in the United Kingdom is produced overseas, will my hon. Friend consider setting clear targets in that review to reduce dependence in the UK on the import of organic food and to increase production of such food in the UK?

Mr. Morley: That is certainly a helpful suggestion. Obviously, we want the organic sector in Britain to expand and we have committed substantial extra resources to that. The area under organic production increased by 400 per cent. in the past 12 months. It is right to say that 70 per cent. of organic food is imported, but we are self-sufficient in some organic products, such as organic meat, and one reason for the review is to consider those areas where we should be giving some priority to addressing the marketing balance.

Mr. Owen Paterson (North Shropshire): Many of my farmers in the dairy sector are switching to organic milk production. In order to keep public confidence in organically produced milk, which is not treated in any way—it is not pasteurised—it is fundamental that the Government resolve the problem of bovine TB as fast as possible. Of the 10 proposed triplets, the Government have set up only two and that is not good enough. When will the Government take some real action on bovine TB?

Mr. Morley: Bovine TB is a serious problem facing the dairy herd, with welfare issues for badgers as well as cattle. We have set up five triplets and we are implementing the Krebs programme, on which there was a great deal of discussion. The advice from independent scientific groups revealed great difficulties in dealing with bovine TB, but this is an issue that we cannot ignore, and, difficult though it is, we are addressing it.

Pesticides

7. **Mrs. Anne Campbell** (Cambridge): What assessment he has made of the operation of the regulatory framework in respect of pesticides use in the United Kingdom. [93391]

The Minister of State, Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Ms Joyce Quin): Pesticides are strictly regulated in this country under national and EU rules. The EU regime for plant protection products is intended to replace national rules but has made slow progress. However, we consider our national regime sufficiently strong to protect public health and the environment until the EU system is fully up and running.

Mrs. Campbell: I welcome my right hon. Friend to her new responsibilities on the Front Bench, and I invite her to agree that genetic modification of crops offers a huge potential for a reduction in the use of pesticides in agricultural crops. Does she further agree that, for that reason if for no other, it is important that we resist the demands that are coming forward for the abandonment of genetically modified field trials?

Ms Quin: As my hon. Friend knows, we believe that the field trials are important and should be proceeded with. I have recently looked at some of the past year's debates in *Hansard*. We have had a good debate on these issues here, but often in the press there has been a great

deal of scaremongering and inaccurate reporting, which does none of us, and in particular the British public, a service.

I also agree with my hon. Friend that we need to consider evidence on the potential reduction in the use of pesticides. Information reveals examples of a significant reduction in pesticide use, and it is obviously important to encourage the development of technology that helps to reduce the use of pesticides generally by much better targeting and through the use of much more sophisticated equipment.

Mr. James Paice (South-East Cambridgeshire): On behalf of the official Opposition, I welcome the right hon. Lady to her new role in the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food—we are pleased to see her. I also welcome the statement, which her right hon. Friend the Minister repeated last night, that the Ministry is opposed to a pesticides tax. We all welcome and support that position, but will she explain to us and to British farmers why the same arable and livestock pesticides are up to 30 per cent. cheaper in Europe than in this country? British farmers are being penalised by unfair competition because British regulations prevent them from importing those same pesticides to replace the more expensive ones available in this country.

Ms Quin: The regulations to which the hon. Gentleman refers were in force under the Conservative Government. I have described how we are taking those regulations forward at national and European level, although it is important to look at the cost structure in such issues—and we are doing so at present.

Distant-water Trawlermen

9. **Shona McIsaac** (Cleethorpes): When he expects to complete his report on compensation for distant-water trawlermen. [93394]

The Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mr. Elliot Morley): Agriculture and Trade Ministers are jointly examining the case for providing compensation, and I hope that that will be completed shortly.

Shona McIsaac: My question was about compensation for distant-water trawlermen. I believe that Question 8 was taken earlier, which may have led to some confusion.

Madam Speaker: Would the Minister repeat the answer?

Mr. Morley: I shall repeat it slowly.

Agriculture and Trade Ministers are jointly examining the case for providing compensation, and I hope that that will be completed shortly.

Shona McIsaac: I apologise.

Madam Speaker: The hon. Lady might just say thank you.

Shona McIsaac: We are here to serve, Madam Speaker.

Do my hon. Friend and his colleagues on the Front Bench appreciate the deep sense of injustice felt by people in the fishing communities of Cleethorpes, Grimsby, Hull and Fleetwood when they keep hearing of the amount of money that goes to certain sectors of the farming community, to which my hon. Friend the Member for Bolsover (Mr. Skinner) referred earlier? They feel that time and again, they are being overlooked. When will the Department put right that injustice, which was perpetrated throughout the Tory years? All the warm words in the world will not heat the homes or pay the bills for those men.

Mr. Morley: My hon. Friend makes a powerful case on behalf of distant-water fishermen, as have my hon. Friends the Members for Great Grimsby (Mr. Mitchell), for Hull, West and Hessle (Mr. Johnson) and for Blackpool, North and Fleetwood (Mrs. Humble). The matter is under consideration, but, in all fairness, this is not a simple issue. We are dealing with events of more than 20 years ago, as well as the issues of cost, the tracing of people who were sailing in those fleets and the mechanism and legal process through which we could deal with the matter.

However, my hon. Friend makes a strong argument and has a powerful case. For that reason, there will be a joint study by the two Departments and consideration will be given to how the matter can be addressed and whether it will be possible to do so.

Mr. Patrick Nicholls (Teignbridge): What confidence can hon. Members on either side of the House have in what the Parliamentary Secretary has just said, when one considers the shambles that the Government are making of safety compensation? Does the hon. Gentleman recall that, just before the European elections, the Deputy Prime Minister travelled to the west country to say very publicly that he had overruled the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, and that he was restoring the safety compensation grants that his right hon. Friend had cancelled? This week, the *Western Morning News* reports that a MAFF spokesman has now said that the Minister is overruling the Deputy Prime Minister and those compensation grants will not be paid at all. Does not the British fishing industry, which has a right to expect better from the Government, looks at that shambles and views the Government with a mixture of pity and contempt?

Mr. Morley: The British fishing industry has a right to expect better than that question from the hon. Gentleman. The Deputy Prime Minister has made it clear that fishing safety grants will be reinstated, and MAFF has made no attempt to overrule that.

The issue that the hon. Gentleman seems to misunderstand is that some sections of the fleet—the under 12 m fishing fleet, in particular—never had access to safety grants. There may well be new safety standards for those sections, and as the MAFF safety grants have finished, it is right that before any new grant is decided, we should look at its implications, how it should be used, who should get it and where the priority should lie. That is under consideration, and an announcement will be made in due course.

Farmers' Incomes (Leicestershire)

11. **Mr. Andrew Robathan** (Blaby): If he will make a statement on the level of dairy and beef farmers' incomes in Leicestershire. [93396]

The Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mr. Nick Brown): Income estimates for farm types are not available at county level. The average net farm income for full-time dairy farms in England was £11,600 per farm in 1998–99. There are no estimates for specialist beef farms, but lowland cattle and sheep farms in England made an average net loss of £1,000 per farm.

Mr. Robathan: The Minister thereby acknowledges the enormous crisis in both beef and dairy farming. There is no point in his pretending that it has nothing to do with the Government, because it does. I cordially invite him to my constituency to visit the dairy and beef farmers whom I saw during the summer recess. They are struggling to keep their heads above water—or will not survive. This is a real crisis. Will the Minister: first, lift the ban on beef on the bone—we may hear about that later—which his chief medical officer has set; secondly, review the calf-processing aid scheme; and, thirdly, take action regarding Milk Marque and the future of dairy farming?

Mr. Brown: I acknowledge what the hon. Gentleman says about farm incomes on behalf of his constituents. I also acknowledge that I, as Minister, and my Department, have a duty to help both the beef and dairy sectors through these difficult times. The hon. Gentleman suggests three remedies. On beef on the bone, I accept the United Kingdom chief medical officer's advice—he wants to lift the ban. I believe that the right thing to do is to proceed in a co-ordinated way throughout the United Kingdom, but I hope that we can do that shortly.

I extended the calf-processing aid scheme twice: the first time getting money from the reserve and the second time using all the available moneys in my Department's budget, in order to continue the scheme at a lower rate. The industry could therefore see that the scheme was being phased out. The calf-processing aid scheme has now come to an end, and I do not intend to reopen it for the remainder of this year, when the European Union-wide scheme closes.

I would like to visit the hon. Gentleman's constituency to meet lowland farmers and discuss what can be done to help. I have had a hard look at what can be done to help under the different common agricultural policy regimes, and there really is not much scope. However, I hope that my intervention and that of the president of the National Farmers Union on the regulatory burden of the sector will afford the hon. Gentleman's constituents some help.

Mr. Edward Garnier (Harborough): May I, too, encourage the Minister to come to Leicestershire? My constituency is next door to that of my hon. Friend the Member for Blaby (Mr. Robathan). The Minister will find a similarly depressing picture. The farmgate price of milk has gone down in the past month, causing huge hardship for my dairy farmers. My hon. Friend's point about the calf-processing aid scheme and other matters relating to beef farming in our county cannot be too strongly stated. Agriculture in our area is in a terrible state, and it is incumbent on the Minister to come and see us to ensure that he is fully acquainted with what is going on.

Mr. Brown: All of that is fairly stated. On the reshaping of Milk Marque following the Competition Commission report, it is right to say publicly that the Milk Marque leadership has acted bravely in difficult circumstances and is advocating the right solution for the producer side of the industry.

I have worked closely with the Milk Marque leadership and the Dairy Industry Federation on the issues raised by the Competition Commission. I shall do what I can to help to get the sector through these difficult times, which are the more so because of the depressed price of milk at the moment. I would happily visit the hon. and learned Gentleman's constituency at the same time as I visit that of his hon. Friend the Member for Blaby (Mr. Robathan). Perhaps we could arrange a joint meeting.

SOLICITOR-GENERAL

The Solicitor-General was asked—

Glidewell Report

27. **Mr. Andrew George** (St. Ives): What progress he has made on the implementation of the Glidewell report; and if he will make a statement. [93415]

The Solicitor-General (Mr. Ross Cranston): On 28 June this year, the Attorney-General provided the final Government response to the Glidewell report. A chart providing details was placed in the Library. Sixty-four of the 75 recommendations are shown as having been accepted, accepted in part or in principle, or implemented. Work continues to implement the recommendations involving substantial change for the better in the Crown Prosecution Service. Only two recommendations are shown as rejected: they are minor recommendations about costing and witness warning. The remaining nine recommendations are shown as having been noted or considered.

Mr. George: I am grateful to the Solicitor-General for that reply. What is the proposed timetable for the implementation of the remaining recommendations? What assistance does he propose to give members of the Crown Prosecution Service who want to appear in the higher courts to represent CPS cases?

The Solicitor-General: The remaining recommendations are in the process of implementation. The recommendation on criminal justice units is under consideration: agencies are working together in the different areas to implement it.

On the hon. Gentleman's specific point about appearances, that process is well under way. Higher court advocates now appear before the Crown courts. We want more such advocates, and we have been waiting for the Access to Justice Act 1999 to come into force to ensure that that applies to barristers as well as to solicitors. There is a rigorous training programme, and the evidence is that higher court advocates are having a favourable impact—the judges and the Bar have welcomed them. I thank the

hon. Gentleman for his interest in the matter. He knows from his visit to his local branch that such advocates are playing a useful role in prosecutions.

Mr. David Kidney (Stafford): The Glidewell report reminds us of the poor quality of the information and communication technology available to the CPS. Is there a Government commitment to pay for the new ICT that the CPS genuinely needs?

The Solicitor-General: My hon. Friend may know that the CPS was successful in obtaining a substantial modernisation grant from the Treasury: some £14 million. That will allow prosecutors to have personal computers, and we hope that that will be achieved in the near future. In the longer term, there is a public-private partnership initiative to provide IT links between courts and the police. I have seen pilots of such a scheme in Durham, and they have had a profound effect on the efficiency of the criminal justice system.

Mr. John Burnett (Torridge and West Devon): This is the first opportunity that I have had since the retirement of the former Attorney-General, the right hon. and learned Member for Aberavon (Mr. Morris), to pay tribute to his unfailing courtesy. He was always prepared to listen, and Liberal Democrat Members wish him well. It is to be deprecated that there is now no Attorney-General accountable and answerable to the House of Commons.

I hope that the Solicitor-General will agree with me that, after a person has been convicted, the CPS should, whenever possible, secure the confiscation of the proceeds of crime and the payment of the huge costs incurred by the state. What are the Solicitor-General's Office and the Crown Prosecution Service doing to meet those two objectives?

The Solicitor-General: I am sure that the former Attorney-General will be very pleased by the hon. Gentleman's comments, for which I thank him. The hon. Gentleman, along with my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton (Mrs. Gilroy), accompanied me on a visit to a local CPS office during the past fortnight, and I am grateful to them for doing so. No doubt they were both impressed by the professionalism that they saw.

The hon. Gentleman raised the question of costs at the time of the visit. The CPS, rightly, applies for costs; it will always apply for costs if it appears that the defendant has the money to pay. That is only right. It is also the case that courts will not often make orders for costs, because a defendant who is about to go inside will be impecunious. In any event, the CPS applies for costs automatically.

I should add that, owing to the reaction of judges or magistrates, compensation sometimes takes priority over an application for costs by the CPS. The hon. Gentleman makes a valid point, however. The CPS also has a central confiscation unit, which is dedicated to seizing the proceeds of crime, and which is very successful.

Mr. Edward Garnier (Harborough): Like the hon. Member for Torridge and West Devon (Mr. Burnett), I regret the retirement of the right hon. and learned Member for Aberavon (Mr. Morris)—as do we all. I also join the Liberal Democrats' spokesman in regretting that this Question Time is now entitled "Oral Questions to the Solicitor-General", rather than "Oral Questions to the Attorney-General". Is it not a sad comment on this so-called new Labour party that, with a parliamentary party consisting of more than 400 Members, the Government must replace the right hon. and learned Member for Aberavon with an unelected politician whom we cannot interrogate here?

What does the Solicitor-General know about the paragraphs in the Glidewell report on victim support, and what is he going to do about them?

The Solicitor-General: I shall convey the thanks of the hon. and learned Gentleman to the former Attorney-General. I regret that I am a mere Solicitor-General, but I hope that I shall prove adequate to the task.

I was rather taken by some remarks that the hon. and learned Gentleman penned in the current issue of *The House Magazine*. He wrote:

> "What do you do when your own mistakes grow in the light of your counterpart's successes? . . . You get ready to move out."

I am not sure that the hon. and learned Gentleman will be doing that. I am certain that we shall face each other across the Dispatch Boxes in the coming year.

We take the issue of victim support very seriously. It is at the top of the agenda. We have a long way to go, because the issue was not taken seriously under the previous Government. As the hon. and learned Gentleman will know, however, my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary put it at the centre of recent legislation, and certain changes have been made in, for example, the way in which we treat victims of rape.

Crown Prosecution Service

28. **Mr. Andrew Dismore** (Hendon): What steps he is taking to promote equal opportunities in the Crown Prosecution Service. [93416]

The Solicitor-General: I have regular discussions with the Director of Public Prosecutions and the chief executive of the CPS. I am personally committed to ensuring equal opportunities in the CPS; it, too, is personally committed to driving forward the achievement of diversity and equality in the service.

The CPS has published a new equality statement, and has established an equality committee to steer and promote the programme of change. An action plan on race will be drawn up by the end of the year. The selection and appointment of a new diversity manager in the senior civil service is in hand, and the post is currently being filled on a temporary basis by Ms Baljit Ubhey, a lawyer in the CPS. Her team is focusing on a number of priorities, such as improving race equality.

Mr. Dismore: I thank my hon. and learned Friend for his answer, but may I give an illustration of the continuing problem of racism in the CPS by referring to the case of a constituent of mine, senior Crown prosecutor Maria Bamieh, who has just succeeded in an employment tribunal case relating to unlawful racial discrimination and victimisation? Even during her case—despite her having passed an examination by a panel, organised externally,

in relation to promotion to a post five grades higher than her current post—she was told by the DPP:

"If you now obtained a promotion, you would be seen as a troublemaker rewarded."

That has been accepted in writing by the Treasury solicitor. That is not the way in which to treat people who, correctly, stand up for their rights. Will the Solicitor-General welcome the involvement of the Commission for Racial Equality, which is actively considering a formal investigation into the CPS?

The Solicitor-General: As a result of the first Bamieh decision, the CPS rightly took several steps. For example, procedures for temporary promotion have been reviewed. In addition, the Bamieh case and several other incidents led to the important statements that I outlined in my first answer, such as the equality statement and the establishment of the equality committee, with a special sub-committee on race.

My hon. Friend has referred to the second tribunal decision, which has just been given. In that case, discrimination was found, but it was not procedural: it was discrimination by a former CPS employee. I have looked at the tribunal's decision and I find it a bit difficult to understand what was done wrongly in terms of discrimination, as opposed to management.

The issue is taken seriously. As I have said, I have personally taken a close interest in the matter. I have seen the Director of Public Prosecutions and the chief executive. I have also seen the acting personnel heads and have had them report to me specifically on the measures that have been taken. We are doing a number of things. I mention, for example, the minority women network, which has been established in the CPS partly as a result of my commitment to the issue.

The matter is serious. It will be unacceptable if there is any discrimination. It must be stamped out, and we are on the case.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): As well as promoting racial and sexual equality in the Crown Prosecution Service, and further to the recent and welcome speech by the Lord Chancellor about the importance of promoting merit in our society irrespective of background, what plans does the Solicitor-General have to ensure that, in addition to the products of the great public schools, there is adequate representation in the CPS of the magnificent products of the remaining 166 grammar schools?

The Solicitor-General: The CPS advertises widely for positions. For example, it advertises in *The Voice* to attract applicants from ethnic minority communities. It will accept applications from everyone and anyone if they meet the standards.

The statutory code for crown prosecutors is absolutely clear: decisions have to be made in a non-discriminatory way and on the basis of the evidence and public interest.

Persistent Young Offenders

29. **Shona McIsaac** (Cleethorpes): What impact the Government's policy on the speedy processing of persistent young offenders will have on the ability of the police to offer alternatives to prosecution. [93417]

The Solicitor-General: The principal aim of the youth justice system, enshrined in the Crime and Disorder Act 1998, is to prevent offending by children and young people. The speed with which young offenders are dealt with is an important factor, but the Government also recognise that, for some offenders, diversion from the criminal justice system is an effective means of tackling youth crime.

Shona McIsaac: What is the CPS doing in Humberside to work with other agencies in my area to reduce unacceptable delays in the youth justice system?

The Solicitor-General: As with all parts of the CPS, there is now joined-up government. The CPS works with the courts and police. I understand that, in Humberside recently, a conference was specifically devoted to bringing the different agencies together to deal with problems such as youth justice. In the next couple of months, I will visit my hon. Friend's area. I invite her to come with me to raise any concern that she has on the issue.

Mr. Andrew Robathan (Blaby): The Solicitor-General talks about speeding up youth justice and the hon. Member for Cleethorpes (Shona McIsaac) talks about unacceptable delays in youth justice, but I remind the hon. and learned Gentleman that he fought the last election on

"an early election pledge:—fast track punishment for persistent young offenders by halving the time from arrest to sentencing".

He may conveniently have forgotten that, now that he is a Minister. Perhaps he could tell us when that will happen; it has not happened early. Labour has now been in government for 18 months. *[Interruption.]*

The Solicitor-General: I hope that the hon. Gentleman is able to calculate delays in youth justice better than he is able to count months. Nevertheless, the Government are reducing the time required by the youth justice system. When we were elected, it took more than four and a half months to bring a persistent youth offender before the courts. That time has been reduced substantially—in some areas, it is already below the 71 days that we pledged. I assure the hon. Gentleman that we are doing everything necessary to fulfil that pledge, and we shall do so.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Madam Speaker: Order. We now return to Agriculture questions.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

The Minister was asked—

Beef Imports

10. **Mr. Martyn Jones** (Clwyd, South): What progress is being made on the resumption of British beef exports. [93395]

14. **Mr. Peter L. Pike** (Burnley): What estimate his Department has made of the amount of beef exported since 1 August. [93399]

The Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mr. Nick Brown): As well as being a clear breach of European Union law, the French import ban has hindered the resumption of our beef exports. I and other Ministers have been in regular contact with our French counterparts and the Commission to let them know how seriously we take the matter. I spoke again to Commissioner Byrne only this morning.

The European Union scientific experts meet on 28 October to consider France's evidence for its continued import ban. In the interests of transparency, I am content that the Commission should ask its experts whether any of the points raised by the French scientists casts doubt on the EU decision on the date-based export scheme. I have looked at all the evidence submitted by France, and it contains nothing that was not already known. I therefore expect the Commission scientists to dismiss the French evidence.

If the scientists find no new concerns that cast doubt on the date-based export scheme decision, the Government have made it known that we expect the French to lift their ban immediately. The Prime Minister made that clear to the French Prime Minister when they met last week. If the French do not lift their ban, Commission President Prodi has assured the Government that the Commission will take swift legal action.

The situation in Germany is different. The German Government are waiting to see what the Commission scientists conclude, and have said that if no problems are raised they intend to lift their ban. The French have given no such undertaking.

The first consignment of date-based export scheme beef was exported on 24 August. Since then, and despite the continued French and German import bans, several consignments have been exported from St. Merryn Meats Group's Probus slaughterhouse and, since 27 September, from Bryson Meats Plant at Strathaven, Lanarkshire. In view of the limited number of companies authorised to produce British beef for export so far, I cannot divulge the amount as that is commercially confidential information.

Mr. Jones: I congratulate my right hon. Friend and his colleagues on their success in getting the worldwide ban on British beef lifted—which has, I am sure, delighted my farmers. Does he agree, however, that the best way forward with the French problem is to get the Commission to use all the powers of law against the French so that they follow the law? Would not that be far more effective than taking an unannounced stroll down the Champs Elysées with some bizarrely worded banners?

Mr. Brown: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and I am being very careful about where I take advice from. The decision to lift the worldwide ban on the export of British beef has been taken by the European Union. It is for the Commission to ensure that all members of the European Union implement that decision.

Mr. Pike: Will my right hon. Friend confirm that both France and Germany are agreeing to the transit of British beef through their countries, but that that, of course, is not an acceptable situation? Does he expect the Commission's scientists to take the decision on 28 October? Will he also make it absolutely clear that the Government are taking all necessary action—by using the Commission's procedures and, if necessary, the law—to ensure that British beef, which is safe, may be exported to and consumed in France?

Mr. Brown: My hon. Friend is absolutely right on the transport point. However, the position differs between the French Government and the German Government—the latter willingly lifted their prohibition on the transportation of British beef through Germany as soon as they could. Because of their co-decision arrangements, there has been a delay in reshaping their domestic legislation enforcing the ban, and they want to see the outcome of the Scientific Committee on 28 October. I have no quarrel with that. The position in France is different, and I have a considerable quarrel with that position.

Mr. Peter Luff (Mid-Worcestershire): Does the Minister understand that if our relationship with our European partners is as close, comfortable, harmonious and co-operative as the Prime Minister regularly claims from the Dispatch Box, the Government should have seen the French legal ban coming months ago and should have taken steps to prepare for it, particularly by lifting the ban on beef on the bone in this country? Although that excuse that we have handed the French is scientifically unjustifiable, it is politically gold-plated, and realpolitik determines that we must lift our ban on beef on the bone before we can realistically expect the French to lift theirs.

Mr. Brown: The date-based export scheme is for deboned beef. The beef on the bone ban in this country, which is at the extreme end of the precautionary measures that we have in place, has nothing to do with the date-based export scheme for deboned beef. As for the suggestion that we should somehow have foreseen the French actions, it genuinely did not occur to me that, having made an international agreement in the European Union, the French would not implement it. Hindsight is a marvellous thing, but not a single Conservative Member of Parliament on the Front Bench or the Back Benches or anyone from the industry or anywhere else in the United Kingdom warned the Government that this might happen. It is all very well to say that it should have been foreseen, but, if it was that easy to foresee, why did the hon. Member for South Suffolk (Mr. Yeo), who speaks for the Opposition, not constantly raise the possibility of the French not implementing an agreement that they had made?

Mr. Michael Jack (Fylde): The Budgen supermarket chain today took action to remove certain items of French produce from its shelves as a way of showing support for public concern about the issue and the fact that no practical action has been taken to support farmers desperate for the resumption of exports of beef. Will the Ministry be doing anything to encourage others in the commercial sector to give similar consideration to gestures of support and solidarity to farmers at this difficult time?

Mr. Brown: I understand the strength of feeling that underpins the decision that Budgen has made on, I believe, apples and pears. It is selling British produce and not purchasing any more from France. There is a great deal of strong feeling in this country about the French

behaviour, and some people take the view that while the French are imposing a ban on our beef we should not buy their products.

Mr. Ben Bradshaw (Exeter): Will my right hon. Friend confirm that it is only because of the European Union that we can force France to reopen its markets to our beef, that non-EU countries banned British beef first and continue to do so, and that if we had the kind of pick-and-mix Europe now advocated by the Tories we would be powerless to force anybody to accept our beef?

Mr. Brown: The Commission and the European Union are standing in our corner on the issue, as are 14 of the 15 member states. That is an important point, because we were not in that position under the previous Government.

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome): Is there not a suspicion that the purpose of the French action was never to impose a sustainable ban, but to create an unfavourable commercial climate in France—an invitation that was readily accepted by the French media? Does that not reinforce the need for a lifting of the beef on the bone ban and a strong marketing campaign for British beef? It is never acceptable for France to abuse its position as the first landfall for British produce on continental Europe by preventing the passage of British produce to third countries. Will the Minister ask for assurances from the French Government that that will never happen again?

Mr. Brown: I have done more than that. I have met the French Agriculture Minister and said that it should not have happened in the first place. I asked him to lift the ban on the transportation of our produce through France well before the French parliamentary procedures would have been completed on lifting their domestic ban on offering the product for sale. The French have been reluctant to do what they have now done. The situation is unacceptable, and their action is in breach of the treaty because it is a constraint on the free movement of goods and services in the European Union. The hon. Gentleman is wrong to relate the beef on the bone ban in this country to the date-based export scheme because that scheme is for deboned meat.

Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours (Workington): May I tell my right hon. Friend what sticks in my throat? It is to witness Tory Members of Parliament attacking a Labour Government for our attempts to resolve the crisis in beef which resulted from BSE—something that the Tories themselves created, through their negligence in the 1980s and 1990s. May I congratulate my right hon. Friend on behalf of the British farming industry on his valiant attempt to resolve the crisis?

Mr. Brown: Under the Conservative Government's stewardship of this issue, Britain was isolated within Europe. Under our stewardship, France is isolated within Europe. That is the difference.

Mr. Dafydd Wigley (Caernarfon): As beef farmers in these islands went to such lengths following the BSE constraints from Europe, does it not now behove France to obey the rules? Will my right hon. Friend press for the European Commission to take the case to the European courts as soon as possible? The European Court of Justice should determine this matter so that there is a ruling preventing other countries from being tempted to act in such a way in future.

Mr. Brown: This is an important matter for the EU and the Commission, and Commissioner Prodi has given our Prime Minister the assurance that the right hon. Gentleman is seeking. The French behaviour is indefensible, and its implications go far wider than the narrow question of implementing the date-based export scheme. The right hon. Gentleman is right to make that point.

Mr. Dennis Skinner (Bolsover): I do not think that the French will listen to my words, but we buy a lot of electricity from France, and there is a line that brings it across. We could provide electricity in this country in many ways, including by not shutting coal mines. Why not tell the French that today? Will my right hon. Friend tell his colleagues that the swiftest way of dealing with this matter is to tell the French that we will not buy any more of their nuclear-produced electricity?

Mr. Brown: My hon. Friend is drawing me slightly wide of my ministerial responsibilities, but he is right to assert that there is a great deal of anger in this country about what the French have done in breaking an agreement that was made in good faith at an international level with the EU. People are looking at ways of expressing their displeasure, and I for one am not surprised at that.

Mr. Tim Yeo (South Suffolk): On 14 July, when the Minister announced to the House, for the fourth time, the lifting of the export ban, it did not occur to me, or to anyone on this side of the House, that he had not taken the trouble to check with the French, who he should have been aware—because they abstained at the November 1998 Agriculture Council when the matter was discussed—had some doubts. It did not occur to me to think that the Minister had not picked up the phone to check with his opposite number before making a statement—on the record, in this House and for the fourth time—that the beef export ban was being lifted. That was an act of gross incompetence, which was compounded this morning by his attempt to blame us for not asking him to do what any remotely competent Minister—even a Minister in this Government—would have done without any reminder from the Opposition.

Does not the Minister recognise that every day that Labour maintains the absurd and unjustified ban on beef on the bone—in defiance of the advice that Labour has received from the chief medical officer that it is safe for consumers—makes it harder for the process of rebuilding confidence in British beef to begin? Does he believe that leaving all this to some legal action by the European Commission—a process that may take months, if not years—is in any way an adequate response to the crisis now overwhelming the British beef sector?

Mr. Brown: I note that no practical alternative remedy is being offered by the hon. Gentleman—unless, of course, he is implying that we should return to the policies pursued by the previous Conservative Government, which left our country isolated in Europe and everyone else

ganging up against us. The position now is that the Commission is on our side, 13 of the 15 countries have implemented the decision and the 14th is implementing it. It is the French who are isolated within Europe.

It is simply untrue that we did not check the French position. There were comprehensive discussions with the French before the decision was made at the November Council of Ministers, and the French stated that their position was one of acquiescence and abstention. I—and, indeed, the hon. Gentleman—had no reason to believe that that would not endure. I should have thought that the whole House could make common cause on this issue, yet I get no support from those on the Conservative Front Bench at a time when British farmers are looking to us to unite and to act.

Business of the House

12.45 pm

The President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons (Mrs. Margaret Beckett): The business for next week will be as follows:

MONDAY 25 OCTOBER—Motion to provide for the carry-over of the Financial Services and Markets Bill.

Motion to renew the sessional orders relating to Thursday sittings.

Motion relating to meetings of Standing Committees.

Motion relating to sittings in Westminster Hall.

Changes to Standing Orders consequential on devolution.

TUESDAY 26 OCTOBER—Opposition Day.

Until about 7 o'clock, there will be a debate entitled "Police numbers, asylum seekers, immigration control and the Government's handling of revelations relating to cold war spies", followed by a debate entitled "The state of the national health service". Both debates will arise on Opposition motions.

WEDNESDAY 27 OCTOBER—Until 2 o'clock, there will be debates on a motion for the Adjournment of the House.

Debate on the Joint Committee report on parliamentary privilege on a motion for the Adjournment of the House.

THURSDAY 28 OCTOBER—Debate on agriculture on a motion for the Adjournment of the House.

FRIDAY 29 OCTOBER—Debate on the future of broadcasting on a motion for the Adjournment of the House.

MONDAY 1 NOVEMBER—Remaining stages of the Contracts (Right of Third Parties) Bill *[Lords]*.

The House will appreciate that, as is usual at this time of year, I am not able to give a full two weeks' notice of business, because we are dependent on decisions being made in the House of Lords. The House will also want to know that on Wednesday 27 October there will be a debate on taxation of energy products in European Standing Committee B and a debate on harmonisation of copyright and electronic commerce in the single market in European Standing Committee C.

Details of the relevant documents will be given in the *Official Report*.

[*Wednesday 27 October 1999:*

European Standing Committee C—Relevant European Union documents: 5562/98 and 8723/99, Harmonisation of copyright; 5123/99 and 10644/99, Electronic commerce in the single market; unnumbered EM, dated 18 October 1999—Relevant European Legislation Committee report: HC155-xviii (1997-98). Relevant European Scrutiny Committee reports: HC34-ix and HC 34-xxviii (1998-99).

European Standing Committee B—Relevant European Union documents: 6793/97, Taxation of energy products—Relevant European Legislation Committee reports: HC 155-xi and HC 155-ii (1997-98).]

Sir George Young (North-West Hampshire): The House is grateful for details of next week's business. Of course we understand the difficulty about the week after, but I assume that we will be dealing with Lords amendments to Government Bills. Can the Leader of the House shed any light on the likely date of prorogation?

I welcome the proposed full day's debate on privilege, for which we have been pressing for some time, and the one on broadcasting, following the Davies report which was published just after the House rose.

The report of the royal commission on long-term care was published in the spring, and the Government have still not found time for a debate on it, despite the reduced pressure on time and the importance of the issue. I am sure that the Leader of the House understands the concern felt both inside and outside the House. I must press her for an undertaking to provide time for such a debate in the very near future.

I welcome the proposed debate on agriculture on Thursday. Can the Leader of the House confirm that the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food will be taking part and that it will be in order to raise the issues in the Cabinet Office report proposing VAT on new building, new taxes on tourism and the relaxation of the planning regime, all of which have caused widespread alarm? Will she reflect on what the Government have just done in respect of Agriculture questions—namely, grouping two questions and taking them at 12.30 pm? Would not it have been better to make a proper statement with due notice and the normal courtesies?

It has been usual to have a two-day debate on defence matters when the House returns in the autumn. What has happened to that debate and to the usual defence White Paper, which has not been published since 1996? The Leader of the House will understand the concerns about overstretch, the Territorial Army and the viability of the strategic defence review. I hope that she can confirm that the debate will indeed take place.

Mrs. Beckett: I am afraid that, for the same reason that I am unable to give further details of future business, I cannot give the right hon. Gentleman any indication of the likely date of prorogation. I am grateful to him for his welcome for the debates on broadcasting and on the privilege report. I accept that he has been pressing for a debate on long-term care, and I can indeed give him an undertaking that we will find an appropriate time for such a debate in the new Session.

The right hon. Gentleman asked whether the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food would take part in the agriculture debate. It is the Minister who wishes to hold that debate in order to give the House an opportunity to discuss agricultural matters. Whether it will be in order to raise a range of issues alluded to in *The Times* is another matter entirely—and not, I am happy to say, a matter for me. I remind the right hon. Gentleman that the debate will take place on a motion for the Adjournment of the House.

The right hon. Gentleman asked also about the grouping of questions. I accept that the House may occasionally prefer a statement, but we are anxious not to take up the time of the House with too many statements. My right hon. Friend the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food took the view that it might be more convenient for the House to handle the matter in this way. However, if Opposition Members do not agree, we will bear that in mind for the future.

The right hon. Gentleman said that there had been no defence White Paper since 1996. However, I remind him that we held the strategic defence review. A White Paper

[Mrs. Beckett]

will come before the House and will be debated at the proper time. I think that the right hon. Gentleman will appreciate that events in Kosovo have necessitated a fresh look at, and some revision of, defence estimates. That is why the paper has been delayed—there is no sinister motive.

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): Albeit that my hon. Friend the Member for Halifax (Mrs. Mahon) and I will share an Adjournment debate on Monday 1 November about the reconstruction of Yugoslavia, will the Leader of the House expand upon her reply to the right hon. Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir G. Young) about defence estimates? Although time is to be found for a debate on the White Paper, that may occur a long way into the future and there are urgent matters to consider in relation not only to Yugoslavia but to the continuing war against Iraq. We should also have an opportunity to discuss the reports of the Bishop of Coventry and his ecclesiastical colleagues who have returned from that country where human disaster is rife.

Mrs. Beckett: I take my hon. Friend's point, but I am afraid that there is a limit to the extent to which I can help him. I have said that the White Paper will be handled in the traditional manner, and my hon. Friend will appreciate that it would be discourteous to the House if the Defence Committee were not given the chance to examine the White Paper and put its views before the House. However, we shall obviously do our best to bring the matter before the House as soon as we can reasonably do so.

Mr. Paul Tyler (North Cornwall): I endorse the concerns expressed about the rather unusual way in which the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food has dealt with the issue of beef exports. It would have been much tidier, and the House would have appreciated it, if we had received notice that the issue was to be the subject of a proper ministerial statement. We could then have dealt with the matter more effectively.

We understand that the Home Secretary will tomorrow publish the Freedom of Information Bill, which has been watered down. This is a controversial matter in which hon. Members on both sides of the House have considerable interest. It was also the subject of two important reports: the first from the Select Committee on Public Administration in July and the second from the other place. This is a parliamentary matter, yet the Government's Bill is to be published on a non-sitting day. That is surely unacceptable. There should be a proper statement and all hon. Members should have the opportunity to learn what is going on. May we at least have a guarantee that the Second Reading of this extremely important Bill will occur very early in the new Session and that, in the meantime, there will be some statement to the House about the Government's precise intentions?

Mrs. Beckett: The handling of Agriculture questions was explained on the Annunciator. However, I accept that hon. Members may have been unhappy with that procedure and, as I have said already to the right hon. Member for North–West Hampshire (Sir G. Young), I will take that on board.

As to the Freedom of Information Bill, I say with respect to the hon. Member for North Cornwall (Mr. Tyler) that anyone would think that this matter had not been in the public domain and not been discussed and scrutinised thoroughly. After all, we had a special opportunity, which I think we all welcomed, to conduct pre-legislative scrutiny, and the Government are taking account of and replying to some of the comments made during that process. Nevertheless, the Bill will put freedom of information on a statutory basis for the first time.

It is rather a pity that so much comment has concentrated on allegations that the Bill has been in some way watered down, not on the greater access that is being provided, particularly on matters of keen public interest. I shall bear in mind the hon. Gentleman's wish for an early Second Reading, but I cannot pre-empt a business statement quite so far ahead.

Mr. Harry Barnes (North-East Derbyshire): May we have a debate on the objective 2 funding proposals from the Department of Trade and Industry to the European Union? The Leader of the House will know that in the east midlands and Derbyshire the figures are quite good. Nevertheless, in north-east Derbyshire the figure is 70 per cent. down in coalfield community areas, so something has gone wrong there. May we have a debate in which the details are examined to see whether there should be some adjustment in the submissions?

Mrs. Beckett: As my hon. Friend will know, the Government got a good settlement on objective 2 and, indeed, on objective 1. As another Derbyshire Member of Parliament, I regret the concern expressed in his part of the county although, as he will know, most coalfield communities have welcomed the settlement. I cannot undertake to find time for a special debate on the matter, but two weeks today there will be a Department of Trade and Industry Question Time when there may well be an opportunity to raise it.

Mr. Peter Brooke (Cities of London and Westminster): To facilitate the next fortnight's business, could the Leader of the House put a bomb under the Cabinet Office to renew the publication of ministerial duties as an index of joined-up government, as throughout the recess we have had to operate with a pre-July document, which is a classic example of Harold Macmillan's remark about looking up this year's trains in last year's "Bradshaw"?

Mrs. Beckett: Indeed, I entirely take the right hon. Gentleman's point. I cannot undertake to put a bomb under the Cabinet Office, but I certainly undertake to draw his remarks to its attention.

Dr. Gavin Strang (Edinburgh, East and Musselburgh): Is my right hon. Friend aware that there has been a warm welcome for the Prime Minister's undertaking in the House yesterday that there will be a full consultation process before any decision is taken on whether to bring forward legislative proposals on air traffic control in the next Session of Parliament? She will be aware that when the announcement was made on the 27 July there was deep anxiety on the Government Benches. Will she arrange for a debate on this subject before the House prorogues?

Mrs. Beckett: I undertake to bear in mind my right hon. Friend's request, but I cannot give him the

undertaking that he seeks. He will know that the Government are concerned to get the right outcome for the air traffic control services and that safety is our priority. It is also important to get much-needed investment into those rather neglected services. However, I shall certainly bear his request in mind.

Rev. Martin Smyth (Belfast, South): The Leader of the House spoke about pressure on the business of the House. Nevertheless, may I press for a debate in the very near future on the Patten commission report? There is great concern in Northern Ireland and throughout the kingdom as a whole about some of its proposals. Surely before the consultation period ends, this House should have an opportunity to express its opinion.

Mrs. Beckett: Again, I undertake to bear in mind what the hon. Gentleman says. As he said, the consultation process is under way and, I believe, runs until the end of November. The Government will respond as quickly as possible after that. I cannot give him an undertaking now about the timing of the handling of these matters, but I shall bear his observations in mind.

Mr. John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington): Given the breadth of some of the titles of the debates over the next few weeks, could my right hon. Friend use her ingenuity to stretch one of those debates to include industrial relations, particularly the case of the Lufthansa Skychef workers? For 12 months they have been locked out, with management refusing to negotiate. I believe that they deserve the support of the whole House for the way in which they have conducted their dispute and sought to redress the wrong of their instantaneous dismissal 12 months ago simply because they took industrial action for 24 hours.

Mrs. Beckett: I know that my hon. Friend has campaigned for a long period about this matter, and the whole House will respect his concern for his constituents. I freely admit that despite the portmanteau nature of our business, particularly the Opposition day debates, how he could raise that matter next week does not immediately spring to mind. However, knowing his ingenuity, I am confident that he will find some way of raising the matter in the near future.

Mr. Nicholas Winterton (Macclesfield): In supporting the call by my right hon. Friend the Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir G. Young) for an early debate on long-term care for the elderly, I thank the Leader of the House for indicating firmly that there will be a debate—early, I hope—in the new Session. Will the right hon. Lady ensure that the Government make no decisions about the White Paper—apparently, they have made decisions, but I hope that they will not be final—before the House has had the opportunity to debate those matters, which are of great importance to a large, vulnerable group of people?

Mrs. Beckett: The hon. Gentleman will recall that I said that we would have a debate in the new Session at the appropriate time. I take on board his remarks about decisions. What he seeks would be difficult to achieve because the Government obviously want to form views and, if I understood him correctly, he is asking for a debate not only before the Government have made a response but before the White Paper is published. I shall certainly draw his views to the attention of my colleagues in the relevant Department.

Angela Smith (Basildon): May I draw my right hon. Friend's attention to next week's exhibition in the Upper Waiting Hall on behalf of the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children's Full Stop campaign, which wants to end the abuse of children? Would this not be a timely opportunity for a debate on that issue, given the widespread support for the campaign by hon. Members on all sides of the House?

Mrs. Beckett: I am pleased to learn from my hon. Friend that there is such an exhibition because the campaign is indeed fully supported on all sides of the House, as it should be. I cannot undertake to find time for a special debate on the matter in the near future, but I am confident that many hon. Members will be pleased that she has drawn the exhibition to their attention.

Mrs. Ray Michie (Argyll and Bute): Will the Leader of the House invite an appropriate Minister to make a statement about the future of the Campbeltown-Ballycastle ferry service, which is under threat and likely to be withdrawn? That will have severe consequences for County Antrim and for Kintyre in my constituency. I assure her that it is a matter for Westminster rather than a devolved matter because it concerns ferry services between Scotland and another part of the United Kingdom. We desperately need to know what is happening.

Mrs. Beckett: I am afraid that I cannot undertake to find an opportunity for a statement on that matter, but I undertake to draw the hon. Lady's concerns to the attention of my ministerial colleague in the relevant Department.

Mr. Mike Gapes (Ilford, South): My right hon. Friend is probably aware that next Monday is United Nations day. Could we therefore have an early debate on UN peacekeeping operations and this country's contribution to them? Could we discuss in that debate the fact that a UN official was gunned down in the street in Kosovo, purportedly by the Kosovo Liberation Army? Will the Government make a statement about what is being done to bring the perpetrators of that crime to justice?

Mrs. Beckett: My hon. Friend will certainly be aware that Foreign Office questions will take place on 2 November, when there may be an opportunity to raise those matters. In the not too distant future there will be debates on foreign affairs and defence following the Queen's Speech, and I have no doubt that if my hon. Friend has not managed to raise those matters with the relevant Ministers between now and then, he will do so on one of those occasions.

Mr. Peter Atkinson (Hexham): Could the Leader of the House arrange for a Minister from the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions to come to the House to explain why the Department takes so long to determine planning applications following public inquiries? One delay has cost up to 2,000 jobs in my

[Mr. Peter Atkinson]

constituency. A plan to create a science park, which was the subject of a one-day public inquiry in January and to which there were no objections, has not yet been determined by Ministers, with the consequence that the scheme's backers have now walked away and the scheme is effectively dead.

Mrs. Beckett: The hon. Gentleman will, I am sure, know that Ministers in the DETR are concerned about the time that such applications take and are reviewing the process to speed it up. I know that they will be sorry to learn of the difficulties to which he referred, and I shall certainly draw his remarks to their attention.

Mr. Gordon Prentice (Pendle): For half its short history, Pakistan has been ruled by the military—and they are back again. Five Labour Members travelled under their own steam to Pakistan, and we narrowly missed being caught up in the military coup, but we did meet several Ministers, who are now under house arrest. Whether the military coup proves to be benign or otherwise, is it not absolutely deplorable that a democratically elected Government should have been set aside by the military, and is not there a powerful case for an early debate on that issue, notwithstanding the fact that the Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Neath (Mr. Hain), has agreed to meet the five of us?

Mrs. Beckett: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for telling the House that the Minister has agreed to meet him and his hon. Friends; it is obviously right for him to do so.

My hon. Friend knows that a decision has been taken to suspend Pakistan from the council of the Commonwealth, and I suspect that his concern will be shared on both sides of the House. It is most unfortunate that, yet again, democratic government has been suspended in Pakistan. However, I fear that I cannot undertake to find time for a special debate on it in the near future although, as I told my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford, South (Mr. Gapes) earlier, there will be Foreign Office questions on 2 November. The position may be a little clearer by then.

Mr. Michael Fallon (Sevenoaks): Has the Leader of the House any news of the long-delayed announcement on the future of the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency? She will appreciate that the delay is causing great uncertainty among hundreds of civil servants at Fort Halstead in my constituency. Does she recall that this was a privatisation that the previous Conservative Government ruled out?

Mrs. Beckett: I did not recall that, nor am I aware whether that statement is accurate, but I can well understand the concern that the hon. Gentleman expresses. If uncertainty is being caused among staff, I shall draw that to the attention of my right hon. and hon. Friends in the Ministry of Defence.

Mr. Huw Edwards (Monmouth): Will my right hon. Friend find time for a debate on the sale of Forestry Commission land? I draw her attention to early-day motion 920, in my name and that of other hon. Members.

[That this House deplores the decision by Forest Enterprise Wales to instruct agents to sell the freehold of Chepstow Park Wood in the Wye Valley area of outstanding natural beauty for potential development as a holiday village operation; notes with concern the manner in which this process has been conducted, the failure to consult or even notify local authorities or other public bodies, the failure to advertise the sale locally, the brief time period for the receipt of offers (noon 22nd October) and the sealed bid system of sale; calls on Forest Enterprise Wales to suspend the sale of Chepstow Park Wood until this matter has been subject to a process of public consultation that can determine what is in the public interest; and calls on the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions and the National Assembly for Wales to intervene.]

There is very deep concern in my constituency that the sale of Chepstow Park wood has been administered in a very underhand and secretive way, not up to the standards that we would expect of a public body. May we hold a debate about the way in which public bodies such as the Forestry Commission attempt to sell their land?

Mrs. Beckett: My hon. Friend will know that the Government imposed a moratorium on such sales, which were of course handled quite differently under our predecessors. I appreciate that he is seeking a debate on the overall policy of the Forestry Commission, not on this specific matter, which would probably be a matter for the National Assembly for Wales. I fear that I cannot undertake to find time for such a debate, as a special item, in the near future. However, I have announced a debate on agriculture, and my hon. Friend may find that the occupant of the Chair allows him to raise the matter in that debate.

Mr. Desmond Swayne (New Forest, West): Can the right hon. Lady arrange for the Secretary of State for Health to make a statement on Monday to clarify the announcement that he made earlier this week? Notwithstanding the promises that he made in that announcement, the British Medical Association has said that there will not be a single additional specialist in the health service as a consequence of it. It would, I think, help the House in its short debate on Tuesday evening if those matters were made clear beforehand so that we could have an informed debate.

Mrs. Beckett: I am afraid that I cannot undertake to find time for an extra debate when, as the hon. Gentleman said, we have so recently had Health questions and focused on those matters. I am afraid that I am not familiar with the BMA's most recent remarks, at least as the hon. Gentleman has reported them, but he will be aware that the Government are making substantial extra investment in the health service, including an extra investment in staff, to make up for the neglect that we inherited from the Government whom he supported.

Mr. David Borrow (South Ribble): My right hon. Friend the Minister for Local Government and the Regions and I attended yesterday's launch of the Leyland Partnership. That partnership is using the new deal to create 300 jobs for the long-term unemployed in my constituency. As the unemployment rate in South Ribble has already dropped below 2 per cent., with the creation

of those 300 jobs targeted at the long-term unemployed, there will be almost full employment in South Ribble by the time of the general election. Does my right hon. Friend agree that it would be appropriate, in the near future, to hold a debate on the success of the Government's job-creation policies?

Mrs. Beckett: I am delighted to hear of the success to which my hon. Friend draws attention. I am sure that his constituents will be appropriately impressed. Even though such a debate would be to discuss the success of the Government's employment and economic policies, I cannot undertake to find time for it.

Mr. John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings): Notwithstanding the debate on agriculture which the Leader of the House has announced, will she make time for a specific debate on planning and development in rural Britain? In the light of the reported Cabinet Office recommendation that would allow for the concreting over of prime agricultural land, and the amended planning guidelines, which will lead to an increase in car-parking charges and restrict car-parking places in market towns, to the detriment of rural car users and rural traders, the right hon. Lady will understand that such a debate would give the Government the opportunity to tell rural Britain what they have got against the countryside. It would also provide an opportunity for this side of the House—when I say this side of the House, I do not include those who sit on the Liberal Benches—to illustrate once again that we are the only champions here of rural Britain.

Mrs. Beckett: As I believe I said to the right hon. Member for North-West Hampshire at the outset, I am aware of reports that have appeared in the press. The hon. Gentleman will be aware that no publication has taken place, and the Government are not putting forward any proposals at this stage on which to focus such a debate. In due course there will be the publication of a rural White Paper and the publication of any analysis that has been undertaken by the performance innovation unit, once that work has been completed, to provide fresh thinking for the Government. I fear that I cannot undertake now to find time for the extra debate for which the hon. Gentleman asks.

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East): Will the Leader of the House try to arrange for the Prime Minister to explain to the House next week the action that he has taken about a serious matter, which is the pressure being placed on the hon. Member for Coventry, North-West (Mr. Robinson), the former Paymaster General, by members of the Prime Minister's Office, not to refer in his memoirs to the improper soliciting before the general election of £250,000 from him for the funding of the Prime Minister's private office? Is not the seriousness of these allegations added to by the fact that the person who made that solicitation is now the Prime Minister's press secretary?

Mrs. Beckett: I am not aware of any such concrete information. Consequently, there is no point in any suggestion that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister should refer in the House to reports that appear in the press, some of which sound increasingly far fetched.

Mr. Robert Syms (Poole): Will the Leader of the House put pressure on the Paymaster General to explain to the House the shocking revelation that 4 million people have been hit by a stealth tax with their national insurance contributions being increased? I did not see a great deal of evidence about this in the Red Book. I am sure that hon. Members on both sides of the House would like to explore the matter further, along with any other surprises and stealth taxes in the last Budget.

Mrs. Beckett: I am well aware that it is the instruction, perhaps, and certainly the preference, of Opposition Members to make constant references to stealth taxes. However, there seems to be a flaw in the argument on this occasion. First, something can hardly be described as being handled by stealth when the relevant information was available in a parliamentary answer of 15 March. I know that not everybody reads *Hansard* with great assiduity, but this cannot really be described as keeping something secret.

Secondly, not only is it not stealthy but it is not a tax. The Government's overall package of proposals, including the abolition of the entry fee on national insurance contributions, the introduction of the 10 per cent. starting rate of tax and the cutting of the basic rate, more than compensate for any rise in the upper earnings level. The hon. Gentleman's question was well phrased but, I fear, ill targeted.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Madam Speaker: Order. We shall now take the second statement.

Mitrokhin Archive

1.14 pm

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Jack Straw): With permission, Madam Speaker, I wish to make a statement about the Mitrokhin archive and other related issues.

On 13 September, when the House was in recess, I issued a written statement concerning the activities of the KGB and its agents which had been brought to light by the Mitrokhin archive. A copy of the statement has been placed in the Library of the House.

The archive material relates to activities spanning several decades, from 1917 up to the mid-1980s. A book by Mr. Mitrokhin and Professor Christopher Andrew drawing on the archive was published in September, prompting extensive media coverage. That in turn raised questions about how the archive had been used.

In the light of those questions, I announced on 13 September, with the agreement of the Prime Minister, that the Intelligence and Security Committee had been asked to conduct an inquiry into the policies and procedures used by the intelligence and security agencies in the handling of the Mitrokhin material. I am very grateful to the right hon. Member for Bridgwater (Mr. King), the chairman of the committee, and his colleagues for taking on that important work.

My right hon. Friends the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary and I will carefully consider the committee's report and ensure that as much as possible of it is made public. It may, however, be helpful to the House if I set out today some of the essential background.

Vasili Mitrokhin worked for almost 30 years in the foreign intelligence archive of the KGB where, at great risk to himself, he made notes of the contents of the highly secret files that passed through his hands. Over many years, he thus assembled a huge collection of material, some in manuscript and some typed.

In 1992, after Mr. Mitrokhin had approached the UK for help, our Secret Intelligence Service made arrangements to bring Mr. Mitrokhin and his family to this country, together with his archive. As there were no original KGB documents or copies of original documents, the material itself was of no direct evidential value, but it was of huge value for intelligence and investigative purposes.

Thousands of leads from Mr. Mitrokhin's material have been followed up worldwide. As a result, our intelligence and security agencies, in co-operation with allied Governments, have been able to put a stop to many security threats. Many unsolved investigations have been closed; many earlier suspicions confirmed; and some names and reputations have been cleared. Our intelligence and security agencies have assessed the value of Mr. Mitrokhin's material worldwide as immense.

Much of the media coverage in September concerned Mrs. Melita Norwood. My statement of 13 September summarised the history of the Security Service's knowledge of Mrs. Norwood spanning half a century, and the decisions that were taken in her case. The handling of her case will plainly form part of the inquiry that is now under way by the Intelligence and Security Committee. For the convenience of the House, however, I shall briefly summarise what I spelled out in September.

Mrs. Norwood was first vetted for access to Government secrets in 1945, when she worked for the British Non-Ferrous Metal Research Association. Although there were concerns about her in 1945, there were insufficient grounds at that time to warrant withholding her clearance for access to sensitive documents. Further investigation, however, led to her vetting clearance being revoked in 1951. She had not in practice had authorised access to Government secrets after 1949.

An extensive investigation of Mrs. Norwood in the 1960s led the Security Service to conclude that Mrs. Norwood had been a spy in the 1940s, but the service also concluded that there was no usable evidence that could be used in court to support a prosecution against her.

When Mr. Mitrokhin's notes of the KGB archive material became available to British intelligence in 1992, those notes further confirmed the suspicions already held about Mrs. Norwood's role as a spy. However, the Security Service again concluded that that material did not on its own constitute evidence that could be put to a UK court. Moreover, a judgment was made at that time that the material needed to remain secret for a period. There were many leads to more recent espionage to be followed up, particularly in the countries of a number of our close allies, which could have been jeopardised by premature disclosure. In summary, the key decisions in the Norwood case were made in 1945, 1951, 1966 and 1992–93.

The House will be aware that questions on prosecutions for espionage, as for any other alleged crime, are a matter for the prosecuting authorities and the Law Officers, not for the Home Secretary of the day.

As I made clear in my 13 September statement, the papers relating to Mrs. Norwood were submitted to the Attorney-General in the spring of this year, but he concluded that 1992 had represented the last opportunity for the authorities to proceed by way of a criminal investigation and possible prosecution, and that there was therefore no decision for him to take. I can, however, tell the House that, in the light of Mrs. Norwood's recent statements, the papers in this case are currently being studied again by the prosecuting authorities. I understand that four other cases, covering the Mitrokhin archive and related matters, are also being considered.

Let me now turn to the decision which was taken to make publicly available information from the Mitrokhin archive. Although the material has been in the custody of the Secret Intelligence Service since 1992, it was and remains the property of Mr. Mitrokhin. It was always his intention that the material should be published, but Mr. Mitrokhin agreed to co-operate with the major operation by our security and intelligence agencies, which I have outlined, to use the information first for investigative purposes.

I understand that, by 1996, investigations in the UK and elsewhere had reached a stage where it was possible to agree to start the process to meet Mr. Mitrokhin's wish to see the story revealed. Given the nature of his notes, it was concluded that this could best be done through an historical analysis.

In March 1996, the right hon. Sir Malcolm Rifkind QC, the then Foreign Secretary, agreed in principle that Professor Christopher Andrew of Cambridge university

should be invited to co-author, with Mr. Mitrokhin, an historical study of those aspects of the archive which cover KGB activities against the principal western states. I understand that Sir Malcolm agreed with the recommendation that an interdepartmental committee of officials should consider whether any of the information in the material needed to be withheld from publication. I also understand that Sir Malcolm imposed a condition that any allegations of criminal behaviour against individual persons should not be made public unless those individuals agreed or they had been prosecuted and convicted.

The Government were informed in late 1997 of the plan to publish the archive, and concurred. In 1998, the Secret Intelligence Service entered into confidentiality agreements with Professor Andrew and the publishers, Penguin. These were intended to ensure that still sensitive material was not published.

In the interests of national security, the Security Service has, over the years, carried out many investigations into allegations of espionage, based on intelligence which it has acquired. But allegations, or even good intelligence, are not proof of criminal activity. They are instead the basis for investigative work designed to prevent further damage to the interests of the country. They may in turn help in the end unearth evidence solid enough to put before a court.

The publication of news articles and television programmes about the Mitrokhin archive and the East German Stasi records has led some people to ask that the Government should publish a list of all those against whom allegations of spying and complicity with the KGB and the Stasi have been made. There are, however, compelling arguments against doing so which have been accepted by successive Governments.

First, it would be wrong to compromise the effectiveness of the intelligence and security agencies by revealing the cases on which they may be working. Above and beyond that consideration, it is a long-established rule of law that people are innocent until convicted in a court of law. We must not slide into trial by denunciation.

The Mitrokhin archive has raised some important issues which we are pursuing through the inquiry by the ISC, and we wait for its report to see what lessons can be learned. That must not obscure the important value of Mr. Mitrokhin's work to this country and to our allies. His archive is a unique testimony to a brave individual who worked alone against tyranny. It is also a reminder, if one were needed, of the continuing value of the work of our security and intelligence services.

Miss Ann Widdecombe (Maidstone and The Weald): I thank the Home Secretary, both for that statement and for his customary courtesy in letting me have an early sight of his remarks. However, I hope that he will kick the habit of revealing the full facts to the House only when the press and media have obliged him to do so.

Did the Home Secretary first know of the allegations against Melita Norwood in December 1998? If so, was he made aware of them in the context of likely publication? If he knew that those facts were to become public, why did he then not decide to inform Parliament rather than waiting for the press to do so? At what stage did he first inform the Prime Minister of what he knew about Melita Norwood? When he was told about Melita Norwood in December 1998, did he then ask whether there would be other revelations? If not, why not? If he did, was any indication given to him then of revelations against any other persons, including Dr. Pearson and Mr. Symonds?

The Home Secretary referred to the condition imposed by Sir Malcolm Rifkind. He said that Sir Malcolm

"imposed a condition that any allegations of criminal behaviour against individual persons should not be made public unless those individuals agreed"—

which I would have thought was rather unlikely—

"or they had been prosecuted and convicted."

In view of that condition, how does that square with what happened? Without going into details, can he tell me as a matter of fact whether the civil servant codenamed Hunt has been identified and, if so, what action is being considered, has been considered or has been ruled out?

We welcome the decision for the prosecuting authorities to look again at the case for prosecution in the light of the recent admissions, but can the Home Secretary explain how the decision not to prosecute, so far, squares with the decision to prosecute Shayler? What is the comparable basis? Can he confirm that age was not a factor in deciding whether to prosecute Mrs. Norwood, as that would stack up rather oddly with his decisions in the case of General Pinochet? Can he also confirm that one of those being considered for prosecution is Dr. Pearson? Is he aware of the serious allegation made by Dr. Gosling that he was drugged and robbed in Warsaw in the late 1970s at an academic conference apparently as a direct result of the activities of Dr. Pearson? Those are extremely serious allegations and I should be grateful for the Home Secretary's observations on them.

Although we also welcome the reference to an inquiry into the activities of the security services, will the Home Secretary now acknowledge that there was one activity that it got absolutely right—the decision to put the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament under surveillance? Among the revelations there are established links between CND and the Stasi. In that context, given the links between CND and members of the Government, will he reassure the House that no currently serving Minister had any contact with any of the persons named in the Mitrokhin archive?

Mr. Straw: When this matter first became public, the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe), in a commentary in the newspapers, demanded that we publish all the names of any more traitors living, like this one, without being prosecuted. She then said that we should be told the reasons why they had not been brought to justice unless there were clear security reasons for not doing so. What the right hon. Lady was seeking was for us to adopt a practice that would be wholly improper and which successive Governments have refused to follow: the denunciation of people against whom allegations had been made, without evidence being put before a court of law, and for their conviction to follow.

All the key decisions concerning the prosecution of people in relation to material in the Mitrokhin archive—key decisions concerning whether Mrs. Norwood should be prosecuted—were made under the right hon. Lady's Administration, not under this one. I am not privy to the decisions and considerations that they made, except that Sir Malcolm Rifkind authorised me to disclose that, in

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1996, he agreed with the recommendation that that material should be placed in the public domain by way of a book co-authored by Mr. Mitrokhin and Professor Christopher Andrew; that he agreed that an inter-departmental committee of officials should consider whether any of the material should be withheld from publication; and, above all, that he personally had imposed a condition that any allegations of criminal behaviour against individuals should not be made public unless those individuals agreed—I agree with the right hon. Lady that that is an unlikely prospect, but that was the condition that her right hon. and learned Friend imposed—or they had been prosecuted and convicted.

That is the appropriate way to proceed in this matter, as in any other. On individual questions about prosecution, I have already made clear what the right hon. Lady knows anyway: that decisions about the prosecution of any individual are not a matter for the Home Secretary of the day; they are a matter for the Law Officers and prosecuting authorities.

One important issue that arose in respect of the Mitrokhin case, particularly concerning Mrs. Norwood, was the fact that the decision not to prosecute Mrs. Norwood in 1992–93 was made within the Security Service, and the papers never went to the Law Officers. I believe that an important issue is raised there and I am certain that the right hon. Member for Bridgwater and his colleagues will want to follow that up in detail.

Mr. Hunt was identified by the Security Service. Investigations showed that he had no access to classified information and could not damage Britain's interest. If the right hon. Lady now asks me why he is not being considered for prosecution, the answer is simple: he is dead.

Mr. Tom King (Bridgwater): May I say, on behalf of my committee, that we welcome the invitation from the Prime Minister to carry out this inquiry? It is no secret that the committee would have wanted to carry out the inquiry anyway, with or without the invitation, because of the security and intelligence implications.

This is, however, a new approach to the handling of a security inquiry of this kind, made possible by the existence of the Intelligence and Security Committee. The committee believes that it is appropriate for it to accept this direct request from the Government to conduct such an inquiry, but it would also be proper to make clear to the House and the Government, as I have already sought to do to the Home Secretary, the basis on which the committee feels able to conduct this inquiry.

We shall look for the fullest co-operation from the Government, Ministers, Departments, agencies, members of previous Governments and the predecessor officials. We shall look for prompt responses to the requests that we shall make. In particular, we shall require access to all relevant papers that the committee may need, recognising that, in respect of this inquiry, it will be particularly germane to see advice to Ministers if the committee is to be able to make objective judgments on this matter.

We take note of the announcement that the possibility of prosecuting Mrs. Norwood is being considered, as are four other cases. That was not known to the committee when the original request was made. The committee has not had a chance to discuss that matter, and we shall need to consider its implications for our inquiry.

We welcome this invitation, and shall submit our report the Prime Minister. He will lay it before the House in the usual way, subject to any necessary deletions, after consultation, for national security reasons.

Mr. Straw: We are grateful to the right hon. Gentleman and his colleagues on the Intelligence and Security Committee for agreeing to undertake this work. I appreciate that, if his committee had not been asked by me, with the Prime Minister's agreement, to undertake this inquiry, it would have properly decided of its own volition to do so. That is why the Intelligence and Security Committee was established. I welcome its work and the fact that it strengthens the role that Ministers exercise in holding the agencies properly to account.

The right hon. Gentleman said that he hopes that this and previous Administrations will co-operate fully with the work of the committee. I can give him that undertaking in respect of this Administration, but he will appreciate that undertakings from the previous Administration are a matter for the former Prime Minister, his right hon. Friend the Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major).

The right hon. Gentleman will know that we are doing our best to ensure that there is a prompt response to the understandably long list of questions that the committee has already posed to my Department, the Foreign Office and the agencies.

The right hon. Gentleman gave me notice of his intention to raise the issue of access to all relevant papers. He will be aware that until now the usual arrangement for evidence to be given to his committee is by way of memorandum of evidence rather than by access to original papers. However, I take his point, particularly in relation to advice to Ministers. I am sympathetic to his view, and I am discussing the matter with my relevant right hon. Friends. I hope to provide a positive response to the committee as soon as possible.

Mr. Simon Hughes (Southwark, North and Bermondsey): I thank the Home Secretary for his statement. I also pay tribute to the security services and to the right hon. Member for Bridgwater (Mr. King) and his colleagues on the committee.

There is widespread revulsion about people in this country who spied either for the East German Stasi or for the Soviet Union's communists. However, I hope that the Home Secretary agrees with me that that does not mean that this country should have a policy of prosecuting all who spied, regardless of how long ago it happened, of the seriousness of what they did or of the public interest in whether a prosecution should go ahead. I shall therefore ask him not about individuals but about the more important issue of how decisions were made, as opposed to what those decisions were.

First, will the Home Secretary confirm that it is not right for decisions to prosecute to be taken either by officers of the security services or by Ministers of the day alone, acting on their own judgment? Does he accept that they should be made by someone who is independent of the security services and of government, and who can enjoy the confidence of the services, the Government, Parliament and the public?

Secondly, does the right hon. Gentleman accept that the test must always be whether a prosecution is likely to succeed and whether it is in the public interest now—rather than in the past—for a prosecution to go ahead?

Thirdly, given the report of the Select Committee on Home Affairs in June about the processes of Parliament, will the Government undertake to consider seriously making the security services' relationship with Parliament as democratically accountable as possible? They have a relationship with the Prime Minister and the Government: the Prime Minister appoints the committee. I think that the mood of the country is that they should come under the normal scrutiny of Parliament, as far as that is possible, by a Select Committee reporting to the House.

Finally, does the Home Secretary not agree that the current system is quaint, old-fashioned, clearly out of date and in need of reform? Three years ago, whatever his good intentions may have been, the Foreign Secretary of the day was able to decide that the first person to be entrusted with important information about espionage over several decades should be a Cambridge academic. Speaking as a Cambridge graduate, I might say that the history of Cambridge and spying made that even more incongruous. In any event, the first person to be entrusted with that information was a Cambridge academic, not Ministers, Government, Parliament or, indeed, the Home Secretary or the Prime Minister of the day.

Mr. Straw: I am grateful for what the hon. Gentleman said in general terms, and I congratulate him on his elevation to the post of Liberal Democrat spokesman on home affairs.

The hon. Gentleman asked me about decisions on whether or not to prosecute. As I have explained a number of times today, and will continue to explain, those are matters for the Law Officers rather than for Ministers, including the Home Secretary of the day. When the Solicitor-General, the Attorney-General and the Director of Public Prosecutions—whose status is independent in this context—make decisions about prosecution, they follow the criteria laid down in the CPS code, which takes into account above all the evidence as to whether a prosecution is likely to succeed, but also takes into account other relevant material and questions, including the question of the public interest.

In this country, there is no age bar on prosecution per se. The House will recall that not long ago someone who had allegedly committed crimes during the war was subject to a prosecution, although by the time he was prosecuted he was at an advanced age.

The hon. Gentleman asked about the democratic accountability of the security and intelligence agencies. It has been suggested from time to time, in the House and elsewhere, that those agencies should be subject to a Select Committee, rather than to the Intelligence and Security Committee—which, by the way, was established by the House of Commons and the other place under an Act of Parliament. I am openminded about the arguments, but I feel—perhaps we should debate the issue in due course—that we should take the advice of those who have the important job of ensuring the accountability of the agencies on behalf of Parliament, namely members of the ISC. When the original proposals were made, there was no oversight committee of any kind. Let me add that I find it difficult to work out how, in practice, a Select Committee could operate any differently from the way in which the ISC is operating. [HON. MEMBERS: "It would be appointed by the House."] Let us be clear about this. Members of the ISC are appointed in exactly the same way as members of Select Committees: they are appointed as a result of discussions between the forces of darkness in the usual channels.

The hon. Gentleman ended by suggesting that it was quaint and old-fashioned that the first people who knew about the activities of Mitrokhin knew about them as a result of the publication of a volume co-authored by Mr. Mitrokhin and Professor Andrew. I make no reference to whether Professor Andrew is an academic.

Let me say two things. First, this is an issue on which the House, as well as Ministers, will wish to hear the considered judgment of the Intelligence and Security Committee, and I am certainly not going to prejudge its conclusions. Secondly, as I said in my statement, it should be borne in mind that the Mitrokhin archives are the property of Mr. Mitrokhin. The idea that has been floating around that somehow Ministers, or the agencies, could of their own volition have made their own decisions about whether the material should have surfaced, and about the form in which it should have surfaced, is wholly unreal.

The right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald raised a question with me. I apologise to her for the fact that I did not answer it at the time. She asked why, given the condition that Sir Malcolm Rifkind had imposed on the non-publication of names where people had not been the subject of prosecution and conviction, the name none the less came out. My understanding—it will be the subject, I hope, of consideration by the ISC—is that the publishers were not going to name Mrs. Norwood either until she had given what amounted to a confession statement to the BBC and to other reporters. It was only at that stage that her name was made public.

Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours (Workington): May I answer the Home Secretary's question by saying that a parliamentary Select Committee has all the protection of parliamentary privilege, which the ISC does not have?

As a member of that committee, may I say that we all take our duties very seriously? We want the inquiry to work. Committee members must have access to all the papers that we believe are relevant to our inquiry. My right hon. Friend said that he would "look sympathetically" at the question that was asked by the chairman of the committee, but we need a bit more than that. We need a guarantee that we will have access to every document that we believe is necessary for the inquiry's success.

Mr. Straw: I thank my hon. Friend for seeking to answer the question that was raised. As I have said, I am openminded on the question of a Select Committee, but I return to the point: what practical difference would it make, given the specific nature of the work of the Intelligence and Security Committee, which by definition inquires not into matters that are in the public domain but into matters that necessarily have to remain secret?

On my hon. Friend's question about access to all papers, the right hon. Member for Bridgwater spoke of all relevant papers. That is the key phrase that we will look at. My hon. Friend will be aware that the arrangements are that the committee itself does not have direct access

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to some operational files, but that there is an investigator to work on behalf of the committee, if it so wishes—access can be granted in that way.

As I understand it, the principal concern of committee members is that they should have access to the advice to Ministers and to relevant material in that area. I have already said that I fully understand the case that my hon. Friend makes. I hope to give a positive answer as soon as possible. I am also fully aware that, if I fail to give an answer that is satisfactory to committee members, they will make their dissatisfaction known publicly.

Sir Nicholas Lyell (North-East Bedfordshire): Will the Home Secretary please try to clarify several unclear matters in relation to the question of prosecution, or possible prosecution, of Mrs. Melita Norwood? He will recall that the book describes Mrs. Norwood as the most important KGB spy ever and alleges that she passed on very valuable atomic secrets at a highly sensitive time. On 13 September, he said in his statement that

"the Security Service were then currently considering whether to recommend the prosecution of Mrs. Norwood"—

that was in December 1998. Was any detailed evaluation of the case for prosecution carried out; if so, by whom, who took decisions on the matter, and when and what were they?

Mr. Dennis Skinner (Bolsover): What was the right hon. and learned Gentleman doing in 1992?

Mr. Straw: As I made clear in my statement on 13 September and have made clear again today, the principal decision not to proceed to prosecute Mrs. Norwood was made in 1992–93. I can answer the sotto voce question asked by my hon. Friend the Member for Bolsover (Mr. Skinner). The answer is that the papers never went to the right hon. and learned Gentleman, the former Attorney-General, because the decision not to prosecute was made within the Security Service. As I said, that raises important questions about who should or should not make decisions on prosecution in such cases.

I look forward to the advice and conclusions of the Intelligence and Security Committee on that matter, for which there is no hard and fast rule. In some cases, there is no evidence to put before anyone, so that it would simply be a waste of time to attempt to bring a prosecution. However, in cases such as this one, the ISC may well conclude that, when such great suspicions have been held over many years, decisions should be made by the Law Officers and the prosecuting authorities, not by officials within the Security Service—who have great skills in one sphere, but are not the ones who should make the final decision on such cases.

As for what followed in 1998, I merely refer the former Attorney-General to the next paragraph of my statement of 13 September 1999, which states that the Attorney-General had decided that, on the basis of the evidence that was then before him,

"1992 represented the last opportunity for the authorities to proceed by way of a criminal investigation/possible prosecution".

In spring 1999, the Attorney-General therefore concluded that there was no decision for him to make.

Mr. Mike Gapes (Ilford, South): Does the Home Secretary agree that a person is not necessarily guilty of something simply because his or her name appears in a handwritten document? In recent months, has not particularly *The Sunday Times* attempted to use the issue in a general smear against perfectly innocent Labour politicians and advisers? Is it not about time we heard the names of some Conservatives who—in the past 20, 30 or 40 years—happened to meet Soviet diplomats?

Does my right hon. Friend agree that simply because a Soviet diplomat or agent chooses to write a report that is sent to Moscow and includes the name of a perfectly innocent person, that person is not necessarily a KGB agent? Is it not time we stopped the witch hunting by the shadow Home Secretary, who is trying to use the issue in a general attack on all those who fought for democracy and freedom in central and eastern Europe and opposed the tyranny of Stalinism?

Mr. Straw: My hon. Friend raises an important issue, which is whether we go in for trial by denunciation.

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): Ha!

Mr. Straw: The right hon. Gentleman scoffs. However, in September, the shadow Home Secretary proposed that I should come to the House and reveal all the names of those who were traitors living freely who had not been prosecuted—not those who had been prosecuted—unless there were clear security reasons for not doing so. To do that would be wholly improper, and would amount to conviction by denunciation. Moreover, I tell the shadow Home Secretary—who has made a great virtue of the fact that she would never say anything in the House that she would not say outside it—that if anyone, from the Home Secretary downwards, were to go outside the House and utter a list of those who were to be denounced as traitors without any evidence to convict them in a court of law, he or she would be subject to huge damages for defamation in our courts, and quite rightly so.

Mr. A. J. Beith (Berwick-upon-Tweed): May I endorse, on behalf of Liberal Democrat Members, something that the Home Secretary said in his statement—that Mr. Mitrokhin was a very courageous man, who, over many years, did what he did because he was increasingly disgusted by what, from his unique vantage point, he saw going on in that evil regime? That fact should not be forgotten in these discussions. Does the Home Secretary also recognise that, were the ISC a Select Committee, it would have to be given the same additional power that the committee has explicitly asked him for—namely, of seeing advice to Ministers, which is central to the matter of what Ministers knew and when they knew it?

Mr. Straw: I entirely endorse what the right hon. Gentleman says about Mr. Mitrokhin's courage. It required huge courage to do what he did. I do not doubt that a great many other people working in the KGB during that long period were pretty disgusted with the work that they were asked to engage in, but very few of them had the courage and tenacity to work, as Mr. Mitrokhin did, to record a huge amount of what was passing across his desk and then to make himself known to intelligence agents in Moscow and have himself and his family brought out at considerable risk. I pay tribute again to his courage and acknowledge the benefits that the whole of the west has received as a result of his disclosures.

As I told the right hon. Member for Bridgwater, I fully understand the point about advice to Ministers and have great sympathy with it. I hope to give the committee an answer that is satisfactory to it as soon as possible. I am sure that if I give the committee an unsatisfactory answer we shall hear all about it.

Mr. Kevin Barron (Rother Valley): The Intelligence and Security Committee—on which I serve—will be breaking new ground by taking on the investigation, as will Parliament. As I understand it, such issues of national security have normally been dealt with by the security commissioners, who have met in secret from time to time and have been able to have all papers in front of them so that they can see everything that has taken place and report whatever is relevant. Without access to all the relevant papers, I do not know how Parliament or my right hon. Friends the Prime Minister and the Home Secretary can ask our committee to do justice to such an inquiry.

Mr. Straw: Of course I understand that point. Were we to offer a paraphrase and memorandum of advice to Ministers rather than the plain text, questions would inevitably be raised about what we had to hide. I am sure that the same applies to Ministers in the previous Administration. My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary and I have nothing to hide. The gravamen of the memorandums has already been made public. However, I understand my hon. Friend's point and I shall do my best to ensure that there is a positive response to the committee.

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East): Is there not a slight contradiction in the Home Secretary paying tribute to the courage and tenacity of Mr. Mitrokhin in one breath and his hon. Friend the Member for Ilford, South (Mr. Gapes) then saying that Mr. Mitrokhin's mere handwritten notes of what he saw in the files are not to be believed? Will the Home Secretary join me in acknowledging not only the bravery of Mr. Mitrokhin, but the resourcefulness of the Secret Intelligence Service in having recognised the value of what he was offering and having safely removed it and him from the Soviet Union?

Does the Home Secretary accept that handwritten notes are not the only factor in deciding whether the lady spy should be prosecuted, because she was mentioned in the Venona intercepts in telegram 1413 from Moscow to London on 16 September 1945? Will he answer the point put to him by my right hon. Friend the shadow Home Secretary: is it not clear that at least one senior elected member of the national council of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, Professor Vic Allen, was a Stasi agent? His name has been widely published and he has not resorted to the libel action that he would have undertaken were he innocent.

Is there not a danger that the Government will seem to have a special interest in covering up issues of subversion in CND, given that 133 Labour Members of Parliament were members of parliamentary Labour CND at its height, including the Prime Minister, the Foreign Secretary and the Home Secretary?

Finally, does the Home Secretary now acknowledge that MI5 was right to keep an eye on CND in the 1980s, because at least one Stasi spy was operating within it? Was not the only failure of MI5 that it did not spot him when everybody knew that Vic Allen was a Stalinist?

Mr. Straw: There is no contradiction in information being contained in the Mitrokhin archive which may assert one thing and a decision then being made not to prosecute. The Mitrokhin archive contains a summary—in some cases a complete, if secondary, account—of what was in the archives that may or may not have been accurate, and that must be assessed.

It is well known that, in some cases, KGB agents and informers were more concerned with justifying their expense accounts than with providing accurate information. Such works of fiction could not in any sense form the basis of a prosecution, still less a denunciation.

Of course I applaud the resourcefulness of the Secret Intelligence Service. Without that resourcefulness—and without the courage of the SIS and its agents—the Mitrokhin archive would not have been made public.

I was asked about the alleged naming of Mrs. Norwood in the Venona book, published earlier this year under the pseudonym Nigel West—better known to this House as Rupert Allason, the former Member of Parliament for Torbay. As a result of information in that book, and in another called "The Haunted Wood"—both of which had fairly small sales, I believe—BBC researchers, working alongside those who were putting together what became the Mitrokhin archive book, worked out who Mrs. Norwood was.

The hon. Member for New Forest, East (Dr. Lewis) referred to CND. I am not privy, by definition, to the decisions made by previous Administrations—Labour and Conservative—in respect of work covering subversion by the security services. However, I understand that it was never the practice of the security services to study a trade union or an organisation. Their concern was to study people who they believed represented a threat to national security, whether or not they were in particular organisations.

As for Mr. Vic Allen, I am astonished that people are now getting excited about him. I happened to be at Leeds university at the same time as Mr. Vic Allen, who was, I believe, a lecturer. It was obvious beyond peradventure that he was an apologist for the East German regime and all its works, and we did not need the Stasi to tell us that 30 years later.

Mr. David Winnick (Walsall, North): The hon. Member for New Forest, East (Dr. Lewis) knows about spying because he spied on the Labour party in the 1970s during the Reg Prentice affair.

As far as Mrs. Norwood is concerned, would not the most appropriate punishment for her—since she has reiterated her commitment to communism—be to invite her to live in one of the four remaining communist countries so that she could see the wonders of the system on whose behalf she was willing to spy against her own country and our democracy?

Should not we be very careful indeed about certain names, bearing in mind the fact that only four years ago Michael Foot was described as a Soviet spy? Michael Foot has been a lifelong anti-communist and resigned

[Mr. David Winnick]

from Tribune when it went through a brief period of fellow travelling just before the second world war. So ludicrous was the claim against him that the matter was settled out of court and he received, as I understand it, substantial damages. Is not that a lesson, showing that while we should certainly expose genuine spies—whether they spied for Nazi Germany or for the Soviet Union—we should be very careful indeed not to have a witch hunt against people such as Michael Foot who have exposed communism and its tyranny at every opportunity?

Mr. Straw: I entirely agree. The shadow Home Secretary wrote a piece in the *Sunday Express* on 25 July, headlined "MPs' privilege not a coward's charter". We would all agree with that. It is crucial that we should not abuse our privilege to make unsubstantiated allegations against individuals, against which they can have no redress in court. I am glad that the allegations against Michael Foot were made outside the House and were the subject of a successful action for defamation. Whether the allegations come from the left or the right, resorting to smears—unsubstantiated allegations against individuals—simply demeans our political debate.

Mrs. Jacqui Lait (Beckenham): The Home Secretary referred to the positive vetting of Mrs. Norwood in the late 1940s when she worked for the British Non-Ferrous Metal Research Association. As someone who used to work for the Chemical Industries Association—whose initials are peculiarly appropriate in this context—I am confused, because I think he said that the security services positively vet only people whom they suspect. He seems to be shaking his head, which makes it even more interesting. Can he please assure me that nobody who works for a trade association now is routinely positively vetted? If such people are vetted, to which categories of trade associations and to which level of staff does that apply?

Mr. Straw: It has been a practice of long standing that people who have access to Government secrets, whether they work within Government or in the private sector, are subject to positive vetting. As someone with experience of positive vetting under the previous Government, I can tell the hon. Lady that it is not a process of which the subject is unaware. Quite rightly, the person concerned is interviewed thoroughly.

Mrs. Norwood was first vetted in 1945 because she was working for the British Non-Ferrous Metal Research Association which, despite its rather prosaic title and its cover as a trade association, was at the time undertaking secret work for the then Government's department of scientific and industrial research. For her to have any access to the secrets on which she would be working she had first to be positively vetted. Even in 1945, the Security Service, which had information relating to her that went back some years before that, raised doubts about her communist associations. It was very concerned about those associations, but further investigation by the service and the police together did not substantiate the doubts and she was given clearance for access to sensitive documents.

As I have already reminded the House, Mrs. Norwood did not in practice have further access from 1949—although it is accepted that a good deal of damage was done before that—and her clearance was withdrawn in 1951.

Standards and Privileges

Motion made, and Question proposed,

That this House—

(i) approves the Tenth and Eleventh Reports of the Committee on Standards and Privileges (HC 747);

(ii) accordingly suspends Mr. Don Touhig, Member for Islwyn, from the service of the House for three sitting days; and

(iii) accordingly suspends Kali Mountford, Member for Colne Valley, from the service of the House for five sitting days.—[*Mrs. Beckett.*]

2.10 pm

Mr. Robert Sheldon (Ashton-under-Lyne): The House is considering today a motion for the approval of the 10th and 11th reports of the Committee on Standards and Privileges, which were agreed in July.

Our inquiry resulted from a report by the Social Security Committee that my hon. Friend the Member for Islwyn (Mr. Touhig), who was then Parliamentary Private Secretary to the Chancellor of the Exchequer, had been given a photocopy of a draft report on child benefit. The Committee had been unable to discover how this leak had come about and asked that the matter be placed before the Select Committee on Standards and Privileges. The Liaison Committee, which I also chair, considered that the leak represented substantial interference with the work of the Social Security Committee. We have set out in our 10th report the circumstances surrounding the leak, and I shall summarise them for the benefit of the House.

The Social Security Committee met on 10 February to consider a draft report on child benefit. It was agreed during that meeting not to proceed to formal consideration, but to consider a revised draft at a future meeting. The Committee Chairman, the hon. Member for Roxburgh and Berwickshire (Mr. Kirkwood), invited Committee members to ask Ministers to send Treasury officials to give evidence, and the desirability of enlisting my hon. Friend the Member for Islwyn as an intermediary was discussed.

My hon. Friend told the Committee on Standards and Privileges that he was approached by two, or possibly three, members of the Social Security Committee in the course of 9 and 10 February. He asked the first hon. Member who spoke to him for a copy of the draft report so that he could understand the problem better. He received the copy at about tea time on 9 February and read parts of it later the same day. He then had conversations with special advisers at the Treasury about the Treasury's refusal to give evidence before the Committee, but did not discuss the draft report with them or with anyone else. The Treasury contacted the Clerk of the Committee on 11 February to say that it had been agreed that officials should appear on 24 February.

My hon. Friend told us that, in retrospect, he bitterly regretted having asked for a copy of the draft report and apologised unreservedly. He took full responsibility for that action and did not feel that he could name the person who had given him the draft report unless that person gave permission, which he or she had declined to do. Therefore, we concluded that my hon. Friend had to accept the consequences of both initiating the leak by asking for a copy of the draft report and refusing to answer a question put to him by the Committee.

We recommended that my hon. Friend should apologise to the House by means of a personal statement—which he has done—and that he should be suspended from the service of the House for three sitting days. This recommendation took account of several mitigating circumstances that are outlined in our 10th report; we would otherwise have recommended a longer period of suspension. We had asked every member of the Social Security Committee whether he or she had given my hon. Friend a copy of the draft report: yes or no. All of them said no, so we did not know the identity of the leaker when we agreed the 10th report on 20 July. We noted that the leaker's failure to own up cast a cloud unfairly over the other members of the Social Security Committee and could only damage the Committee's standing in the House.

Before that report was published, my hon. Friend the Member for Colne Valley (Kali Mountford) realised that the response that she had made to the Committee's inquiries had not been accurate. She wrote to me on 23 July, stating:

"I regret to say that I did allow . . . sight of my copy of the draft child benefit report to Don Touhig MP and I offer my full apologies to you for having done so."

The full text of the letter appears in our 11th report.

We welcome the decision of my hon. Friend the Member for Colne Valley to come forward, which has cleared the other members of the Social Security Committee of suspicion. The Committee on Standards and Privileges noted that my hon. Friend is not an experienced Member of Parliament and had been absent for much of the Session through illness. None the less, she aggravated her original serious offence by denying responsibility. The Committee recommended unanimously that she should apologise to the House by means of a personal statement—which she has done—and should be suspended from the service of the House for five sitting days.

It is, of course, of the greatest importance that the work of Select Committees investigating the operation of Government Departments is not obstructed by outside interference. The premature release of a draft report is a most serious matter because outside involvement with the report's conclusions might be attempted at that stage. If there were any suspicion that such practices existed, the standing of our whole Select Committee system could be questioned. We have made these recommendations with those considerations in mind.

It is a matter of great regret to me personally that I should be speaking for the second time this Session recommending that the House should agree to suspend from its service fellow hon. Members whom I know well and respect. However, the Committee agreed unanimously that the penalties were appropriate given the gravity of the offences and the way in which leaks such as this destroy essential trust among Committee members. I should also put on record the fact that my hon. Friend the Member for Islwyn played a valuable part in the decision of my hon. Friend the Member for Colne Valley to admit her responsibility for, and involvement in, the leak. Therefore, I ask the House to uphold our conclusions and to approve the 10th and 11th reports of the Committee.

2.17 pm

Sir Patrick Cormack (South Staffordshire): This is a sad occasion for the House—debates of this sort always are. I begin by underlining the fact that the Select Committee on Standards and Privileges is representative of the whole House and that the reports we are debating were unanimous. I hope that I speak for the whole House when I thank the right hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Mr. Sheldon), who has given long and conspicuous service to the House, for the work that he has done since he became Committee Chairman. He has an onerous responsibility, which he shares with his colleagues and which he discharges with great distinction. We are grateful to him.

I do not want to speak at any length today—certainly not about the two hon. Members involved. I do not have the pleasure of knowing personally the hon. Member for Colne Valley (Kali Mountford). I do know the hon. Member for Islwyn (Mr. Touhig), whom I consider to be an honourable Member of Parliament. He has acknowledged that he made a mistake, as has the hon. Lady, and they have made their apologies to the House. I believe that the House should approve the report and leave it at that as far as those two hon. Members are concerned.

However, this is a serious episode which contains some important lessons for hon. Members on both sides of the House. The comments of the right hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne about the standing of Select Committees are extremely important. Since their establishment in departmental form some 20 years ago this December, Select Committees have performed an important function. However, the Select Committee is only as valuable as its own dispassionate impartiality will allow it to be. If a Select Committee or any of its members views the role of that Committee as being somehow to aid and abet Government, they are misinterpreting its function. It is the job of the Select Committee to hold the Executive to account, to scrutinise and, where appropriate, to criticise. If there is, or there appears to be, collusion between Government and those on the Select Committee, the whole system is undermined.

One can understand that new Members in particular feel a certain degree of over-exuberance or a certain desire to please the Government of the day. Parliamentary Private Secretaries, who occupy a sort of political no-man's-land—they are not Ministers, nor are they Back-Bench Members in the absolute sense of the word because they have a quasi-governmental position—sometimes find their loyalties stretched. Anybody who has been a PPS knows that to be the case. From 1970 to 1973 I was one myself—

The Secretary of State for Scotland (Dr. John Reid): With enormous distinction.

Sir Patrick Cormack: Yes, indeed, with enormous distinction, as the right hon. Gentleman says.

The fact is that when a Member serves on a Select Committee, he or she must put that duty before all others and when a Member is a PPS, he or she must recognise that it is important that Select Committee members should not in any sense have the impartiality of their inquiry undermined or attacked in any way.

I hope that the Leader of the House, who perfectly understandably moved the motion formally, will respond to the debate. After all, the Government have a role here. They must resist the temptation of either soliciting goods to which they have no entitlement or misusing stolen property if they receive it. Without wanting to expand too

[Sir Patrick Cormack]

much on those points—or you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, would rightly call me to order—I would say that there has been a disturbing proliferation of leaks of one sort or another since 1 May 1997 and several of those have involved the work of Select Committees.

In the coming Session, we should all consider the way in which Select Committees are appointed. If their impartiality is to be absolutely beyond question, we must examine their appointment and the role of Government in the nomination of their members. I personally should like a much more independent Committee of Selection deciding who should serve on Select Committees by looking at the credentials of the Members who apply. We want Members nominated to a Select Committee because of their particular expertise or interest in the subject concerned, rather than because they have been nominated by the Whips' Office. *[Laughter.]* The Secretary of State may laugh, but that is what has happened.

I am aware that my hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield (Mr. Winterton) is probably sitting behind me. I am also aware that if he is behind me physically, he will be behind me enthusiastically in the points that I seek to make. My hon. Friend was indeed the victim in a previous incarnation. He had my support then as I know I have his support in making these points now.

It is never too late for a sinner to come to repentance. The fact that we may have appointed Select Committees in certain ways in the past, regardless of who was in government, does not mean that we should not look at the system afresh. My right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition is determined to restore the primacy of Parliament, the centrality of this Chamber and the independence of the instruments that it devises, even if that means temporary discomfiture in future to a Conservative Government. Given the present Government's enormous majority, the Leader of the House could, without any real danger to herself or her colleagues, consider whether it might not be better in the service of this House and of parliamentary democracy to have Select Committees appointed in the way that I suggest.

I do not wish you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, to rule me out of order. These points are relevant and have been underlined in the reports to the House by the Chairman of the Select Committee on Standards and Privileges. We should thank him for what he has done because if any Member has been prepared to be wholly impartial and to put his duties to this House before any others, it is the right hon. Gentleman. We owe him a debt of gratitude for that. His Committee has done the right thing. Although it is always sad when Members are suspended from the service of the House, it is right on this occasion that they should be. We support this report.

2.25 pm

Mr. Malcolm Bruce (Gordon): I endorse a number of the comments made by the hon. Member for South Staffordshire (Sir P. Cormack) and the right hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Mr. Sheldon). Although this is a short debate, I hope that it will be seen to be serious and instructive for the conduct of the House and its business.

I am satisfied from what I have read in the report and from conversations with my hon. Friend the Member for Roxburgh and Berwickshire (Mr. Kirkwood), the Chairman of the Select Committee on Social Security, that there was a genuine attempt by a PPS to be helpful—indeed, it turned out to be helpful, although the request for a Committee paper was mistaken and he has accepted that it was wrong. There was over-enthusiasm on the part of an inexperienced new Member who was also trying to be helpful, but nevertheless was in clear breach of the rules as stated in the copy of the report that she had before her, namely that it should not be disclosed to anybody other than members of the Committee. They have apologised and on the basis of this report, they are being recommended for an appropriate disciplinary measure. They have made statements to the House and we can now draw a line under the matter.

This Parliament is characterised by many new Members and a Government with a large majority, and this matter points to the need for Members to recognise that their job is not just to uphold the Government, which in the case of Labour Members they were elected to support, but that they have a responsibility to Parliament. Indeed, Parliament has a responsibility to call the Executive, whoever they are, effectively to account.

In most cases, the work of a Select Committee is not partisan; there is a genuine attempt to seek consensus. Select Committees probe the effectiveness of Government policy and, in some cases, try to prevent the Government from making mistakes by ensuring that policy is properly scrutinised through calling expert witnesses and questioning the practicalities of Government policy. Clearly, it is not helpful if Government members of Select Committees see protecting the Government as overriding their responsibility to Parliament and the quality of legislation.

Dr. Norman A. Godman (Greenock and Inverclyde): I share the hon. Gentleman's views about the need for disinterestedness, impartiality and independence from Government of all Select Committee members. He may recall that, many years ago when we both served on the Scottish Affairs Committee, we consistently and persistently argued the need for such high levels of conduct to the Conservative members who leaked to the then Government so disgracefully.

Mr. Bruce: That is true, but to be fair to the hon. Member for South Staffordshire, whose personal integrity I accept, his comments were sincere. The fact that, in the past, Governments and their supporters have behaved disgracefully should not be used as an excuse or justification for a Government of a different persuasion to behave in that way today. I am grateful to the right hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne for making it clear how strongly the Committee feels. I hope that those elected at the last general election, not just those on the Government side, will accept that their responsibility to Parliament must always override their loyalty to the Government of the day.

It is perhaps unfortunate that Governments tend to put Members on a Select Committee to see how they do. One notices how many Members serve for only a short time on a Select Committee. Indeed, I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Roxburgh and Berwickshire has complained about the rapid turnover in the membership of his Committee as, indeed, has the Chairman of the Treasury Committee. Select Committees are seen as a recruiting ground for talent.

The problem is that there is a conflict in the mind of members of Select Committees as to whether their job on the Committee is to please the Government and secure promotion, or to serve Parliament and improve the quality of legislation. It might help if a Government with such a large majority accepted that it would be a good idea to ensure that Committee membership was balanced by experience and parliamentary responsibility, and was not only a recruitment and training ground for Ministers which kept hon. Members quiescent and compliant. A Government with a majority of this size surely do not need quislings on Select Committees to conduct their business—although I am not suggesting that anybody has behaved in that manner.

The serious point is that Select Committees do some of the most effective and respected work of this House. Select Committee reports are read with interest and are seen to be objective. I know that Committee Chairmen strive to secure consensus, but their ability to do so effectively is dependent on the Government majority in those Committees recognising their responsibility to question the Executive and call them reasonably and responsibly to account, and I suggest to the Leader of the House that that is in the best interests of the Government.

On that basis, it is helpful that the report has come to the House, and I hope that many Members who have not been in the House for long will realise that they have a genuine responsibility to consider and will not make similar mistakes.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House—

(i) approves the Tenth and Eleventh Reports of the Committee on Standards and Privileges (HC 747);

(ii) accordingly suspends Mr. Don Touhig, Member for Islwyn, from the service of the House for three sitting days; and

(iii) accordingly suspends Kali Mountford, Member for Colne Valley, from the service of the House for five sitting days.

Procedural Consequences of Devolution

[Relevant document: The Second Report of the Scottish Affairs Committee, Session 1997–98, on The Operation of Multi-Layer Democracy, HC 460.]

2.31 pm

The President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons (Mrs. Margaret Beckett): I beg to move,

That this House takes note of the Fourth Report from the Procedure Committee on The Procedural Consequences of Devolution (HC 185), and the First Special Report from the Committee (HC 814) containing the Government Response.

The Government will table motions to agree with the Committee's recommendations on questions to Ministers, Select Committees and the Advocate General for Scotland. Those will appear on the Order Paper and will be put to the House on Monday.

I am very grateful, as I am sure the whole House is, to the Procedure Committee for its careful study of the consequences for this House of the devolution legislation that we passed in the previous Session. The Committee has examined the situation as it developed and advised the House of the changes that we need or may need to make. It has drawn on the experience of many senior Members of the House who chair the Select and Grand Committees most closely affected by devolution. That collective wisdom is distilled in the report that was published after the elections in Scotland and Wales and before power was transferred.

The Committee's report sets out four common principles that the Government commend to the House. They are, in short, that parliamentary procedures should not be called in aid to undermine the devolution settlement agreed by Parliament; that there should be minimal procedural barriers to close co-operation between MPs and Members of the devolved legislatures; that all MPs have an interest in matters that remain the responsibility of the UK Parliament and that there should be consistency in the way that the House deals with devolved legislatures. That all chimes well with the Government's approach. We want devolution to be a success and we shall encourage measures to ensure smooth functioning of that process. In addition, we believe that although some procedural change at Westminster may become necessary, that should evolve in the light of experience.

This is not the first debate on the consequences for Westminster of devolution and I strongly suspect that it will not be the last. Today we are putting forward some proposals for change, but others may become necessary when we see how relations between this House and the Scottish Parliament and the National Assembly for Wales develop in practice. I welcome the Procedure Committee's intention to keep those matters under review and to report again to the House.

Central to the devolution settlement is the fact that there are now some matters for which UK Ministers are no longer responsible. That must mean that they will be unable to respond to questions and debates on such matters in Parliament. That has happened before; for example, when nationalised industries were privatised. On this occasion, the Committee has put forward a resolution defining the subjects on which questions should no longer

[Mrs. Margaret Beckett]

be tabled. I accept that, in the end, that will depend on the answering practices adopted by Ministers, but the resolution will give the House a firm basis for asking questions.

I accept that even those who sat through all the debates on each of the devolution Bills may, on occasion, lack instant recall of which subjects are now devolved and which are not. We have, therefore, commissioned a paper for Members and peers which summarises the division between reserved and devolved matters under the devolution legislation. As soon as that is ready, it will be placed in the Library. It does not seek to be a definitive statement—that is ultimately a matter of statute law—but I hope that it will assist colleagues in understanding where the border lies.

We also accept the recommendation that Scottish questions be reduced to 30 minutes, subject to discussions through the usual channels about the rota for oral questions. At this stage, no change is planned for Welsh questions, which are in any case shorter.

As the Procedure Committee points out, the remit of the Scottish Affairs Committee and the Welsh Affairs Committee will also be affected by devolution. In one respect, the role of the two Select Committees will change to reflect the reduced responsibilities of the two Secretaries of State, but in another it will broaden to include liaison with the Scottish Parliament and the National Assembly for Wales.

The Procedure Committee recommended that the operation of the Grand Committees be suspended during the experiment with sittings in Westminster Hall. We have always accepted that some adjustment to the procedures of those Committees would be necessary, but I am reluctant at this early stage to dispense with what is still a useful procedure.

There will continue to be important Welsh and Scottish matters that need to be debated in the House. Whether they are debated on the Floor, in Westminster Hall or in a Grand Committee can depend on circumstances. I do not want to close off one option so soon, particularly before we have seen how the Westminster Hall experiment works. That experiment is designed to provide time for additional debates on subjects that are not usually covered elsewhere. If part of that time is taken up with debates that would otherwise be held in the Grand Committees, the scope for such additional debates will be restricted from the outset.

Mr. Robert Maclennan (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross): In the light of the fact that the Government do not accept the Procedure Committee's recommendation for the Grand Committees, will the right hon. Lady give us examples of circumstances in which she thinks that it would be valuable to have debates in the Grand Committees?

Mrs. Beckett: The recommendation would not be of much value to the House, as I have already said. The matter will have to be considered in differing circumstances, but the House may take the view that there is virtue in airing a matter in a Grand Committee. If we ultimately find that the route is not needed, we can reconsider the matter. It is a little early to decide to close off that option and to do so would conflict with the establishment of the Westminster Hall sittings.

Mr. Dafydd Wigley (Caernarfon): Perhaps I should declare an interest as an elected Member of the National Assembly for Wales. The situation in Wales is somewhat different from that in Scotland, and it is felt that the Welsh Grand Committee may well have a role, albeit a different role, in handling matters for which there is specific legislation for Wales. For example, if the Local Government (Wales) Act 1994 needed to be amended, the Grand Committee could be a fast-track procedure so that we would not have an inordinate wait in the queue for time in the House. The Committee would be able to make relatively minor changes needed by the National Assembly for Wales.

Mrs. Beckett: The right hon. Gentleman reinforces the point that I have just made: there can be a continuing role for the Grand Committees. He suggests a legislative role. The Committees could also deal with the relevant annual estimates. No doubt, different examples will spring to the mind of other Members. I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for confirming our view that the Grand Committees are an option that should not be closed to the House.

Mr. John Swinney (North Tayside): In the Government's response to the Procedure Committee's recommendation on the Grand Committees, they suggest that the Committees may meet to discuss reserved matters. The guidance given by the Clerks of the House on other aspects of the Procedure Committee's report suggests that Ministers can deal only with issues for which they have responsibility. It is hard to imagine circumstances on a reserved issue that may come before a Grand Committee where, for example, the Secretary of State for Scotland may appear, where he would have direct ministerial responsibility. Can the Leader the House give us an example of such circumstances?

Mrs. Beckett: Other Ministers might appear before the Grand Committee; it need not be the Secretary of State for Scotland. That depends on the matters that are before the Committee. However, I believe that the hon. Gentleman is again reinforcing the case that there is a potential continuing role for the Grand Committee. In this debate, we are merely arguing that it is too early to close off that route.

The House may reach a different view in the fullness of time. We may decide that there are other routes and that this route is no longer needed, but we consider that it is too early to decide. Indeed, I understand that the Scottish National party said in evidence to the Procedure Committee that there was virtue in that procedure remaining available to the House.

The Procedure Committee made another interesting recommendation in its report—that Bills that could be certified as relating to only one of the four parts of the United Kingdom should have their Second Reading debate in a Standing Committee. I am certainly in favour of holding the Second Reading debate of less controversial Bills, by agreement, in a Second Reading Committee, but I consider that that should depend on the subject of the Bill, not on whether it relates solely to England, Scotland or Wales.

I admit that it is hard to envisage that there will be many occasions, if any, when it would be possible to classify a Bill as relating exclusively to England, but I certainly agree that there would be strong reservations about restricting participation in debate on such a matter to what would inevitably, in a Second Reading Committee, be very few Members and a small proportion of the sum total of 528 Members who represent English constituencies. Of course, in any case the decision on Second Reading would remain with the whole House.

I welcome the initiatives that have been taken to foster close contact between Committees of the House and those of the devolved legislatures. The Procedure Committee's report sets out some of the issues involved in the exchange of documents and formal joint meetings. I believe that the whole House recognises how much can be achieved by informal contacts. It is still early days in the operation of the devolved legislatures, and time is needed for those working relationships to develop and settle down. Therefore I believe that the whole House would welcome the Procedure Committee's willingness to keep those matters under review. I would undertake to the House to consider moving any necessary motion in the House to overcome any specific case of difficulty, but I consider that it is early to change these procedures before we have a clearer idea of what is likely to be needed in practice.

Arrangements for fostering good relations with devolved legislatures go beyond procedural matters as such. The Government hope that members of the devolved legislatures could be given at least as much access to this place as Members of the European Parliament are, but of course that is a matter for the domestic Committees of the House. The House will be aware that it is already possible for MPs to visit Edinburgh and Cardiff on parliamentary business under the extended travel scheme, and it remains to be seen what arrangements the devolved legislatures adopt for access to their premises by MPs and peers.

I believe that, as a whole, the Procedure Committee's report and the Government's response to it provide a way forward for the House to respond to the immediate consequences of devolution. The Committee will study developments and report again. In the light of experience, our procedures may well need to evolve further. In the meantime, I hope that hon. Members in all parts of the House will do everything that they can to ensure good working relationships with the devolved bodies.

As we are the Parliament that passed the devolution legislation, we should be—and I hope that we shall be—slow to criticise and quick to encourage the Scottish Parliament and the National Assembly for Wales. It can only be to the good of all parts of the United Kingdom that good relationships exist between elected bodies in all parts of this kingdom, and I hope that no hon. Member can disagree with that.

2.44 pm

Sir George Young (North-West Hampshire): The Opposition welcome the debate. It has been some five months since the report was published. There might have been some advantage in debating it before 1 July, not least because the Committee produced the report concentrating

"on those matters which need to be addressed before July".

However, I am aware that there were pressures on parliamentary business in the summer, and I welcome the opportunity to debate the report this afternoon.

Given that the Government's response to the report was published as recently as yesterday, I agree with their decision not to ask the House to implement their recommendations today, especially where those are at variance with the Committee's proposals. I think it right to invite us instead to take note, with further debates on the specific resolutions as and when the Government decide to take matters forward—Monday for some of the resolutions. Many are non-controversial and can be activated quite quickly.

Like the Leader of the House, I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield (Mr. Winterton) and his Committee for grappling with this important subject. Devolution is like one of those fireworks with sequential bursts of different colours. Just when one thinks that it has finished, there is another explosion of light. The Committee's report provides a further burst of illumination on the devolution landscape. I congratulate my hon. Friend and his Committee on producing a unanimous report on such a complex issue.

I do not believe that the House or the country have fully woken up to all the changes that devolution will bring about, although the recent tensions on beef on the bone have given us a preview. That issue shows how the language of devolution can conflict with some of the centralising imperatives of Downing street.

Our overall approach is to make devolution in Wales and Scotland work; to accept the verdict of the two referendums and to look forward. We welcome the publication of the concordats earlier in the month, although they were a little bit later than was originally expected. However, the Opposition have a caveat, which is very relevant in the context of the report.

In our view, for England, the present devolution settlement is neither stable nor defensible. I do not propose to develop that argument fully in this debate, because it was very well set out in July by my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition in a speech to the Centre for Policy Studies. In a nutshell, now that we have new arrangements for resolving domestic priorities and legislative programmes in Scotland—arrangements to which English and Welsh MPs are not a party—it is no longer appropriate for Scottish MPs to retain rights on the same issues in England and Wales.

When I address the key paragraphs of the report—paragraphs 23 to 27—I hope to show that the Select Committee's recommendations provide some important building blocks towards a more equitable settlement that will rebalance the constitution and remove the inequity for English voters and English Members of Parliament. I very much regret the fact that the Government have chosen to reject this most important section of the report, and to leave us with an indefensible status quo.

The first paragraph of the report sets the whole tone, and the Leader of the House picked that up. It is essentially a cautious approach, speaking of

"some of the changes which may be required"

to House of Commons procedure. The Committee advocates an evolutionary approach. It says that

"arrangements made may well have to be adapted in the light of experience."

It

"intends a full review of the procedural consequences of devolution in due course."

[Sir George Young]

Therefore, the report is very much a first-sighting shot at what needs to be done, and it should be recognised as such.

Paragraph 2 suggests a "constitutional affairs committee", but does not spell out how that would be constituted, how it would relate to the existing institutions of the House, or what its terms of reference might be. The Committee will no doubt want to return to that subject in due course, to fill in some important details.

The difficulties that confronted the Committee, and that confront the House and the Government, are listed in paragraph 5, headed "General Principles", which I note the Government have accepted.

Some of the four principles pull in opposite directions. Principle No. 1 is that parliamentary procedure or custom should not undermine the fact of devolution, but principle No. 3 appears to qualify that, by saying:

"it is legitimate for all Members . . . to have an interest in matters which remain the responsibility of the United Kingdom Parliament".

That is fine, but the report continues:

"however Members from an area to which powers have been devolved will have a particular interest in business affecting that area".

Principle No. 2 states that, if co-operation is desired, procedural barriers should not prevent it. Co-operation may be desired by Members of this House in a matter that has been devolved, but Members of the Scottish Parliament or Welsh Assembly may not want it. It is not clear how principle No. 2 would operate in that case.

Mr. Desmond Browne (Kilmarnock and Loudoun): Lest the point be lost by the right hon. Gentleman moving on too quickly, will he make it clear whether he, on behalf of the official Opposition, accepts the third general principle?

Sir George Young: I have no difficulty with the principles. I am hoping to show that their application may be difficult when there is ambiguity about which principle comes first. Almost anything could be brought into order in the House under the second principle by a Member simply asserting that, although the matter was devolved, in his or her view, co-operation was desirable.

There is also a difference in emphasis on the principles between the memorandum of understanding published by the Lord Chancellor earlier this month and the Government's response. Paragraph 14 of the memorandum reads:

"The United Kingdom Parliament retains the absolute right to debate, enquire into or make representations about devolved matters. It is ultimately for Parliament to decide what use to make of that power, but the UK Government will encourage the UK Parliament to bear in mind the primary responsibility of devolved legislatures and administrations in these fields".

That is much softer than principle No. 1, which reads:

"Parliament has agreed that certain powers and responsibilities should pass from it to the devolved legislatures; parliamentary procedure or custom should not be called in aid to undermine that decision".

We need to ensure that Parliament and Government are working to the same ground rules. Perhaps at some point we could debate the concordats and return to some of these issues. As I have said, we welcome the recent concordats.

Mr. Michael Connarty (Falkirk, East): In seeking clarification, is it not legitimate for any representative in any part of the legislative framework to show interest and attempt to inform the debate? It has been said that devolved legislation will be dealt with in the place to which it has been devolved.

Sir George Young: Yes. I just wonder how one interprets that principle. Although it looks fine, Members may pray in aid different principles in arguing that something is in order. Indeed, it would be possible to develop as strong an argument that it was out of order from reading another principle.

The Secretary of State for Scotland (Dr. John Reid): In fairness, let us give the full picture. The right hon. Gentleman says that, while Parliament has the sovereignty and right to debate everything, the Government will encourage Members to respect the devolution of powers to the Scottish Parliament and to the National Assembly for Wales. That is one part of the argument. However, if he turns the page of the memorandum of understanding, he will see that paragraph 15 states:

"The devolved legislatures will be entitled to debate non-devolved matters, but the devolved executives will encourage each devolved legislature to bear in mind the responsibility of the UK Parliament in these matters."

It is symmetrical. The idea behind the concordats and what we are trying to achieve by setting precedents is to encourage a partnership and a mutual respect for the rights and responsibilities of both the UK Parliament and the devolved legislatures.

Sir George Young: I take the point, but I hope that the right hon. Gentleman agrees that there is a difference in emphasis between saying, "You will encourage Parliament to bear something in mind," which is what the memorandum says, and saying explicitly that parliamentary procedure or custom should not be called in aid to undermine that decision. I am saying that the Government have come up with a memorandum of understanding, which I accept, while the Procedure Committee has come up with a somewhat different approach to the same question. We need to ensure that Parliament and Government have the same ground rules on the same issues.

Dr. Reid: This is an important point because the concordats are not between Parliament and Parliament, but between Government and the Scottish Executive. Parliamentary procedures are matters not for diktat by Government, but for this Parliament. That is why we are debating them. It would have been inappropriate for the Government to do other than arrive at an agreement with their counterparts in the Scottish Parliament and the National Assembly for Wales. As a Parliament, we are discussing how we should interpret such matters. That is entirely in accord with the precedents of the House. Of course we shall try to ensure that there is no nuance of difference between the documents, but that requires discussion, as our debate shows.

Sir George Young: The way in which to resolve the issue would be for the Government to say, without equivocation, that, where there is a dispute, they would accept the Procedure Committee's comments, which would override the memorandum of understanding. The report is what Parliament has said, and it is what we are

debating. We are taking note of what the Procedure Committee—*[Interruption.]* I should like to make some progress. I have some important points to make.

On subjects for questions, I agree with the Committee that we cannot simply leave the decision on what is in order to Ministers. The report puts this rather delicately:

"the attitude of ministers to certain issues is not constant".

It must be right that the decision should rest with Parliament and the Speaker.

I find some ambiguity in the resolution drafted by the Clerk at the end of paragraph 10, which is an attempt to resolve the issue. It recommends that questions can be tabled that relate to matters which

"UK Government ministers have taken an official interest in"—

not a legitimate interest or an interest which the law on devolution allows them to take, but an official interest. What is an official interest? Is it an interest that has been expressed by somebody who holds ministerial office? The Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food could take an official interest in whether beef on the bone is banned in Scotland—but should he answer questions on that matter? The answer is no if we accept the principle in paragraph 5 of the Committee's report, but yes if we read paragraph 10, which would allow questions on anything in which the Minister has taken an official interest.

Mr. Browne: I am fascinated by the right hon. Gentleman's argument. Where does the law on devolution disallow a Minister taking an interest in any subject? We are talking not of federalism or independence, but of devolution.

Sir George Young: The principles to which I have referred specifically rule out intervention on certain issues. One such principle is that we should not do anything that undermines the principle of devolution. I am saying that, if "an official interest" is not defined, the principle can be undermined by declaring a question in order whenever a Minister has taken an official interest in the subject, even if that interest is precluded by what is set out in statute.

I think that the Government recognise some of those problems but are reluctant to find a solution. There is an admirably frank quotation of the Leader of the House in the report. She said

"there will be . . . a number of grey areas."

The past 10 minutes have illustrated that. She continued:

"I am reluctant to get drawn into the precise boundaries of the settlement and the judgements which might be made; indeed that will, happily for me, be a matter for the chair."

On oral questions, the Committee reflected the continuing uncertainty over the need for, and the role of, a Secretary of State for Scotland. It did not say that there should always be a separate Question Time for the Secretary of State for Scotland; it simply said that it would be "premature" to decide that it was no longer needed. Perhaps the Secretary of State will shed some light on that when he replies.

If devolution is to work, there can be no argument that we can justify allocating the same time for Scottish questions. I accept the recommendation and the proposals for discussion through the usual channels on what happens to the extra 10 minutes that will become available—the first of the devolution dividends.

I agree with the recommendations on Grand Committees. The Modernisation Committee has drawn our attention to the luxuriant foliage of the Committees. Many Members wanted to rationalise and streamline them. We now have just such an opportunity. Grand Committees sit uneasily with devolution; once we have devolution, their purpose is diminished. The Government argue that it is premature to abolish such Committees, and I would not go to the stake over that. The Procedure Committee suggests that they are suspended while we see what happens with the Westminster Hall sittings, but the Government suggest that we keep them while we see what happens in Westminster Hall. The matter should be reviewed, perhaps in a year.

On the scope of Select Committees, the Government appear to take a different view from the Procedure Committee. If my hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield, the Chairman of the Procedure Committee, catches your eye, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I shall listen to him with interest.

The section on legislation is the most interesting part of the report. I was pleased to find support from the Procedure Committee for the argument that, in the light of the arrangements for Scotland and for Wales, different procedures may now be necessary for England. The Committee anticipates conflict, and wisely suggests procedures for minimising it. I regret that the Government have rejected the proposals.

I was especially interested in the proposal to change rules "by convention", which is set out in paragraph 23. Changing rules by convention is a means of reform in the House without primary legislation. For example, if the Government lose a vote of no confidence, the Prime Minister asks for a dissolution. There is no rule; it is a convention. If there is support for the proposition that matters that affect England should be voted on only by English Members—a number of Scottish Members have already indicated their support for that—it is for consideration whether that might be done by convention rather than legislation.

Paragraphs 25 and 26 are important for the argument about English Bills. Indeed, they pave the way for the proposals that have been set out by my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition. It is worth reading the relevant section in full. It states:

"The main point of principle to be considered is whether it is appropriate to retain special procedures for bills relating exclusively to one of the constituent countries of the United Kingdom, as currently apply to bills relating exclusively to Scotland or Wales. On balance we believe it is. There may soon be governments of different parties in different parts of the United Kingdom; party balances already differ in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland."

That is a very important section, because it concedes the principle—I believe for the first time—of new procedures for legislation that affects England. Once that point has been conceded, English votes for English Bills are a logical conclusion. Indeed, on page 59, in evidence, that was proposed.

Paragraph 28 also concedes that representation on Bills dealing with English legislation should be in accordance with party balance in England. The hon. Member for Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale (Mr. Moore) stated:

"As a Scottish MP, frankly I am not terribly interested in having a say over the English health budget, the way in which health policy is going or education, and all the matters over which responsibility

has been devolved to Scotland, I think it is right and proper that English MPs should be left to consider the equivalent legislation in England for themselves."

There speaks a Scottish Member of Parliament.

Mr. Wigley: Taking forward the logic that only English Members of Parliament should determine legislation that applies only to England, does the right hon. Gentleman accept the corollary that Welsh Members of Parliament should determine matters that apply only to Wales but are passed in this Parliament?

Sir George Young: The logic is precisely that. Where Bills apply only to England and Wales, which is more likely to be so, only English and Welsh Members of Parliament should vote, and likewise if Bills apply only to Wales.

Mr. Browne: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Sir George Young: This is the last time that I shall give way to the hon. Gentleman.

Mr. Browne: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for giving way for the third time; he is extremely patient. Would he further concede that, under the principle of English votes for English laws, in the rare circumstances in which the House might need to legislate on a devolved matter, with the agreement of the Scottish Parliament, only Scottish Members should be allowed to vote on that legislation?

Sir George Young: I am not sure in what circumstances the House would legislate on a matter that applied only to Scotland and not to other elements of the United Kingdom. To those who have difficulty with the principle, the important point to make is that it was not dreamed up by the Conservatives. The principle that I read out was approved unanimously by a Procedure Committee on which nine members of the governing party serve. I am not the only one who is enunciating and defending a principle; the principle found favour with a Committee of the House.

The Committee report goes on to say that it is too early to tell whether legislation relating to a single part of the UK will be brought forward frequently. However, it must be likely that legislation covering England and Wales will be introduced. The Committee does not seem to have dealt with that. Paragraph 24 covers legislation relating solely to one of the four component parts, as does the recommendation in paragraph 27. That should be amended to cover Bills that affect only England and Wales.

The Committee deals with one of the principal objections to the proposal of the Leader of the Opposition: designating Bills as applying only to one part of the UK. It has been argued that that would put an impossible burden on the Speaker and, therefore, was not a feasible solution, but the Committee clearly comes to a different view in paragraph 27.

On the key recommendation that the Speaker should be able to certify that a Bill applies solely to England, the Government put the telescope to their blind eye. The Committee spells out, in paragraph 26, precisely why it considers such a procedure necessary. Devolution has changed the constitution. Important principles about legislation that applies to only one part of the UK are raised. In order to anticipate and avert conflict, the Committee believes that provision should be made.

How do the Government respond to that considered view? They simply assert in paragraph 8:

"If . . . it were possible to identify some bills as relating exclusively to England, it is not clear what benefit this would have for the House."

The entire debate about the West Lothian question and the imbalance in the constitution has gone straight over their heads. It is not that they disagree with the solution; they do not believe that there is a problem.

The Select Committee also proposes that the Standing Order that requires Standing Committees to reflect party strength in the House be lifted, so that it can reflect party strength in the relevant constituent part. Again, that supports my right hon. Friend's proposition for English Bills.

The report provides a basis for dealing with the West Lothian question—a question that the Government have found so awkward that the Lord Chancellor has advised us to stop asking it. We will not; nor should we. The Government's view, apparently, is that Scottish Members of Parliament should continue to vote on English Bills. As they stated in their White Paper:

"Scotland's Members of Parliament will continue to play a full and constructive part in the proceedings of the House of Commons."

That view is not supported by public opinion in Scotland, and it is certainly not supported by public opinion in England. *[Interruption.]* In an opinion poll in Scotland, there was a majority for the proposition that Scottish Members of Parliament should not vote on English domestic legislation.

The Government's proposal for regional assemblies is not an appropriate answer. First, the powers that would be given to the English regions would not compare to those being devolved to Edinburgh; and, secondly, a region will get an assembly only if the Government can demonstrate that there is demand for it. In my region, there is no such demand. England should not have regional government and an extra tier of administration foisted upon it, simply so that the Government can fudge the West Lothian question.

In rejecting the recommendations, the Government are clutching at straws. They recognise that a Committee of English Members of Parliament would have to sit in the Chamber. That is fair enough, but they dismiss that because

"it would be difficult to exclude any other Members of the House—though if they wished to be called in debate they would presumably be less likely to catch the Speaker's eye than Members with a constituency interest."

That is a bogus argument, and symptomatic of the culture of excuses that the Prime Minister condemned this morning. The difficulty to which the Government refer is no different from the difficulty that Standing Committees might have at present. Certain Members are entitled to take part in their proceedings, and others are not. I am not aware that that has presented us with any difficulties, and the Government will have to come up with a better alibi than that.

The rest of the report is straightforward. I agree with the proposals on private and delegated legislation. On relationships between Westminster and the devolved

legislature, I strongly agree with paragraph 37, which stresses the importance of personal contact. There is much to be said for regular informal meetings, which is how my party has addressed the issue. So far, nothing too offensive has been said in the House about Members of the Scottish Parliament, or the other way round. I hope that that tolerance will continue to be observed, and survive the forthcoming encounter on the soccer pitch.

We shall need to return to the subject. With the qualifications that I mentioned at the beginning, I support what has been proposed, but I believe that it should be taken to its logical conclusion of English votes on English Bills, building on the reforms proposed by the Committee and sadly rejected by the Government.

Our proposals would work within the conventions and traditions of the Westminster Parliament; they are based on precedents; they are accepted as fair in Scotland; and they represent common sense. Above all, they would deal with the English question and make the Union stronger. I must say to the Government that I believe they are making a serious mistake in their response, and it will fall to a different Administration to put right this constitutional mistake, along with all the rest that they have got wrong.

3.8 pm

Mr. Martyn Jones (Clwyd, South): As Chairman of the Select Committee on Welsh Affairs, may I say that we are affected by the consequences of devolution and we welcome the Procedure Committee's report. We also welcome the Government's response to that report, as far as it goes.

When we were asked by the Procedure Committee for our views, I felt both as an individual and as a 110 per cent. supporter of the Assembly that there probably was no role for the Welsh Affairs Committee, as it considered the responsibilities and duties of the Welsh Office, and as the Welsh Office functions to be performed by the Assembly would be overseen by Members of the Assembly who had been elected for that purpose.

However, we considered the matter individually and as a Committee and on reflection, it seemed that, if anything, our role would be enhanced. There were many reasons for that, one of which was that the Assembly does not have primary legislative powers. The Government have rightly called for a greater role for the Select Committee in pre-legislative scrutiny. We believed that, at some time in the future, the Assembly was bound to want legislation from this place, as the only source of primary legislation. At present, the only conduit for that legislation is via the Secretary of State for Wales. Assembly Members' worry was that that may not always work. Therefore—surprisingly in some respects—they felt that the Welsh Affairs Committee should continue. I would have expected them to share my original reservation that they would not want to be second-guessed by a Committee of the House considering their functions.

The corollary of any legislation that the Assembly may require is its need to be considered on an England-Wales basis, and particularly with regard to Wales. I shall not touch on Scotland, which I am sure has its own views. With legislation being promoted and put forward in this place for England and Wales, there is obviously a role for pre-legislative scrutiny of that legislation as it pertains to Wales. Only the Select Committee could consider such legislation.

Before devolution, the Select Committee had an informal meeting with the National Assembly advisory group, which, as hon. Members may or may not be aware, included representatives of all parties and was set up before devolution to advise on the Assembly's Standing Orders. It was supportive of the role that we believed the Welsh Affairs Committee to have.

The problem with a pre-legislative role is that much legislation will pertain to England and Wales, and the Select Committee may not have time to consider each piece. The Assembly may not want every piece of legislation pertaining to England and Wales considered in so far as it relates to Wales, but it may give evidence to the Select Committee, focusing on those pieces of legislation that it would like us to scrutinise. Those are two distinct roles that could be performed by the Select Committee, and the Procedure Committee accepted our consensual view, which was given to it in evidence.

Since devolution, we have had other meetings with the Assembly, both informal, with regard to how we proceed in future, and also to consider—in this early period of devolution of suck it and see—what kind of functions it would like the Select Committee to perform and what kind of structures it would like to see. We have had meetings with the First Secretary, with departmental Secretaries and with the Assembly's Chairmen's Panel. They are all in favour of the Select Committee carrying on, and I am pleased that the Government have accepted that view. I am sure that they support our view. We feel strongly that it is a way of helping devolution along and ironing out any problems that may occur.

One of our proposals which was not accepted initially concerned joint meetings, although the Procedure Committee accepted that in principle. I am sure that, eventually, there will be a Welsh Committee of some kind comprising Members of the House and of the Assembly with powers similar to that of the Select Committee, able to call for people and papers and to interrogate the Executive. That will result in a direct input into the Assembly from the House with its law-making processes. That is not an option in the short term, but I am pleased that the Government have decided to put the resolutions of the House on an ad hoc basis for joint meetings of the Select Committee, as it exists now, with Assembly Members. That is a good move forward.

One problem that I foresee, on which I would like the Minister to comment, concerns Standing Order No. 152, which is down for amendment next week. The amendment is minimalist in that the functions of the Welsh Office are to be described as the remaining functions of the Secretary of State for Wales, or the Wales Office, as I think it will be called.

I have reservations in terms of what the Select Committee needs to do. Given that the Welsh Office no longer exists, since May we have been operating reasonably successfully without any Standing Orders, although that situation obviously cannot continue. If the Government's amendment is accepted next week, the Select Committee may be put in the position of having to call the Secretary of State for Wales on policy matters relating to other legislation going through the House concerning other Department, such as the Home Office or the Department of Social Security, which pertain solely to Wales but which would not be a matter for inquiry by those Departments' Select Committees. They would be

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unlikely to want to consider a piece of legislation in so far as it appertained to only one part of the UK and, moreover, one with devolved powers.

Therefore, the Select Committee has a role in considering legislation put through the House by other Departments and affecting Wales. The problem is that the Select Committee can insist only on the appearance of the Secretary of State for Wales. We can call other Ministers, but they do not have to come. I can foresee a situation where the Secretary of State for Wales will be bouncing to and fro between offices in Whitehall being briefed on issues that we want to discuss. That situation might be unsatisfactory if we want to discuss policies which are being made in other Departments.

I should be most grateful if the Minister would assure the House that the Government would expect Ministers in other Departments to appear before the Select Committee, if it had a good reason concerning policy matters for asking them to do so, so that they could be quizzed on legislation affecting Wales.

The Select Committee broadly welcomes the Government's acceptance of most of the Procedure Committee's report, and we shall do everything that we can to work constructively with the Assembly and to make the government of Wales in devolved matters work as well as possible with this place.

3.18 pm

Mr. Robert Maclennan (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross): The procedural consequences for this House of the devolution settlements were given less consideration during the passage of the legislation than they perhaps merited. They touch on sensitive questions concerning the relationships of the different parts of the United Kingdom to each other and on the continuing authority of the House.

However, the caution that has been displayed by the Select Committee in its report seems appropriate because the different institutions in Wales and Scotland, legislative and executive, are evolving, and it is appropriate that consultation should take place between the different affected bodies before we set in concrete procedures that could be irritating to parties in different parts of the country.

Although the Committee recommends an evolutionary approach, in some respects it made rather radical suggestions. As I disagree with its suggestions in respect of legislation and the role of Select Committees and Grand Committees in Scotland in particular, I shall spend a little more time on that than on many of the other matters on which the House would be sensible to accept its recommendations.

The general view expressed by the Procedure Committee that we should try to get to know each other better—I am putting this in non-legal terms—is extremely wise. It is also right that we should recognise, as the right hon. Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir G. Young) did, that there are contradictions in the Government's attitude as expressed in the concordat, as compared with their response to the Committee's report—in particular with regard to the functioning of Question Time.

As a general principle, it is right that the House and the devolved Assemblies should be broadly free to discuss and raise such matters as they think appropriate without let or hindrance and without a prickly, legalistic sense of where the lines have been drawn legislatively. It would create great artificialities if we were to restrain ourselves in our debates. The fact that something is the responsibility of a devolved Assembly is no reason for the subject matter not to be considered in debate here. That raises certain problems of ministerial accountability and responsibility: the broad principle that Ministers should not be called to answer for matters for which they are not accountable is without doubt correct but the House is a forum in which we debate matters that go far beyond the responsibility of individual Ministers. Public policy consists not only of those matters for which Ministers are answerable in the House.

Mr. Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley): I am extremely grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for giving way. I do not know whether he was present during the farce that was Welsh questions post-devolution, but does he accept that UK taxpayers' money is being spent throughout the whole of the United Kingdom, and that I, as a UK Member of Parliament, should have a right to question the Secretary of State for Wales about how that money is being spent in Wales, even though he may not be directly accountable for the specifics of how it is spent?

Mr. Maclennan: That goes rather further than I was seeking to go. It is right that the House and Members here should have the responsibility of asking Ministers questions about matters of which they have knowledge and in respect of which they are empowered by the parent legislation to require the devolved Administrations to provide information. That is covered by one of the specific recommendations of the Procedure Committee. However, I hope that the lines on questioning are not drawn so tightly that they artificially exclude the general discussion of the affairs of territories—of nations—to which powers have been devolved. So far as it is possible to raise those matters without implying ministerial responsibility, they should be so permitted.

Mr. Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield): It is not so much the questions as the answers that are the problem. It would be a bold Secretary of State who provided an answer to a question relating to a devolved matter, because that would be likely to queer his pitch in respect of relations with a devolved Administration.

Mr. Maclennan: This is a matter of questions, because questions will not be permitted—tabling them will not even be allowed—if they relate to matters for which the Minister to whom they are directed has no responsibility.

Dr. Reid: I very much concur with the spirit of the right hon. Gentleman's remarks and it might be better if Opposition Front Benchers, rather than looking only at the last Welsh Question Time, considered the previous Scottish questions, at which there was a wide-ranging and balanced question and answer session covering 17 topics of interest to the people of Scotland. The right hon. Gentleman is talking about balance and suggesting that we can discuss anything, as Members of the Scottish Parliament are able to do, but we ought to strike a balance

on the rights and responsibilities of each other's territory in terms of legislation and not abuse that trust. As he says, this is a matter of achieving a balanced partnership.

Mr. Maclennan: I am obliged to the Secretary of State, particularly in the light of what I am about to say about his office and certain other matters on which, as he knows, my party is at odds with the Government.

Turning from those general expressions of principle to some of the particular issues to which the report alludes, let me say that the view of my right hon. and hon. Friends is that the devolution settlement—although one that has to be tried and used to the best of our ability to make it work—is flawed and imperfect. It is certainly not one that we would envisage having a lasting shape. We want steady progress towards the achievement of a federal United Kingdom in which there is not uniformity of devolution, but devolution reflecting the aspirations of the nations and regions of the United Kingdom, and a settlement under which the United Kingdom Parliament relates to the Parliaments and Assemblies of the nations and regions as a federal Parliament relates to the second-tier Assemblies in existing federations in other countries.

It is fair to say that we have come nearer to achieving that ideal in the Scottish context than in Wales. Partly because of that, my remarks necessarily focus on Scotland, for the Government's thinking—and, indeed, some of the recommendations of the Procedure Committee—fails properly to recognise that, whether they like it or not, the Scottish settlement is quasi-federal. The legislative authority and the administrative powers of the Scottish Executive are substantial and the matters reserved to the House are essentially of United Kingdom interest. The consequence of that for our procedures is that it is at least artificial, and possibly a source of friction, to retain the operations of the Scottish Grand Committee at this time.

I asked the Leader of the House in what circumstances she envisaged it might be advantageous to use the Grand Committee. She certainly did not give me any such example, although she was perhaps looking for one before she replied. The reality is that the Scottish Grand Committee is now supererogatory in its operations and should not exist in the future. Perception is extremely important in these matters, and it is seen as—

Mr. Browne: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Maclennan: When I have finished this sentence. The Scottish Grand Committee will be at risk if it meets and it will have great difficulty not only in excluding devolved matters from discussion—accepting the view of the Procedure Committee, we should tread carefully so that we do not undo the work of devolution—but in not giving rise to considerable criticism in Scotland of our second-guessing the work of those institutions to which we have given direct responsibility.

Mr. Browne: Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that it would be possible for the Scottish Grand Committee to discuss, for example, news broadcasting in Scotland, the impact of petrol taxation in rural Scotland—doubtless a matter that is close to the right hon. Gentleman's heart—welfare to work in Scotland and the new deal? I did not make those up; they come from the Scottish National party evidence to the Procedure Committee, and the SNP in turn got them from the previous agenda of the Select Committee on Scottish Affairs since 1997. It is not difficult to find examples.

Mr. Maclennan: Those are important matters, but they are reserved matters. They are reserved for a good reason: because they have United Kingdom dimensions. It is not sensible to discuss matters that have a UK dimension—the peculiar burdens of the taxation of petrol in remote rural parts of the country are felt in Cornwall as they are in Scotland—but it is perfectly appropriate to discuss them in UK Committees of this Parliament and of this House. It is from those debates that consequences will flow.

The Scottish Grand Committee is a notoriously impotent body, which has for many years been subject to criticism on that account. Select Committees, which make recommendations following examination, are much more likely to elicit Government answers, and it would be very much in the interests of the Scots that matters of UK importance, such as the ones that the hon. Gentleman mentioned, should be handled in that way.

Mr. Swinney: The right hon. Gentleman's experience of the House, and of the Scottish Grand Committee, predates mine. Before the general election at which I joined the House, a host of what could be described as UK Ministers appeared before the Scottish Grand Committee to discuss various issues that could now be described as "reserved matters". Was there any purpose to any of those discussions, and did they achieve anything other than obliterating the Conservative party? If the Labour Government insist on going down that route, it may happen to them as well.

Mr. Maclennan: I have already made the general point that the Scottish Grand Committee was a talking shop that delivered little, and was perceived as such in Scotland. This is an opportunity to wrap it up and to recognise that second guessing the work of the institutions to which we have devolved power is not an appropriate thing for this Parliament to do.

Mr. John Maxton (Glasgow, Cathcart): As the evidence will show, I share some of the views that the right hon. Gentleman is expressing about the Scottish Grand Committee. What I do not understand is the intervention by the hon. Member for North Tayside (Mr. Swinney). The evidence submitted to the Committee by the Scottish National party says that the Grand Committee

"remains an appropriate forum for the debate of reserved matters from a distinctly Scottish perspective . . . We therefore propose that it continue on a trial basis for the time being."

I therefore do not understand what the hon. Gentleman is talking about.

Mr. Maclennan: I am afraid that I share the hon. Gentleman's doubts about the wisdom of those recommendations. We can only speculate about the SNP's motivation.

The second question that arises is whether there should be a territorial Select Committee structure. It is much more sensible if topics addressed by Select Committees

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covering Scottish matters are handled within the United Kingdom context and addressed by those departmental Committees whose Ministers have prime responsibility for the issues under discussion. From time to time, the Scots may have a particular angle on the subject, the Government may hold a different view and the Secretary of State may be following a different policy. If so, it should be open to those Select Committees to invite the Scottish Secretary to give separate independent evidence.

The point has been made that the territoriality of the Scottish Committee is what gives it its clout. I do not believe that that is so.

Mr. Swayne: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way on that point?

Mr. Maclennan: Let me finish the point first.

What gives those Committees clout is the fact that Ministers with prime responsibility for the subject in question appear before them. The Secretary of State for Scotland still has his finger in a lot of pies, but he does not have prime responsibility for dealing with petrol prices in remote rural areas or broadcasting in Scotland. Such matters are best handled by the departmental Minister who is responsible. If the Secretary of State wants to stick his finger in the pie with the Committee, that can doubtless be arranged.

It is time we stopped regarding the territorial Committees as talking shops suitable for sending little press releases to local newspapers, when what we really want is to influence the Government's policies.

Mr. Browne: Can the right hon. Gentleman point to the place in the Procedure Committee report where I can find evidence from his party to that effect? Did any member of his party attempt, on behalf of the party, to persuade the Procedure Committee that the Scottish Affairs Committee should be treated in that way?

Mr. Maclennan: My hon. Friend the Member for Argyll and Bute (Mrs. Michie) gave individual and very powerful evidence, with which I totally agree. Indeed, I would have singled her out for special attention even if the hon. Gentleman had not given me the opportunity to do so.

On the final point about legislative proposals, I agree with the Government's conclusion that it would be inappropriate to have a system of Second Reading Committees for Bills that are territorially limited to England, Scotland, Ireland or Wales. I fail to understand the reasoning behind the Procedure Committee's recommendations. It is certainly not spelled out.

The Government's case is not greatly strengthened by their saying that there would be a problem of accommodation for the English Second Reading Committee, which would have 546 members. The principle must be that matters that the House is debating are of United Kingdom interest. The principle is that, where devolution has occurred and matters have been reserved to this House, and the House is legislating on them, all members of this House should be treated alike in participating in those debates and seeking to shape the legislation.

The position in Wales in distinctly anomalous and, in many ways, the Committee has done a good job in handling the Welsh issue. The Scottish position, however, seems clear: reserved matters should be debated by Scots as of right, along with all other members of the House. The problems that arise in respect of England may be de minimis problems because, as the hon. Member for Glasgow, Cathcart (Mr. Maxton) advised the Committee, it is hard to put one's finger on a purely English piece of legislation. One senses that those who are trying to stir up this issue are doing so not because there is a major constitutional problem but for political reasons of their own.

I hope that some of the Committee's other recommendations, including the establishment of a Constitutional Affairs Committee to consider the relationship between the constituent parts of the United Kingdom, will be implemented with the support of the House. We are watching and participating in an unrolling, developing situation that has great oddities. It should be approached not in an ad hoc, pragmatic way, but with some regard to what the Committee called principles of consistency. I hope that that approach will inform future changes in the procedures of the House.

3.41 pm

Mr. Douglas Alexander (Paisley, South): I shall begin by responding to the remarks of the right hon. Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir G. Young), before turning to two specific recommendations in the Committee's report. The right hon. Gentleman began his speech by quoting the general principles that informed the Committee's deliberations, as set out its report. In paragraph 5, the third principle stipulates that

"it is legitimate for all Members of the United Kingdom Parliament to have an interest in matters which remain the responsibility of the United Kingdom Parliament; however Members from an area to which powers have been devolved will have a particular interest in business affecting that area".

Surely that principle is merely a restatement of the broad understanding that this is a United Kingdom Parliament, and that all of us Members are UK MPs. There are not, and must not be, two classes of MP in this House.

The so-called West Lothian question—to which the right hon. Gentleman referred and which was echoed by some of the Committee's recommendations, especially those for a new Standing Committee reflecting area representations—questions why Scottish Members are able to legislate on matters that affect English constituencies, whereas English MPs cannot legislate on exclusively Scottish issues devolved to the Scottish Parliament. I contend that the question is based on a fallacy concerning the role of elected Members of this House.

In support of that contention, I owe a debt of gratitude to the writings of the former Member for Berwick and East Lothian, Professor John P. Mackintosh, who, when this issue was first raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell), examined the realities of the operation of the House. Mackintosh's critique rested on the observation, which still holds true today, that, in the majority of cases, the legislation affecting, for example, education in West Bromwich is initiated not by individual Members of the House, Scottish or otherwise, but by the Executive.

In the words of de Smith and Brazier—and more recent constitutional authorities—the House gives the Government their "legitimate foundation". The invitation to form that Executive is extended to the Member of the House who is judged most capable of commanding a majority of MPs. That majority is a majority of all the Members of the UK Parliament as a collective entity, including representatives from every part of the United Kingdom. To undermine that fundamental principle, and to reduce the status of any individual group of MPs, would be to deny the reality of our country as a multinational state and the status of the House as a UK Parliament. That is why the observations to the Centre for Policy Studies, of the Leader of the Opposition referred to by the right hon. Member for North-West Hampshire, are misplaced and contrary to the third principle in the report.

In that speech, the Leader of the Opposition mentioned the distant drumbeats of English nationalism. He failed to mention the fact that he and his Front-Bench colleagues are themselves now beating that drum. They may try to become once again a one-nation party, but they are revealing their hand: that one nation is little England.

It again falls to the Labour party and the Government to defend devolution from it opponents south and north of the border. That informs the Government's response to the Committee's report.

The Committee recommended that, after devolution, the range and detail of questions to be put to the Secretaries of State for Scotland and for Wales should be reduced to matters relating to their ministerial responsibilities: that was stated in paragraph 8. That rejection of the evolutionary approach was echoed in the statement made by Madam Speaker on 12 July 1999, *Official Report*, columns 21-22, in advance of today's debate. The broad terms of that statement made it clear that, if matters are devolved to the Scottish Parliament or to the Welsh Assembly, questions on the detail of policy or expenditure would not be deemed in order.

Although Madam Speaker made it clear that the terms of her ruling would be reviewed in light of the operation of the rules and of today's debate, I for one believe that there is no difficulty with that approach. However, I enter an important caveat. This ruling reflects the fact that Scottish devolution is a two-Parliament solution. It also reflects the Committee's finding that, in passing the legislation that underlies devolution, Parliament has agreed that certain powers and responsibilities should pass from this House to devolved legislatures, and that parliamentary procedures and customs should not be called in aid to undermine that decision.

The Scottish Nationalists and the Conservative party rejected, and sought election in opposition to, that reformed constitutional architecture, but the two-Parliament solution was the goal of the Labour party. For the two Parliaments to work harmoniously, there must be a sharing of powers and responsibility. For the devolutionary settlement to succeed, there must be an exercise of responsibility by this House and a recognition of responsibilities by Members of the Scottish Parliament in Edinburgh. That is why I welcome the terms of the memorandum of understanding, especially paragraph 15, which states that the Executive in Edinburgh will encourage Members of the Scottish Parliament to keep in mind the responsibilities of the UK Parliament as well as their own.

Although it would be inappropriate and contrary to the spirit of devolution for the House to intrude on the areas of responsibility that have been devolved by the Scotland Act 1998, it would be equally inappropriate, and contrary to the spirit of devolution, for the Parliament in Edinburgh to intrude on areas of responsibility that are not devolved.

I do not believe that the voters of Scotland would look favourably on parties or representatives who have been charged with serious responsibilities, such as improving the health, education, housing and local services of the people of Scotland, who chose to waste their time on matters for which they did not have responsibility.

The Committee recommended that the provision allowing the Speaker to certify that Bills relate exclusively to Scotland should be transferred to a new Standing Order and adapted so that the Speaker can certify that a Bill relates exclusively to one of the constituent parts of the United Kingdom. It further recommended that Bills that relate to such a constituent part could be transferred to a new Standing Committee containing at least 16 Members from the area concerned. It is not clear to me that that change would benefit the House or its work. The practice of certifying Scottish Bills has historically been for the purpose of treating them in a different way from other Bills. Now that devolution is in place, the frequency of such Bills will undoubtedly diminish. It remains the case that the issue of whether any Bill is taken on the Floor of the House or in a Second Reading Committee is determined by the size and content of that Bill, rather than its territorial scope.

Mr. Grieve: I note that the hon. Gentleman has not touched on the question whether the Grand Committees should remain. I was puzzled that he did not do so, because, in the earlier part of his speech, he said that the essential issue was that all those of us who remained in this House were dealing with reserved matters on an equal basis. How does that square with keeping a Grand Committee to allow a section of Members of Parliament to discuss reserved matters when other MPs cannot be present?

Mr. Alexander: The creation of regional Standing Committees is the most obvious answer. Of course Members of the House have equal status, but some matters are dealt with on a regional basis. My hon. Friend the Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Mr. Browne) outlined some clear areas that were previously the work of the Scottish Grand Committee which will remain of profound concern to his constituents and to mine.

Mr. Swinney: The hon. Gentleman talked about the principles that underpinned the Procedure Committee's report. Has he a particular view on the ranking of those principles? Does the first one have greater status than the second, third or fourth?

Mr. Alexander: Anyone familiar with recent electoral politics in Scotland will understand if I happily pass by on the other side and do not take up the hon. Gentleman's invitation to state a second choice.

The report and today's debate offer a real prospect for partnership between the two Parliaments, if we are minded to work in that direction. I believe that we have the support not only of constituents who voted for that

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approach on 1 May 1997 but of those who did so on 11 September 1997. All hon. Members—whether they opposed devolution for years, whether they are from north or south of the border, and regardless of their party—have an obligation to make devolution work in the interests not only of Scottish constituents but of constituents in every part of the United Kingdom.

3.50 pm

Mr. Nicholas Winterton (Macclesfield): I speak as Chairman of the Procedure Committee, but also as Member of Parliament for Macclesfield. As Member of Parliament for Macclesfield, I think that most of my colleagues on both sides of the House will be well aware of my personal feelings about devolution; but wearing my hat as Chairman of the Procedure Committee, I recognise that this House of Commons has decided that devolution should take place, and now that that decision has been made, I—no less than any of my colleagues on the Committee—hope that devolution will be a success.

I must say that I am somewhat concerned—I go no further than that—about the way in which the debate has been structured. Neither I, as Chairman of the Procedure Committee, nor members of my Committee have featured in a debate that appears to have almost deteriorated into a campaign involving a dispute between those who are pro-devolution, those who are anti-devolution, Labour, Liberal—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I take it that the hon. Gentleman is not criticising the Chair.

Mr. Winterton: I am expressing concern, not criticism, Mr. Deputy Speaker. That is why I chose the word "concerned". This is a debate about the House of Commons, and party politics should not enter into it. The House of Commons is deciding how it should alter its procedures in the light of what has happened in respect of the passing of powers to Scotland, to Wales and perhaps, in due course, to Northern Ireland.

Since the Committee published its report in May, devolution has taken place. We know that; we have experienced it. The Government have issued—somewhat late in the day—concordats relating to how the devolved Executives and the United Kingdom Government will work together. I welcome the fact that, at long last, those documents have been published: in my view and that of my Committee, they are at least a starting point for the establishment of a framework enabling the Governments within the United Kingdom to work together, and to do so effectively.

I welcome the Secretary of State for Scotland to the debate. I am sad that the Leader of the House can no longer be with us, but she apologised to me personally. She has a reason for not being here, which I fully accept, as I know the House would.

There is a memorandum of understanding between the United Kingdom Government, Scottish Ministers and the Cabinet of the Assembly for Wales. It clearly comes from the same stable as the rest of the Government's thinking. In my view and that of my Committee, it is founded primarily on the assumption that the two sides will work together sensibly. The Secretary of State for Scotland has made that point many times. It is indeed useful to have a basic structure in place, but I genuinely wonder how robust the concordats will prove to be when severe pressure is exerted on them. I look forward to hearing what the Secretary of State has to say when he winds up the debate.

The detail of the concordats raises a number of questions in my mind. I find it alarming that the Government either have not considered these matters or have chosen to gloss over them. One of the most serious issues is the fact that the concordat on international relations apparently allows Ministers of the Scottish Parliament, or of the Welsh Assembly, to speak on behalf of the United Kingdom at foreign summits. Whether or not such representation occurs with the consent of the Foreign Office is not the issue. I ask, how could a politician who is not a Member of the United Kingdom Parliament represent the United Kingdom? To whom would he or she be accountable? What right would this House have to question him or her on the meeting at which he or she represented the United Kingdom? It would clearly be a constitutional outrage if such a thing ever came to pass.

Mr. Maclennan: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Winterton: I will in a moment.

Personally, I am not convinced that it is appropriate for representatives of devolved Administrations to take the lead on behalf of the United Kingdom in European Union negotiations; but I fear that only time will tell whether I am right, and whether this could prove to be a source of resentment.

Does the right hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Mr. Maclennan) still wish to intervene?

Mr. Maclennan: No.

Mr. Winterton: I have obviously satisfied him.

The concordats provide for tiered levels of contact between Ministers and officials of the United Kingdom Government and the devolved Executives, and for a flow of information; but in my view and that of the Committee, many practical issues have not been considered. For example, the concordats are littered with references to the confidential exchange of "relevant" information, but who decides what is relevant, and what recourse has one side if it feels that it has not received important information?

On the other hand, the concordat on financial assistance to industry seems to me to cut across the whole devolutionary principle by requiring all the Governments to supply information about the financial packages that they are putting together in an attempt to woo potential inward investors. Again, I must ask the Secretary of State whether this will be a stable, on-going, workable arrangement. Clearly, there must be some doubt about that.

Mr. Swinney: In his capacity as Chairman of the Procedure Committee, would the hon. Gentleman care to reflect on what I think will be the difficulties with regard to parliamentary scrutiny posed by the discussions that take place under the concordats? Many issues relating to dispute resolution will be handled by a joint ministerial

committee whose minutes will not be published. How will this House, the Scottish Parliament or the Welsh Assembly be able to guarantee effective scrutiny?

Mr. Winterton: I am afraid that I cannot give the hon. Gentleman an answer, although the Secretary of State for Scotland may well be able to do so on behalf of the Government. I shall be dealing with issues that have already been touched on—perhaps indirectly including the issue that the hon. Gentleman has identified—later in my speech; but there is clearly a problem. I know that politicians north of the border are deeply concerned, because, in their eyes, this understanding and the way in which it will work depend on the diktat of Westminster, and there will be no real input from north of the border. Only time will tell, but it is a question to which the Secretary of State—

Dr. Reid *rose—*

Mr. Winterton: I am happy to give way to the right hon. Gentleman.

Dr. Reid: I thank the hon. Gentleman.

The answer is simple. All Ministers in the House of Commons are accountable to the House, and all Ministers in the Scottish Parliament are accountable to the Scottish Parliament. The fact that minutes of any particular meeting may or may not be made available—in the case of any number of meetings, here and in the Scottish Parliament, minutes are not made available instantaneously, if ever—does not mean that Ministers are not accountable for them. As the hon. Gentleman will appreciate, the real motive behind many questions posed by members of the Scottish National party is not to create concord by means of the concordats, but to create discord and divorce between the Parliaments.

Mr. Winterton: I am sure that the House is grateful for the right hon. Gentleman's reply to the question posed by the Scottish National party; but I am not wearing a party political hat, and I therefore cannot be expected to comment on his observation. I am here in the hope of representing—as I have so many times in the past—what my Committee and I hope is the best interest of the House of Commons.

Let me say, in a conciliatory way, that I know the Government favoured an evolutionary approach in the drafting of the concordats. I do not think, however, that the Government had much choice; I do not think that they could do other than feel their way gingerly through the constitutional minefield that they had created. Let me tell the Secretary of State, and the House as a whole, that the Procedure Committee, too, has decided on an evolutionary approach to the matters within its remit.

Huge constitutional issues remain unresolved, however. The concordats are a start. The Procedure Committee's recommendations are also a start, but they will not be enough in themselves; perhaps the speech by the Leader of the House showed that. I am grateful to her for being reasonably flexible. Although I have some criticism of her and of the answers that the Government have provided to our report, on many issues, she has left the door open for action and for changes to Standing Orders and procedures of the House. Some serious thinking has to be done by everyone who wishes our Union to be strong and stable in future.

I welcome the Government reply to our report, although with some reservations. The memorandum of understanding states—it is worth reading it out—

> "The United Kingdom Parliament retains the absolute right to debate, enquire into or make representations about devolved matters. It is ultimately for Parliament to decide what use to make of that power, but the UK Government will encourage the UK Parliament to bear in mind the primary responsibility of devolved legislatures and administrations in these fields and to recognise that it is a consequence of Parliament's decision to devolve certain matters that Parliament itself will in future be more restricted in its field of operation."

I could not agree more. That chimes with the first of the guiding principles that the Procedure Committee identified in discussing devolution, a principle with which the Government agree:

> "In passing the legislation which underlies devolution, Parliament has agreed that certain powers and responsibilities should pass from it to the devolved legislatures; parliamentary procedure or custom should not be called in aid to undermine that decision."

The Government are right that it is for the House, not the Government, to determine its own procedures, but the House can do that only if the Government in due course table the proposals for procedural change that would allow it to do so. In its report, the Committee identified several procedural changes that should be made in response to devolution. I pay tribute to all members of the Committee who played an important role in the inquiry and the report that we produced, to those who came before us as individuals or as Committee Chairmen to give evidence and, of course, to the staff of our Committee.

Implementing devolution without changing the procedures of the House is like giving a person one's wallet but keeping a string of elastic attached to it: he has the wallet in his hand, but if he wants to use it to make a purchase that one disapproves of, one tug and the two are locked in conflict.

We have decided to hand over powers. Let us, then, do it properly and accept that the House will have to curtail some of its activities in consequence of Parliament's decision. It would be unfair—I hope that the hon. Member for Edinburgh, South (Mr. Griffiths), who is a distinguished member of our Committee, agrees with my sentiments—to the devolved legislatures not to do just that.

The Government have replied to our report and have indicated that they wish to retain the Grand Committees. There seems to be a misunderstanding in the Government's mind about Grand Committees and the Procedure Committee's recommendation. The Procedure Committee gave the matter careful consideration. We suggested not abolishing the Grand Committees, which would close the option for all time, but suspending them for the period of the experiment in Westminster Hall to find out whether there was an on-going purpose for the Grand Committees. My own view is that they should go, but in its wisdom the Committee rightly said that, in the interim, while we learn a bit more about devolution, they should be suspended.

The matter that I am most clear about is that, once devolution is achieved, there is no place in the House of Commons for Grand Committees—which, I remind the House and those who perhaps have come to the House only in recent times—were set up as substitutes for devolution.

I understand that the Government do not wish to crowd rewarding debates out of sittings in Westminster Hall, but that is to miss the point. The Grand Committees will be

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concerned with reserved matters, or perhaps with devolved ones. The argument against debating devolved matters in the Grand Committees is surely obvious to the House. The temptation in those Committees to second-guess devolved legislatures will be considerable.

We must recognise that, following the Scotland Act 1998, the House is now concerned with reserved matters. Reserved matters are reserved for good reason: as has been said, they pertain to the United Kingdom as a whole. The Procedure Committee accepts that there may be a need for debates on reserved matters as they pertain to Scotland or Wales and that such debates may be of particular interest to Scottish or Welsh Members, but all Members—I repeat, all Members—of the House of Commons potentially have an interest in such matters; the right hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross made that very point. We need to know how United Kingdom policies work throughout the United Kingdom. As has been pointed out, the Grand Committees, which are limited in their membership, are no longer an appropriate forum for such debates.

Sir Raymond Powell (Ogmore): On that very issue, as a Welsh Member who has been in the House for 20 years and regularly attended the Welsh Grand Committee, I can say that the purpose that it served was to allow Welsh Members to express opinions—it was very limited, but it was especially in connection with Wales.

I, too, have in the past served on the Committee appointing Members to serve on the House's Committees. Having read the list of the Members appointed, I cannot understand why, to my knowledge, not one Welsh Member served on the Procedure Committee, with the result that the views of Welsh Members were not expressed to the hon. Gentleman when the Procedure Committee was talking about the Welsh Grand Committee.

Mr. Winterton: The hon. Gentleman has been in the House for many years. I happen to have been here for 28 years, if we are making play of how long we have been here. We took evidence from the Welsh Grand Committee and from the right hon. Member for Alyn and Deeside (Mr. Jones), who chairs that Committee with great distinction. We also took evidence from the Select Committee on Welsh Affairs, so those who come from the Principality contributed considerably to the evidence that we took for our report. The hon. Gentleman has, I believe, been a Whip of his party. It is not up to me as Chairman to dictate who is appointed to my Committee. Sadly, that is done through the usual channels—that dark hole that many people refer to from time to time.

Towards the end of our inquiry, we were fortunate to have appointed to our Committee a Member of the United Kingdom Parliament from Scotland, but it took me quite a lot of effort and representation behind the scenes to get a Member who represents a very important part of the Union of the United Kingdom, north of Hadrian's wall, on our Committee. If there was any implied criticism of the Committee or me as Chairman, it was misdirected and off target. It does not lie with me to decide who serves on my Committee. That is no cause for criticism of the Chair.

In shadowing the Secretaries of State, the territorial Committees will inevitably touch on the work of many, if not all, the United Kingdom Departments. Moreover, the territorial Committees will inevitably have much contact with the devolved legislatures. That is, as hon. Members have said, already the case, and I hope that it will continue to be so.

Surely it would be better to appoint freestanding Committees now. That would abandon the pretence that the Committees should concentrate on "expenditure and administration", when much of that responsibility in relation to Scotland and Wales has been devolved. It would also make future amendments to the Committees' terms of reference very much more simple. I am sure that, eventually, relations between Westminster and the devolved legislatures will necessitate an amendment to the territorial Committees for Wales and Scotland, and possibly Northern Ireland.

Our report deals with one matter that may soon become very pressing: co-operation between Westminster and the devolved legislatures. The Government seem unaware of the real difficulties in formal co-operation, saying that—like me—they hope that

"the House will not take too restrictive a view of its procedures"

in such relations with the devolved countries of the United Kingdom. However, the problems arise from statute, not from procedure.

In this House, we operate under the protection of parliamentary privilege and the privilege of the Parliamentary Papers Act 1840. We have a near-complete protection—it is so good that we are hardly aware of it. Our speeches in debates, our proceedings in Select Committees and the documents prepared for those Committees are all protected. Our colleagues in the devolved legislatures have no such complete privilege. That technical subject is dealt with in our report. Now, I shall merely point out that, although it would be possible to do much by informal agreement, it is also possible that Committees will find that formal co-operation is much more satisfactory.

I tell the Scottish Secretary that I would be a bit queasy and uneasy about Committees informally exchanging papers with bodies outside the House—they need the authority of Standing Orders to exchange papers with one another—if the House had not previously agreed to the principle of such changes.

I understand why the Government have not yet proceeded with some Standing Order changes. In our report, we note that it is not for Westminster to prescribe the nature of the relationship with devolved bodies. As the Scottish Secretary has said, such relationships must evolve, and both sides will have an influence on their evolution. There are, however, legal questions to be addressed, and I trust that the Leader of the House and the Scottish Secretary will recognise that, in time, there may have to be a resolution of the House, and meaningful Standing Order changes, to comply with the recommendations of our report.

We shall have to change our procedures if we are to be fair to Wales. We shall have to change our procedures if we are to be fair to Scotland. We shall have to change also if we are to be fair to England. As has been said in the debate, we have enacted a variable-geometry devolution, and each part of the United Kingdom has its own system and powers. Scotland and Wales—and eventually, I hope, also Northern Ireland—will have powers to determine how they, as constituent parts of the Union, should be administered. However, the largest and

most popular country in the United Kingdom has no such power. [HON. MEMBERS: "Populous."] No, popular, in respect of numbers. I do not mean populous or population, but the country in the United Kingdom that is most popular, because of its numbers.

When the Procedure Committee visited the Basque country in Spain to see how the Spanish system was developing, our hosts were in no doubt—Committee colleagues took part in the debate, and can confirm what was said—that the answer to the West Lothian question was an English Parliament. Occasionally, a small group of people demonstrates in Parliament square, demanding just that—an English Parliament. Some hon. Members on both sides of the House believe that that may well be the answer.

Mrs. Maria Fyfe (Glasgow, Maryhill): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Winterton: I shall give way, and then establish my position and that of the Committee.

Mrs. Fyfe: Although there may be some expressions of a backlash against devolution outside the House, has the hon. Gentleman noticed that, today, such a backlash has not been evident in the Chamber? Most hon. Members in this debate represent constituencies in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, and the few English Members here do not seem to have seen the debate as an opportunity of expressing opposition to the consequences of devolution. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the way in which some of the media has attempted to stir up opposition to devolution has been very misguided?

Mr. Winterton: I shall allow hon. Members to draw their own conclusions on that matter and state my own position—which is that I do not support the cause of an English Parliament. Such an institution would weaken the Union. It would be too powerful and would steamroller the constituent parts. Moreover, I believe that it is harmful and artificial for nations to define themselves—and regard their national interests—as opposed to each other: the English, the Welsh, the Scots and the Irish must work together, both in Europe and in the world as a whole. Over the years, surely, the history of the United Kingdom has been one of intermarriage, mobility and flexibility.

I do not want to witness the further fragmentation—

Mr. Browne: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Winterton: No, I shall not. The hon. Gentleman has spoken frequently.

Mr. Alexander *rose—*

Mr. Winterton: I shall not give way to the hon. Member for Paisley, South (Mr. Alexander) either.

I do not want to witness the further fragmentation of the Union of the United Kingdom by the introduction of regional governments or assemblies. Regionalism, in my view, does not have a place in our country's history and traditions, and I most certainly hope that it will not have a place in the future of the United Kingdom. We must, however, find ways of being fair to England. The devolution settlement that we now have means that Westminster Members—be they English, Scottish or Welsh—should not interfere in matters that are the responsibility of the devolved legislatures. We should recognise that, and I agree with it. However, I go further.

I believe—I think that this will be welcomed by many who support the Welsh national party, the Scottish National party and other national parties—that, although in principle Westminster retains the right to legislate on devolved matters, we should not exercise that right unless we are requested to do so. However, under that very settlement, Scottish Members of the United Kingdom Parliament may find themselves holding the balance of power when legislation dealing with England and Wales, or even England alone, is before the House of Commons, even when the legislation is on matters whose equivalents are devolved to Scotland or within the power of the National Assembly for Wales.

In other words, my esteemed colleague on the Committee, the hon. Member for Edinburgh, South, for example, may not be able to vote on the structure of local government in Scotland, whereas he may cast the crucial vote that determines the structure of local government in England. I say quite openly that surely that would not be fair.

Mr. Elfyn Llwyd (Meirionnydd Nant Conwy): Does the hon. Gentleman remember chairing the Standing Committee's proceedings on the Welsh Language Act 1993, when he cast his vote against an amendment that I tabled on Welsh jury trials?

Mr. Winterton: I do indeed. I also remember that, on every occasion, I attempted to introduce sittings that I was chairing in the Welsh language. I tell the hon. Gentleman, for whom I have great affection, regard and respect, that as he knows—and as the Deputy Speaker would be very quick to tell the House, if he were asked—as a Committee Chairman, I operate in accordance with precedent. Regardless of whether I liked the hon. Gentleman's amendment, I had to vote as I did, in accordance with precedent.

Mr. Alexander *rose—*

Mr. Winterton: The hon. Member for Paisley, South is looking pregnant. Would he like to intervene?

Mr. Alexander: I thank the hon. Gentleman for the gracious manner in which he gave way. Will he confirm that there has never been an occasion when the Conservative party has had a majority in England and Wales while Labour has commanded a majority in the House throughout the United Kingdom? My understanding is that at no point during this century has that been the case. I welcome his concession of rejecting an English Parliament. Other than the physical architecture, what is the difference between an English Parliament and the proposals advanced by Conservative Front Benchers—of English votes for English laws?

Mr. Winterton: I am not sure that I can give an answer off the cuff, although in the previous Parliament when the

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Government's majority came down to one, the Scots and the Welsh played a major role in deciding what the Government could do.

Dr. Norman A. Godman (Greenock and Inverclyde): And the Unionists.

Mr. Winterton: As Chairman of the Procedure Committee, I am looking at how the procedures of the House are influenced by the devolution that has taken place. I do not wish to trade across the Floor of the House statistics relating to what the position might have been under a particular Government and what influence the Welsh Members, Scottish Members or, as the hon. Member for Greenock and Inverclyde (Dr. Godman) says from a sedentary position, Northern Ireland Members may have had.

It is no solution to say that the number of Scottish seats will soon be reduced and that it is extremely unlikely that the Scots will hold the balance of power as they did in the 1974 Parliament. I was there, although I was not very senior or very experienced. As the hon. Member for Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale (Mr. Moore) said when the Scottish Affairs Committee gave evidence to our Committee—I paraphrase him—such matters are best dealt with before there is danger of conflict, when it is possible to determine them without rancour. Those were very wise words.

Debate is not a problem. We are a United Kingdom Parliament, even on matters that are of more concern to one part than another. We can learn from one another. That is why the Grand Committees should go. The English way of doing things may not be the best, hard though it is for me to say that, but this House is not just about debate—it is about taking decisions. That is very important. The procedures of the House must be seen to be fair on that. It is not just a matter of fairness to England. When we take decisions that affect a specific part of the United Kingdom, we need to have a system that gives Members from that area ample opportunity to have their say.

That brings me back to the points made by the right hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross. In our report we suggest—tentatively, as one colleague on the Committee may well add if he catches your eye, Mr. Deputy Speaker—that one way of giving Members from the region affected a say would be for Bills to be certified by Madam Speaker as relating exclusively to England, Wales, Scotland or, in due course one hopes, Northern Ireland. The normal presumption would be that such Bills would be debated in Committees containing a substantial proportion of Members from the area concerned. The Leader of the House seemed to feel that we were suggesting that all Members representing England would serve on such Committees. That is not the case. The Government would be able to override them, but if they did so it would be transparent and obvious to all. We do not pretend that that is the only solution or even the best that can be found, but I would be reassured to have some sign that the Government were also seeking solutions to the problems that I have outlined.

I am somewhat disappointed by the section of the Government's reply relating to legislation. In our report we made it clear that our proposals were tentative. We are learning as we go into devolution. The Government have dealt with the detail of our proposal without addressing the concerns that underlie it. It could be argued that the gradual approach—it says that the future will be shaped in reaction to devolution rather than beginning by thinking about abstract concepts such as fairness—is an inherently English approach. It was Louis MacNeice—born in Belfast—who observed:

"They don't want any philosopher-Kings in England".

I am content to accept a devolution settlement that leaves room for negotiation and adjustment, but there needs to be some concept of fairness underlying the development.

The Scots may have resented the influence of England in the United Kingdom and felt that their aspirations were thwarted by English domination. Now there is a danger that the largest and most populated part of the Union will feel itself controlled by the devolved Administrations. The issue of whether beef on the bone is safe to eat is, as it were, but a taste of things to come.

I want devolution to be a success. I do not want to have to echo Dr. Johnson and say:

"Seeing England, madam, is only seeing a worse Scotland."

We need means for English Members to take those decisions that affect England alone. If we find such a mechanism now, we may avoid much unnecessary conflict in the future—and Parliament will be the better for it.

4.26 pm

Ms Jackie Lawrence (Preseli Pembrokeshire): It is an honour yet again to follow the hon. Member for Macclesfield (Mr. Winterton). It is getting to be a habit, and I feel honoured to do so. I congratulate him on his speech, which demonstrates the service that he has done to the Select Committee system which seeks to put Parliament's interests above those of the party structure.

I have listened from the beginning of the debate with great interest. The opening comments of the right hon. Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir G. Young) confirmed that the Opposition are painting themselves as a purely English party. That is how we have always perceived them in Wales. The people of Wales certainly recognised it in 1997, and those on the Conservative Front Bench seem to be recognising it, too. The debate is not about devolution but about the processes by which we make devolution work. However, far from defending the Union, the Conservatives' line contains an implicit threat of the break-up of the Union.

In his intervention, the right hon. Member for Caernarfon (Mr. Wigley) confirmed the separatist basis of his party's history by demonstrating his willingness to use the procedures of the House to further that separatist aim. It is a dreadful shame that he is no longer present, because I was hoping that he would come back on that point.

Mr. Evans: The hon. Lady says that the Conservative party is painting itself as a little England party. Does she think that it strengthens the Union or this Parliament that

Scottish Members of Parliament can vote on purely English matters, but cannot vote on the same issues for Scotland?

Ms Lawrence: I am here as a Welsh Member of Parliament to look at the issues relating to Wales and to comment on the stance of the Opposition in relation to the area that I represent.

Sir Paul Beresford (Mole Valley): Will the hon. Lady give way on that point?

Ms Lawrence: No.

Only the Labour party has demonstrated by its actions that it is committed to the future of the Union, while ensuring through devolution that the decision-making process is closest to those whom it affects. We have delivered devolution, and we want to see devolution deliver.

As the first "victim" of the uncertainty surrounding the issue of questions, I was delighted that the report and the Government's response recommended that questions should not be so prescriptive as we had all feared initially. Similarly, the Grand Committee will have a role initially in Wales, as we need that forum to discuss matters such as the Budget for Wales.

Mr. Grieve: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Ms Lawrence: No, I have already given way. I wish to make one particular point, which is fundamental to the Government's response and the report.

Paragraph 23 of the report concerns legislation. It states:

"We support the principles behind the Government statement on legislation and agree that the House should not legislate on devolved matters without the consent of the legislature concerned."

However, no reference is made in the response to the fact that the report goes on to say:

"There is a grey area, in that the Welsh Assembly does not have the power to pass primary legislation".

The failure to acknowledge that further statement by the Committee in relation to this grey area creates the potential for misunderstanding, leading to possible conflict in the future unless it is clarified here today.

The response goes on to compound the potential for misunderstanding, first, by not referring to the grey area, and then by changing the terminology in the response. The Government refer simply to collective "devolved administrations", appearing to accord them all the same rights. Wales does not have primary legislative powers but, as it has secondary powers, it is clearly a legislature and an Administration—hence the need to acknowledge the difference and to clarify the Government's definition of legislature and Administration in the context of the response.

If that is not done now, the way will be paved for considerable misunderstanding and conflict between Westminster and the National Assembly for Wales. I speak as someone who wholeheartedly supports the principles of devolution. It is important to make that point, because I want the system to work and to work well on behalf of the people of Wales.

The Assembly offers the people of Wales the opportunity to set their own priorities within Wales in a way that they have never done before. That is to be welcomed and built upon. To do that, it is vital that the potential for misunderstanding is dealt with now—as the hon. Member for Macclesfield said consistently throughout his excellent speech.

Assembly Members, working with colleagues at Westminster, should be able to set those priorities in their areas of responsibility in the certain knowledge of the parameters of their particular legislature's responsibilities and the precise remit of each body as the new National Assembly for Wales beds down and consolidates its role in Wales.

In the response to the report, the word "consent" is quoted by the Government. In the report, that is qualified by an explanation of the framework within which Scotland has responsibility for primary legislation, based on the role of the Sewel convention. That explanation is not confirmed in the response, in that it does not define the difference between Scotland and Wales, but changes the terminology to refer simply to "devolved administrations". If that point is not clarified, the use of the word "consent", as outlined in the response, would effectively transfer much more power to the Assembly, allowing it to veto the role of Westminster. It could effectively undermine Westminster's powers over primary legislation in relation to Wales.

In the case of Wales, one would expect consultation with the Assembly legislature and the Administration. That is right and proper, and reflects the debates that took place here during consideration of the Government of Wales Act 1998. Any failure to make the distinction between consent and consultation in the case of Wales could result in conflict.

I believe that it is important that we acknowledge here today that while consultation, co-operation and partnership are not just desirable but essential—and to be welcomed and encouraged—it must be made clear that there is no doubt that primary legislation in relation to Wales is completely at the discretion of the UK Parliament.

4.36 pm

Mr. John Swinney (North Tayside): I congratulate the Select Committee on Procedure on its fourth report. During Agriculture questions earlier today, the Chairman of the Committee, the hon. Member for Macclesfield (Mr. Winterton), said that this House was at its most effective when it was at its most courteous. The language of the Committee's report is very courteous and sensitive, and allows the House to reflect on how the debate should move on after the legislative changes associated with the Scotland and the Government of Wales Acts 1998.

The hon. Member for Macclesfield caused some consternation among Scottish Labour Members when he referred to the hon. Member for Edinburgh, South (Mr. Griffiths) as the Member from Scotland. He created—inadvertently, I assume—the sense that the number of Scottish Members was to be reduced from 72 to one, and that all power was to be vested in the hon. Member for Edinburgh, South. That would result in a short-lived experience for the hon. Member for Hamilton, South (Mr. Tynan) who has joined us recently, and whom

[Mr. John Swinney]

I congratulate on his election victory in late September. I am sure that that will not be the next step of the Procedure Committee, but it may be a future recommendation that the number of Scottish Members be reduced from 72 to one, and that a lifetime appointment be made for the hon. Member for Edinburgh, South to carry out that task.

We have heard it said that some people have an interest in making devolution work and others do not. I want to make it clear to the House once again that my objective and that of my party is to make devolution work. I believe that Scotland will be able to achieve the fundamental aim of my party—Scottish independence—only if the Scottish people see the Scottish Parliament being successful and effective. The Scottish people could then come to the conclusion that, having made a success of control over a limited but important number of areas of policy within the Scottish Parliament, they would be capable of controlling all the affairs of Scotland and of representing Scotland in Europe effectively as an equal member of the European Union. That is our aspiration.

When I raise with the hon. Member for Macclesfield my concerns about the memorandum of understanding and the role of the Joint Ministerial Committee, it is not to be unhelpful but to ask how we are to exercise true and transparent parliamentary scrutiny if we are not in possession of the information that is appropriate to allow us to arrive at decisions.

Mr. Alexander: I am obliged to the hon. Gentleman for giving way, and for his kind remarks about my hon. Friend the Member for Hamilton, South (Mr. Tynan), to whose election campaign the hon. Gentleman contributed so much. The hon. Gentleman has observed that there are limited but important matters dealt with in the Scottish Parliament, devolved in Holyrood. Will he give an undertaking to the House that his time in that Parliament—and the time of his fellow representatives of the Scottish National party—will be used to deal with those specific, limited but important powers, such as education, housing and health, rather than using the Parliament to try to discuss issues outwith the competence of the Parliament, which are reserved here at Westminster?

Mr. Swinney: An important point established during the passage of the Scotland Act 1998 was the right of the Scottish Parliament to debate issues that it considers appropriate. That point was well made in the Chamber, so it should not be a surprise to the hon. Gentleman. My party will certainly ensure that the matters that are devolved to the Scottish Parliament are properly dealt with there. Some of the unease and tension among Labour Members is evidence of the effectiveness of the way in which we scrutinise the work of the Executive in the Scottish Parliament, although I accept that that Executive also involves Liberal Democrats, however uncomfortable they may feel at times.

It is important that we address the issues that are of concern to the people of Scotland. That is the rule of thumb that my party follows in the Scottish Parliament.

Dr. Reid: Will the hon. Gentleman answer the question that he was asked? In view of what he said earlier, will he give an assurance not only to the House but, more important, to the people of Scotland that he and his party will spend the bulk of their time in the Scottish Parliament dealing with issues that are within the competence of that Parliament—the issues that the Scottish people want to be dealt with in Scotland and that they pay him and the other Members of that Parliament to deal with—rather than, as is currently evidenced in the majority of the parliamentary questions that they table there, dealing with issues which are reserved to the United Kingdom Parliament and which the Scottish people want to be dealt with in the United Kingdom Parliament?

Mr. Swinney: We will discuss the issues that are of relevance to the people of Scotland. I am interested to find that the Secretary of State is paying close attention to the questions tabled in the Scottish Parliament, but if I were to go much further down that road, Mr. Deputy Speaker would tell me that I was roaming out of order.

In Inverness yesterday, I chaired a meeting of the Enterprise and Lifelong Learning Committee of the Scottish Parliament at which the chief executive of Highlands and Islands Enterprise expressed his concern about the enormous damage being done to the highlands and islands economy by the fuel duty escalator. It would have been inappropriate of me to say to him, "Stop there. That is nothing to do with this Parliament. The Secretary of State for Scotland has to fight for the Scottish interest in Westminster." Members of Parliament who are sent to Westminster to represent the Scottish interest sign up to such issues of enormous concern left, right and centre.

Miss Anne Begg (Aberdeen, South): Can I take it, then, that the hon. Gentleman would be happy for someone from Highlands and Islands Enterprise, or whoever is concerned about the fuel duty escalator, to come down and give evidence to the Scottish Affairs Committee? That is the only conclusion that we can reach from what he is saying.

Mr. Swinney: I want to continue with my comments about the institutions of the House, but I will certainly answer the hon. Lady's point. My point in response to the hon. Member for Paisley, South (Mr. Alexander) and the Secretary of State is that it is unrealistic to believe that the Scottish Parliament will not encroach on or raise issues that are important to the Scottish people but happen to be reserved.

The principles in paragraph 5 of the Procedure Committee's report have been referred to at length. The first of the principles is that

"in passing the legislation which underlies devolution, Parliament has agreed that certain powers and responsibilities should pass from it to the devolved legislatures; parliamentary procedure or custom should not be called in aid to undermine that decision".

That is a robust interpretation of the Scotland Act 1998.

I am concerned about the fact that the third principle states:

"Members from an area to which powers have been devolved will have a particular interest in business affecting that area".

I suspect that there will be a trade-off between those principles as the issues that this Parliament wrestles with begin to change.

The Procedure Committee recommended that there be a continuing role for the Scottish Affairs Committee, and I certainly welcome that commitment. It is important that

the role and responsibility of the Secretary of State be properly scrutinised by a Committee of the House to which he is accountable. He may properly divulge to the House some of the confidential documents about which I am most concerned, if his Scottish Executive colleagues are not prepared to release them to the Scottish Parliament to enable proper scrutiny there.

We need to be able to find out what the Secretary of State is doing, what he costs and what his office costs. That is a matter of enormous concern. The running costs for the Scottish Office for the current financial year were initially estimated at £2.4 million, but I read in the newspapers that they have gone up to £5.7 million and are expected to rise to £6 million in the next financial year. That is 138 per cent. more than the original estimate. If that is an example of the new Administration's book keeping, it is a pretty unhappy one.

I recognise that the Scotland Act 1998 entitles the Secretary of State to certain powers, but it is important that we should have proper scrutiny when he is removing from the Scottish block the amount that is required to run his Department. It is important that the Scottish Affairs Committee should be in there, scrutinising his activities. It should also scrutinise the work on reserved matters, including the climate change levy, the fuel duty escalator and IR35—the Inland Revenue document—all of which cause great concern to my constituents. In a Select Committee environment, members can consider dispassionately how those issues are handled.

When we debated the role of Select Committees earlier, the hon. Member for South Staffordshire (Sir P. Cormack) made an extensive case for the requirement on their members to act independently of the party Whip, on the basis of the evidence before them. That is exactly what we need Scottish Members on the Scottish Affairs Committee to do. They must consider what is happening dispassionately, from a Scottish perspective, and be prepared to call to account United Kingdom Departments that are pursuing an agenda on reserved matters that is hostile to the Scottish interest.

Mr. Alexander: Does the principle of the dispassionate scrutiny of the Executive by a Select Committee hold good north of the border, and would there be a conflict of interest when a party's leading spokesperson also held the chair of the relevant Select Committee?

Mr. Swinney: That matter is being considered by the Procedures Committee of the Scottish Parliament. I will happily abide by the outcome of that consideration. Before the hon. Gentleman makes such remarks, he should read the official record of that Committee and reflect on some of the remarks that his colleagues north of the border have made. I will not embarrass him by recounting them here, as that would probably damage my reputation more than his.

The Procedure Committee has recommended the retention of Question Time; we support that, but with restricted time. I have some concern about how much the criteria for questions can be extended. Madam Speaker referred to the acceptability of questions that relate to

"information that the United Kingdom Government are empowered to require of the devolved Executive".—[*Official Report*, 12 July 1999; Vol. 335, c. 21.]

That is endorsed by the Procedure Committee in its report as the basis for the admissibility of questions.

Section 96 of the Scotland Act 1998 states:

"The Treasury may require the Scottish Ministers to provide, within such period as the Treasury may reasonably specify, such information, in such form and prepared in such manner, as the Treasury may reasonably specify."

If that is not a blank cheque for the Treasury to ask what it wants of the Scottish Executive and to require the Executive to supply that information, I do not know what is. It will open the flood gates as to what questions hon. Members may ask in this place. That is a practical illustration of the inconsistencies we face and the fact that some definitions may be stretched in a way that no one envisaged.

Madam Speaker has ruled—the Procedure Committee has supported her view—that Adjournment debates on Scottish subjects may be held in the House only when they relate to areas of ministerial responsibility. On 20 July, I raised a point of order with Madam Speaker about a motion that had been submitted by the Conservative Opposition for a debate on health policy within the United Kingdom. I asked Madam Speaker for some guidance on whether it was appropriate to debate health policy in the United Kingdom after 1 July when power was devolved to the Scottish Parliament. Madam Speaker said that it was not a point of order, and I obviously accepted her ruling. However, I think that we must consider the circumstances of all debates and the steps that led to that motion being accepted inadvertently for debate in the House. I am sure that the Select Committee on Procedure will examine the issue.

Mr. Browne: I intervene on the hon. Gentleman at this stage as he appears to have abandoned his prepared speech. He briefed the Scottish press yesterday about his intention to criticise the Secretary of State for Scotland about his decision to retain the Scottish Grand Committee, which the hon. Gentleman claimed was part of the Secretary of State's "empire building". Did the hon. Gentleman bother to tell the press that retention of the Scottish Grand Committee was part of the written evidence that the Scottish National party submitted in a memorandum to the Procedures Committee, or did he neglect to mention that?

Mr. Swinney: The hon. Gentleman asserts that I have abandoned my prepared speech, but I intend to go through it page by page. This is a website extract from the Procedure Committee report and it presents a sequence—*[Interruption.]* I will deal first with the points raised by the hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Mr. Browne) in his intervention—if he has the courtesy to listen. I had the courtesy to allow him to intervene, so he should have the courtesy to listen to my response.

I have various quotations made by several Members: the hon. Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell), Madam Speaker, the right hon. Member for Cardiff, South and Penarth (Mr. Michael), me and many others. I also have a briefing note entitled "The Scotland Office Rip-Off", which outlines the expanding costs of the office of the Secretary of State for Scotland, and I have referred already to section 96 of the Scotland Act. My speech is crafted on A5 paper and written in my own hand. The next page is entitled "Grand Committee", so I am about to address the issue about which the hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun is so concerned. *[Interruption.]*

[Mr. Swinney]

The Secretary of State is behaving as discourteously as the hon. Gentleman. I will come to that point in a moment.

The Procedure Committee report states:

"Grand Committees are, in some sense, an alternative to devolution and when devolution is effected, they are no longer appropriate."

I am prepared to accept that point of view. My party made a submission to the Procedure Committee in February 1999. The hon. Member for Glasgow, Cathcart (Mr. Maxton) failed to refer to the part of our submission that said:

"It is to be questioned whether there remains a role for the Scottish Grand Committee. It remains an appropriate forum for the debate of the reserved matters from a distinctly Scottish perspective, but this is also within the Scottish Parliament. We therefore propose that it continue on a trial basis for the time being."

That was in February. We have had a trial period. We have had a number more of them. The hon. Member for Argyll and Bute (Mrs. Michie) presided over the last one in the former Scottish Assembly building in Regent road, Edinburgh some weeks before the election in May. It was a comprehensive waste of time, just as they all were before the 1997 election. The formula proposed by the Secretary of State for Scotland that we should summon all sorts of United Kingdom Ministers to the Scottish Grand Committee produced nothing but cost to the public purse. No information was given to the Scottish public and absolutely no purpose was served.

In proposing the continuation of the Scottish Grand Committee now, the Secretary of State is simply extending that process of giving institutions to Scottish Members of Parliament at Westminster who do not have enough to do and are determined to find a role for themselves. That is what we take exception to. The Scottish Parliament is doing fine work scrutinising important issues. The reserved areas can be adequately handled by the Scottish Affairs Committee, scrutinising them genuinely and dispassionately. There is no need to summon a whole bunch of Labour Members just to say yes to the Secretary of State for Scotland, who seeks to intervene again.

Dr. Reid: I intervene only because the hon. Gentleman did not answer the question that he was courteously offering to answer. Did he tell the press yesterday, when he made the allegation that the Scottish Grand Committee constituted an empire being built by me, that it was the view of his party in its evidence to the Procedure Committee that the Scottish Grand Committee should be retained as it was a useful forum for discussion of reserved matters? Did he tell the press that? If not, is that not one of the most rank pieces of hypocrisy, even by the SNP's standards of double briefing?

Mr. Swinney: In terms of the most rank pieces of hypocrisy, the Secretary of State could outclass me any day of the week. This morning's news reports said:

"These measures were generally supported by the Scottish National Party last night, but it is expected the Nationalists will today heavily criticise Dr. Reid's decision to retain the grand committee."

I have explained the development of our position.

Dr. Reid: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Swinney: No, I am making progress. I have explained what we are doing, what we have set out in our arguments and what we are putting to the House today. It is important that we do not have more institutions built upon existing ones simply to create the infrastructure for the Secretary of State to have a bigger role and job.

Mr. Alexander *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman may be keen to intervene but I will not have two Members standing at the same time.

Mr. Swinney: I have spoken for 22 minutes, which is longer than I had intended and I certainly wish to give other hon. Members the opportunity to take part.

We do not want to see institutions built upon institutions to create a job and a role for the Secretary of State for Scotland and his not-so-busy Labour Members at Westminster. The key point in our proposals today is that there must be no unilateral interference in the matters devolved to the Scottish Parliament by Westminster—the Select Committee on Procedure has helped us with a number of definitions by what it has reported today. Westminster must respect the right of elected representatives of the Scottish Parliament to express their views on any number of issues, the scope of which will be for the Scottish Parliament to determine.

Mr. Browne: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Alexander: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Swinney: I am bringing my remarks to a close. I have spoken for longer than I had anticipated because I was so gracious in accepting interventions.

The final issue does not concern me because I represent a Scottish constituency and I have no desire to intrude on the domestic debate within England about how it is governed, but there are legitimate issues about the governance of England that are not answered by the Government's response to the Procedure Committee's report. The Government should reflect on that. The logical solution to the position that has resulted from devolution is to establish in Scotland an independent Parliament with the powers and control over Scotland's resources to fulfil the aspirations of people in Scotland and meet their expectations in all policy areas.

5 pm

Mr. Malcolm Chisholm (Edinburgh, North and Leith): Perhaps I should declare an interest as a Member of the Scottish Parliament. I am proud to be a Member of that Parliament, but I am proud also to be a Member of this Parliament until the general election. Unlike the hon. Member for North Tayside (Mr. Swinney), I see a central, crucial role for Scottish Members in this Parliament throughout the next century and beyond.

Mr. Swinney: I should also have prefaced my remarks by declaring an interest as a Member of the Scottish Parliament, and I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving me the opportunity to make that declaration now.

Mr. Chisholm: Unlike the hon. Gentleman, I have a coherent view on the Scottish Grand Committee. We all

enjoyed his attempts to explain the earlier submission on that issue by the Scottish National party. I noted that he resorted, as a final defence of that submission, to the explanation that the party supported the Grand Committee on a trial basis. Since 6 May, the Scottish Grand Committee has met on precisely no occasions. That must be the first trial in the history of Parliament based on no sittings whatever. For opportunistic reasons, the SNP changed its view simply because it wanted to continue its campaign against my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State, and on this occasion the Scottish Grand Committee was the stick with which to beat him.

The right hon. Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir G. Young), who led the debate for the official Opposition, restated the charge that Labour Members have not thought through the consequences of devolution. However, it strikes me that the Opposition have not thought through the consequences of their central proposal. Their oft-repeated message, which is directed at their English electorate, relates to English and Welsh Members voting on English and Welsh legislation.

There is a case to be made for that by those who believe in federalism, and the Liberal Democrats are consistent in that regard. There is even a case to be made by those who believe in an English Parliament, but the official Opposition keep saying that they do not believe in federalism or an English Parliament, while making their populist, opportunist appeal to their English voters.

In this century, only between 1964 and 1966 has there been a Labour majority in Parliament and a Conservative majority in England, but we know that on some future date that situation could arise. By quoting John Mackintosh, my hon. Friend the Member for Paisley, South (Mr. Alexander) made the important theoretical point that the Opposition's proposals undermine the whole nature of Cabinet Government in this Parliament. One party could have a majority in England, but another party might command the UK Government, and the Opposition know that in those circumstances we would have, for example, a Health Secretary for England who could not get legislation through the House. If the Opposition wanted to make their proposals and move towards federalism, that would be a consistent position, but it is totally dishonest of them to use the argument about English votes without thinking through the consequences of their proposals.

Mr. Grieve: Surely the hon. Gentleman himself has half-answered the question. It is unlikely in practice that limiting votes on English and Welsh issues to English and Welsh MPs would affect the viability of the United Kingdom Government. That is a good reason not to go down the road to the federalism of which the Secretary of State does not approve. However, on those occasions on which such a situation could arise, the Government would, in any event, be inherently weak, and the fact that they might be shorter-lived as a result probably does not matter for the sake of making sure that the Union is maintained, and that the people of England and Wales consider that they have been treated fairly as a result of the way in which devolution works north of the border.

Mr. Chisholm: It seems to me that the hon. Gentleman is proposing a federal solution, and he should think of its consequences.

The settlement, as agreed by legislation in the House, is based on a fundamental distinction between devolved and reserved areas. As a consequence, all Members of the House have a vote in reserved areas. The fundamental principle of the settlement is power sharing, and we should remember that that is at the centre of what we are discussing.

I noticed that, at the start of the debate, the right hon. Member for North-West Hampshire said that the language of devolution was inconsistent with the centralising instincts of Downing street. I do not know anything about the instincts of Downing street, but I do know that, in the past few years, Downing street has handed over more power than any other Government did in this or any other century. That is the reality of the decentralisation of power. Now, on the brink of a new century, we are moving forward to a century of power sharing—by contrast with the 19th century and most of the 20th century, which were centuries of nationalism.

I am sorry that the hon. Member for North Tayside has left the Chamber, because my fundamental reason for objecting to the ideology of the Scottish National party is that it is rooted in the nationalism of the past, whereas we are moving on the tide of history towards the power sharing of the new century.

Rev. Martin Smyth (Belfast, South): The hon. Gentleman has three times used the term "power sharing". Would he care to give the House his definition of that? He seemed to be mixing it up with divesting the House of its power, and I do not think that power sharing is exactly as he envisages it.

Mr. Chisholm: I was going to speak about power sharing. I thought that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State summed it up in the word "symmetrical". He said that the House should be concerned with the reserved areas although it could at times, if it wished, discuss areas devolved to the Scottish Parliament and the National Assembly for Wales, whereas the Parliament and Assembly should concentrate on their devolved areas, although they could sometimes discuss the reserved areas.

That is the partnership that the new settlement is all about. We all know that that is how it will work. Power over health policy and education policy in Scotland lies with the Scottish Parliament; power over social security policy and defence policy and other areas lies in this place. I hope that that partnership will extend to all levels of the political process—to the devolved bodies and to the constituencies. I hope that, sooner rather than later, individual MPs and MSPs will get used to focusing on their specific areas. I am sure that that is already happening—that Members of the Scottish Parliament are dealing with constituents who come to them about health or education, whereas Members of this Parliament are dealing with constituents who come to them about social security or immigration.

That separation of powers also underlies many of the suggestions in the report. When I first thought about the subject, I shared many of the feelings of my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow, Cathcart (Mr. Maxton)—who, in his submissions to the Procedure Committee, said that his first instinct was that there should not be a Scottish Grand Committee, a Scottish Affairs Committee or Scottish questions because devolved areas only would

[Mr. Chisholm]

have been discussed in them. If that had happened, or if those areas had been discussed substantially at all, I would certainly not have supported the continuation of those bodies. However, the report and the Government's words show that it is intended that those bodies should focus not on devolved areas but on reserved areas as they affect Scotland. That is the massive role—I hope that Welsh Members will forgive me if I focus on Scotland—that Scottish Members of Parliament will continue to play in the House.

Often, the media do not seem to understand that massive areas of policy affecting Scotland—social security, Treasury matters, defence, foreign affairs, and many others—are still being decided in this House, and that, increasingly, Scottish Members will devote themselves to and focus on those issues. The work of the Secretary of State and the different Committees should all be seen in the light of that general point.

As the first paragraph of the memorandum of understanding says, the Secretary of State is speaking for Scottish interests in all those reserved areas, and part of that work—which is not understood by many people outside the House, including the media—is the crucial work of the Secretary of State in the Cabinet Committees. So much of the work of Government takes place in those Committees. It is crucial that the Secretary of State for Scotland is present to argue for Scotland in the same way as Scottish Office Ministers used to do in the past.

Mr. Alexander: Does my hon. Friend agree that one of the difficulties that has bedevilled many of the debates on these issues has been the basic failure of people to understand that the mandate of Members representing Scottish constituencies at Westminster is derived not from the Scottish Parliament, but directly from their election by the Scottish people at general elections? In the light of that, it is reasonable, defensible and attractive to have a situation where powers can be shared within Parliaments, because within defined and limited areas, Parliaments have competencies. There are reserved areas—the areas that are dealt with by Westminster Members, whose mandate for them is derived directly from the Scottish people. Equally, Members of the Scottish Parliament have a mandate derived from the Scottish people in respect of devolved areas of government.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. Interventions should be brief. They are not a chance to make another speech.

Mr. Chisholm: I entirely agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Paisley, South. I hope that over time, members of the public will come to have that understanding.

Having dealt with the Secretary of State, the next contentious issue is the Scottish Grand Committee. I do not see that as problematic. It seems only natural for Scottish Members to want to express an interest in reserved areas as they affect Scotland. I have dealt with the position of the Scottish National party, but I was surprised to see the SNP changing its mind. The hon. Member for North Tayside gave the example of the fuel duty escalator. At some point he might welcome a Scottish Grand Committee, where that issue could be discussed in relation to Scotland.

On a lighter note, the hon. Member for North Tayside said that before the general election, Scottish Grand Committees had been successful only in helping to obliterate the Conservative party in Scotland. That is also an argument in their favour.

Theoretically, there might be more contention in relation to Scottish questions and the Select Committee on Scottish Affairs. When those involved are dealing with reserved matters, they can tread on the toes of other Secretaries of State and other Select Committees. Basically, that is a fact of life that we must accept in the new settlement. I think that there can be negotiations within Westminster so that the Secretary of State and the Committees can take an interest in the various reserved areas.

Mr. Swinney: Does the hon. Gentleman think that a report of a Select Committee would be more effective in changing the Government's mind in a particular policy area than a debate in the Scottish Grand Committee?

Mr. Chisholm: I do not see why we have to make an exclusive decision about that. Clearly the Select Committee and the Scottish Grand Committee would have different roles. I am a great supporter of Select Committees and of the Committees of the Scottish Parliament. Equally, however, a Grand Committee can express a view.

With the Procedure Committee report and the Government's response, we have a sound basis for building the new sort of Union that we want to create in the new century. The United Kingdom has never been a unitary state, even under the old dispensation, but it is now clearer that we are a Union of different nations. I believe that we can go forward into the new millennium strengthening the bonds within the Union, but making sure that nations can express their own concerns and priorities because of the new opportunities that the Government have created via devolution.

5.14 pm

Sir Paul Beresford (Mole Valley): I want to be succinct because I feel that as a member of the Select Committee that produced the report, it is more appropriate to listen and afterwards to read the report of the debate.

I shall touch on two matters that came through to the Committee, and certainly to me, but do not come through in the rather dry report that is before us. The feeling came through quite clearly—I salute my ancestors, who were almost all Scottish and Macdonalds, a comment that has probably started the war again—that the role of a Scottish Member in Westminster following devolution had dramatically diminished. One had the feeling that some Scottish Members were wondering what on earth they would do with their time. That feeling is exacerbated by the over-representation of Scottish Members in the House. I understand that that will be righted in two elections' time, and I regret that it will not happen earlier.

It seemed to me that various approaches to the problem were possible. The over-representation could be reduced. The tight boundaries on discussion in this House of matters before the junior Parliament, if I may put it that way, could be broadened. I use local government in England as an example, although I accept that it is a tenuous example.

Local government in England comes under heavy scrutiny in the House. That presents an opportunity. The Chairman of the Select Committee on Welsh Affairs suggested a joint Select Committee between the two Parliaments, and consideration should be given to that proposal in the Procedure Committee.

The Committee's immediate response was to examine whether the procedures could be reduced to meet the diminished role. There was considerable debate and we agreed—rightly, I think—that the Select Committees should continue. They have a definite role. However, we were clear—some of us emphatically so—that the Scottish Grand Committee should go. As one can imagine, there was quite a squawk, and we are hearing the reverberations from some hon. Members this evening.

Consequently, it was decided to try a "suck it and see" approach, and to ask for the matter to be laid to one side for a time, to be tested. It is with considerable regret that I note that the Government take the same position—test and see—without actually testing it. I hope that they will think about the issue more carefully and recognise that the Committee carefully adopted a similar posture to that of the Government, but intended to use the opportunity to test whether we needed the Grand Committee.

The second view that came across clearly was that England was not being represented and was not getting a fair crack of the whip. The Committee argued that Bills—I should say all legislation—relating exclusively to England, Scotland or Wales should be considered in Committee by Members representing the relevant part of the United Kingdom. There have been examples of that under previous Governments, particularly in the case of legislation relating to local government. Generally, such Bills relate to England and Wales, and it would be appropriate for Members from those two countries only to participate in the discussion and perhaps even in the vote.

I stress those two topics because they are not represented in the report, although they provoked the most heated discussion. I hope that deep consideration will be given to those views, which the Government seem to have rejected. That is a mistake, and they should think again.

5.19 pm

Mr. Nigel Griffiths (Edinburgh, South): I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Macclesfield (Mr. Winterton), who chairs the Procedure Committee. He spoke today with directness and honesty. Those who do not serve with him on a Committee may not see the hon. Gentleman's diligence and energy, hard work and output, to which, in spite of political differences, I and everyone else pay tribute.

We have just heard from the hon. Member for Mole Valley (Sir P. Beresford) an equally honest account of how he sees things. To my mind, he has just spelled out to the House a recipe for tearing the United Kingdom asunder. He directly challenged the role of Scottish Members of Parliament in this House of Commons, with which the Procedure Committee's report dealt in detail. If we go down the route of excluding Scottish Members of Parliament, not only will it damage relations between us within the United Kingdom, but it will leave England immensely impoverished. That is because all of us bring to debates and deliberations on legislation in this place our experiences, and the experiences of our constituencies and of our regions.

In this House, Madam Speaker, like previous Speakers, lays down clear rules for calling on Members of Parliament to participate in questions and debates according, among other things, to what she believes they have to contribute from their experience.

On Tuesday, when the Deputy Prime Minister spoke in the House on the terrible rail tragedy at Ladbroke Grove, those who were called to put questions to him had some interest in the matter, such as the Chairman of the Select Committee. Only those with some interest were called. We have a history of that.

On 19 May, one Home Office Minister was answering questions about the Government's proposals on the right to elect for trial by jury. Hon Members were called from both sides. A number of hon. Members suggested that any restriction on that right was a tremendous infringement of civil liberties. My hon. Friend the Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Mr. Browne), a Scottish Member of Parliament, rose to say that the Scottish people have never really had that right, that it is a matter for the prosecution. If Madam Speaker had not called my hon Friend, on what, as a consequence of the Procedure Committee's report, might be considered a wholly English issue, the House would have been immeasurably impoverished and ill-informed, or would certainly not have had that information.

I have a children's hospital in my constituency and, when the problems arose in Bristol, I, like, I am sure, other hon. Members in a similar situation to me, obtained a briefing from the local consultant on whether there was a likelihood of anything similar arising. I was informed why, without prejudging the final outcome, it was unlikely that anything similar would arise.

If we are saying that the right of a Member of Parliament from one part of the United Kingdom, be it Northern Ireland, Scotland or Wales, to inform a debate and—to come directly to the point made by the hon. Member for Mole Valley—even to vote, to avoid a problem and a pitfall into which people may be blindly walking, should be removed, that would be bad for the people of England as well as for the way in which we legislate in this place.

Mr. Grieve *rose—*

Mr. Russell Brown (Dumfries) *rose—*

Mr. Griffiths: I shall give way to my hon. Friend, but I give way first to the hon. Member for Beaconsfield (Mr. Grieve).

Mr. Grieve: The hon. Gentleman is making a most interesting contribution. Is it not a fact that I, as a Member of Parliament for the United Kingdom, with, as it happens, a great interest in conservation in the highlands and in the Cairngorm area, which I know well, can no longer intervene on the question of the Cairngorm funicular because that is one of the consequences of devolution? It may be a loss, but is there not a measure of unfairness when the reverse is not the case—and an unfairness which is likely to grow unless the issue is addressed, possibly incrementally, but certainly now?

Mr. Griffiths: I realise that the hon. Gentleman was not a Member of the House in the previous Parliament.

[Mr. Griffiths]

He did not see the impact of hon. Members telling the Scottish people exactly what they thought was best for them—the poll tax and a catalogue of other measures, for example. I do not want to rake through history, but that was a mistake. It would be a mistake if hon. Members from parts of the United Kingdom other than England did not take full account of what local Members of Parliament were saying and what was informing them. Restricting the dialogue and debate in any way would be quite detrimental.

Sir Paul Beresford *rose—*

Mr. Russell Brown *rose—*

Mr. Griffiths: I have a point to make to the hon. Member for Mole Valley, but before I do so I shall honour my word to my hon. Friend the Member for Dumfries (Mr. Brown).

Mr. Brown: I thank my hon. Friend, and perhaps I can add to his argument. He is fully aware of the location of my constituency. The point being made in the Chamber, which has been made in the past, concerns restricting the voting power of Scottish Members. As important as the health care offered by Dumfries and Galloway health board in my constituency and the neighbouring constituency is that provided in Cumbria, because about—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. An intervention must be brief. The hon. Gentleman is not the only Member who has perhaps made a small speech during an intervention, but that cannot be allowed.

Mr. Griffiths: My hon. Friend was making a valuable point.

Sir Paul Beresford *rose—*

Mr. Griffiths: I will give way to the hon. Member for Mole Valley, but I shall perhaps provoke him a little further by giving an example that comes to mind because of something that was said about the problem of English Members of Parliament—or, indeed, Scottish Members of Parliament—not being able to vote on the reform of local government in Scotland, but being able to vote on such reform in England. We may learn in two scenarios: the Scottish Parliament may make mistakes, which we will want to inform the House of and avoid; equally, we may want to participate in reforms of local government that are carried out by the House and which we will then want to commend to our colleagues up in Scotland. This is not a clear-cut issue in terms of participation or voting.

Sir Paul Beresford: There is an opposite to that. I, and many of my hon. Friends, have experience of local government in England, but we are not able to contribute to any debate on the reform of local government in Scotland—unless, perhaps, this House has more far-reaching effects on its junior Parliament than are presently envisaged or allowed.

Mr. Griffiths: I can be more direct with the hon. Gentleman than I was with the hon. Member for Beaconsfield, his colleague on the Front Bench, because he was a Minister in the previous Government. The damage that I am afraid was done in Scotland is the reason why there are no Conservative Members of Parliament representing Scottish seats. Under no circumstances will we make the same mistake in England.

On page 139, the report raises several issues under the heading "Post Devolution Concerns", and the hon. Member for Mole Valley touched on one of them—the electoral change that may be needed in Scotland in respect of boundaries. I am concerned about one aspect of that. Let me concede at the outset that there may be a case for considering how many electors in cities such as Edinburgh, which are comparable to cities elsewhere in the United Kingdom, should elect a Member of Parliament. However, the biggest discrepancies can occur in rural areas—the smallest electorates in Scotland live in the islands, for example—and we shall have to be very careful. The biggest seat in Scotland—Ross, Skye and Inverness, West—covers 3,500 sq m of territory and has an electorate of some 55,500.

Sir Paul Beresford: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Griffiths: No, because other hon. Members want to speak.

If one wants to adjust that boundary and have a bigger electorate, does one go north to Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross, where there are already 3,200 sq m to be covered, or south to Inverness, East, Nairn and Lochaber, which covers 3,300 sq m and has an electorate of 65,500—closer to the English average of just under 70,000? The biggest English seats are all more than half that size. Indeed, the biggest English seat is well under half the size; the second biggest is less than 1,000 sq m and, therefore, less than a third of the size. Those seats sit together. Hexham, which is the second biggest—Penrith and The Border is the other—has an electorate of 59,000. In recognition of the fact that the Member of Parliament representing that seat has to cover such a large area, his electorate is 15 per cent. lower than the English average.

I use those examples to inform the House of the problems faced. Although we do not live in an age when one has to spend a month riding on horseback around the constituency, or even a week or two, and most of our constituents now have telephones, people are increasingly sceptical of politicians' intentions. As one who is passionately committed to public service, I know of the sacrifices that are made by everyone in this Chamber, and I think that our constituents appreciate them. However, if one expands some of those big constituencies, it becomes impossible for hon. Members to cover them and see their constituents, and to keep the link that we prize so much.

From the tenor of some of the comments made in this debate, I fear that those who will be most disadvantaged are not the Scottish Members of Parliament but the electorates not just of Scotland but of Northern Ireland, of Wales and, most important in the context of this debate, of England.

5.33 pm

Mr. Elfyn Llwyd (Meirionnydd Nant Conwy): To quote Lewis Carroll, this debate is becoming curiouser and curiouser. We have been discussing the West Lothian

question for hours, and the architect seems to be missing from the Chamber. There is some talk in the Lobby that he has been imprisoned in Millbank Tower, but I do not know whether that is true.

Post-devolution, many questions will have to be asked. There is uncertainty about how the relationship between this place and the National Assembly for Wales will develop, but, crucially, there is some uncertainty about the future relationship and conduct of affairs with the European Commission and the Council of Ministers, and the important role that the National Assembly will play in that regard.

It does not matter whether one is on the progressive side of the argument—believing that devolution is a process, not an event—or on the regressive side, or dinosaur tendency, which adheres to the opposite view. We have before us a real opportunity to improve the governance of Wales and, in so doing, to bring it far closer to the people. That will bring with it a far greater sense of accountability, something that I am sure that we would all want.

In the European context, I am pleased to note that the agreed concordats provide:

"In appropriate cases, the leader of the delegation could agree to Ministers from the devolved administrations speaking for the UK in Council . . . and that they would do so with the full weight of the UK behind them".

My party and colleagues in the Scottish National party have been campaigning for that for a long time. It is a great step forward, but whether it happens is another matter. I hope that it will happen, if devolution in its true sense is to come about. I welcome the day when Scottish Ministers and Welsh Secretaries conduct affairs on the European mainland. Despite what the hon. Member for Macclesfield (Mr. Winterton) said in his redoubtable, forceful and eloquent way, as usual I do not agree with him.

There are many other issues to consider, such as the deep and wider agricultural crisis in Wales. The crisis in Wales is different from that in the other constituent parts of the United Kingdom. There is an immediate case for a Secretary from Wales to represent the National Assembly at a European level.

Mr. Ieuan Wyn Jones (Ynys Môn): My hon. Friend has referred to concordats and our problems in agriculture. Does he agree that we could make considerable progress if the Government in Westminster were to push ahead with plans to have much wider concordats between, for example, the National Assembly's Agriculture Secretary and the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, so that the ground rules are clear into the future?

Mr. Llwyd: I agree entirely with my hon. Friend. The concordats are very important documents. We have waited a long time for them, and I welcome the fact that they have now been produced. I am pleased that they will be reviewed annually. Despite what I said earlier, I realise that this process takes time and we cannot have all the answers at once.

The impact of the agricultural crisis on all sectors of the Welsh agricultural economy is slightly different, and problems will be tackled differently from those in East Anglia, where substantial farmers farm in a totally different way. I hope that we take advantage of this concordat, and move forward to better the situation of people in rural Wales.

In March this year, I gave evidence to the Procedure Committee, which is ably chaired by the hon. Member for Macclesfield. I welcomed that inquiry because things were, and are, going to change. My major concern at that time was the suggestion that the Welsh Grand Committee should be abolished: "suspended" was the word used. To be perfectly honest, the Welsh Grand Committee is no great shakes. Its list of achievements is minimal, to put it mildly. It has never taken any decisions of earth-shattering importance.

Nevertheless, it is a conduit to Welsh opinion, and, in its latter stages, it met several times in Wales and was a tangible and useful link with the electors. Fewer meetings in Wales may be called for post-devolution, but the vital point that I was trying to make then, and that I wish briefly to make now, is that the Welsh Grand Committee is entitled, under current Standing Orders, to sit as a Second Reading Committee. That is the crux of the matter. It could be used as a Liaison Committee with the National Assembly: a sounding board providing a fast-track procedure for legislation that the National Assembly wants to bring before the House without its being caught up in the timetable that inevitably clogs up work in this Parliament.

I recall the exchange that I had with the Chairman when it was suggested that the new Chamber in the Grand Committee Room could serve as a venue for Welsh debates. It does not matter where the Committee sits. I believe that that made the case for the Welsh Grand Committee. I took the view that it was important that we fought to retain the Welsh Grand Committee. I am pleased that the Government have sided with my party on the evidence that we and others gave that day. I believe that the Welsh Grand Committee still has an important role in the current settlement. I welcome paragraph 5 of the Government's response to the report. I agree that to suspend the Welsh Grand would be premature and possibly damaging. I share the Government's view that that forum is a useful mechanism for debating issues of particular interest to Wales.

Some of the more cynical in our midst might place a different construction on that. Curiously enough—speaking of cynics—it was put to me by a member of the lobby that this might enable central Government to reel back a bit; but I prefer to think that that is not the case, and that it is a contribution to devolution. I am not naive, but I genuinely believe that that is the right construction, and that the process will be assisted rather than impeded.

The question of a legislative platform for the National Assembly is vital. It is one of the core points. As others have observed, the Select Committee on Welsh Affairs engaged in a fruitful discussion with a panel of chairpersons of the various National Assembly Committees. We are graced by the presence of one of them today—my hon. Friend the Member for Ynys Môn (Mr. Jones). The prevailing view seems to be that the Welsh Affairs Committee could become a conduit, or sounding board, for legislation, and that the Assembly might want that to happen.

We heard earlier that whatever legislation was introduced must be introduced at the behest of the National Assembly or the Scottish Parliament. That is

[Mr. Llwyd]

fine: I have no problem with it. Such action could focus on the primary legislation that was considered a priority by the Assembly, but it could also provide a useful mechanism for feedback from Westminster on the progress of primary legislation. It should be stressed, however, that the Welsh Affairs Committee could not be the sole route or interface for communication. I feel that the Welsh Grand Committee should perform that function as well, because, in my view, the situation requires a bolster of that kind. Meetings that I have had with Welsh Assembly Members of various political hues suggest to me that they and Welsh Members of Parliament unanimously want the relationship to succeed, in the interests of better governance in Wales.

The hon. Member for North Tayside (Mr. Swinney) made a point that impressed me greatly, but it seems to have escaped me now. No doubt, it will come back to me in a moment. His speech contained so many impressive points that it is not surprising that I missed out one or two.

Perhaps the most important of the report's recommendations for Wales is that there should be a new way of dealing with legislation relating exclusively to Wales. Instead of the current Second Reading debates on the Floor of the House, for most Bills of that kind, special Committees would be set up. If agreed, Bills would then proceed to Committee and to other stages. That would provide a fast-track system: Bills would not be clogged up in the procedures of this House.

The Procedure Committee rejected the suggestion that Second Reading should be taken in the Welsh Grand Committee, and I feel that that was a mistake. I think that I have made the point sufficiently. The Procedure Committee suggested that there should be an ad hoc Second Reading Committee containing at least 20 Welsh Members of Parliament. That implies that there might be a different political balance—that the Second Reading Committee might reflect party strengths in Wales, while the Committee stage Committee might reflect the strength of the Commons as a whole. That may give rise to concern.

The Government's response is careful and considered. I ask the Secretary of State for Scotland whether the words

"debating issues of particular interest to those parts of the UK"

envisage the possibility that the Welsh Grand Committee will become a debating chamber for particularly Welsh business. Can we consider strengthening it by giving it a role involving liaison with the Assembly, initiating Bills to be dealt with by this Parliament rather than relying on Government time or private Members' procedures? That might envisage a requirement on Government to introduce any Bills that are presented to them by the National Assembly. The Committee would surely be the forum for that.

I deal with two short matters of substance. One is the scope of future inquiries of the Select Committee on Welsh Affairs. The obvious point is that the Select Committee's remit will be that of non-devolved areas that impact on Wales. It follows that the remit must be examined carefully and redefined. For example, if there were a problem to do with taxation, defence, social security or one of the other reserved matters, Welsh electors would not have the same rights via their representatives and the respective Select Committee to scrutinise and to hold the Department responsible to account. That presents a case for broadening the Standing Orders. In fairness, the Procedure Committee suggested that, although that suggestion has not found favour, as yet anyway, with the Government. However, the tenor of the Leader of the House's speech was careful and balanced. To put it crudely, it was a wait-and-see speech. I should like to develop that theme further at another point.

There is no doubt that we need to look at that matter. We have talked about fairness for various constituent parts of the United Kingdom, but that point is crucial. I commend the letter of 14 October from the Chairman of the Select Committee on Welsh Affairs to the Leader of the House as the right way forward. I have no doubt that it can be reconsidered at another point.

Therefore, the Procedure Committee's recommendation of a relaxation in that area is right. Of course, I do not agree with the Government's view, but, as I have said, I hope that the matter can be revisited fairly urgently. There will be an urgent need to redefine the working of the Select Committee if, as is suggested, it is to carry on working.

I am not saying that to perpetuate my membership of the Committee—I have other things to do—but it is in the best interests of our constituents; that is really what it is all about. As I have said, I am sure that the Leader of the House will be prepared to debate the matter at another point.

The other matter is the Government's correct belief, that Select Committees will play an important role in fostering good relations between Westminster and the respective devolved legislatures. In the words of the Government's response:

"It is possible that they will also conduct inquiries in conjunction with Committees of the devolved legislatures into subjects for which responsibility is shared."

That makes sense. It will reflect the tenor of the useful recent meeting between the Select Committee and National Assembly Members in Cardiff.

The Procedure Committee's view on joint meetings appears to be a little negative and not reflective of the views of Assembly Members and Members of the House of Commons, as far as I am aware. At paragraph 17, the Committee said:

"Committees should not hold formal meetings in conjunction with Members of the devolved legislatures without the express authority of the House and Members should be aware that there is no guarantee that their words enjoy the protection of Article IX of the Bill of Rights in any informal joint meetings."

That is a bit negative. Clearly, what is needed is for Standing Orders to be changed. I hope that we shall persuade the Leader of the House that a Standing Order change is necessary to foster good regular meetings and good relations with the devolved legislatures. The reference to privilege is clearly not insurmountable and can be cleared up with a little ingenuity.

Subject to the caveats that I have mentioned, the Procedure Committee's report is broadly to be welcomed, as is the Government's response. Both are constructive and will assist devolution. If the right hon. Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir G. Young) pleads for a full legislative and tax-varying Parliament for England, he can rely on Plaid Cymru for support.

5.50 pm

Miss Anne Begg (Aberdeen, South): I shall concentrate on two aspects of the report. The first is expressed in the report's very first paragraph, which says that the Committee supports an evolutionary approach. That is to be welcomed, and I note that some matters are still evolving.

Secondly, I shall concentrate on the role of the Scottish Affairs Committee, of which I am privileged to be a member. I believe that I am also the only member of that Committee who is to speak in this debate. I was very happy to note that, if the report's recommendations are accepted, for years to come I shall have a long and fruitful time on the Select Committee, the powers of which may even be enhanced.

Over the years, many of the House's procedures have developed through habit and repute. Our procedures have not been written in tablets of stone, and the same should apply to the Scottish Parliament and the National Assembly for Wales. One evolving feature of devolution has been the relationships developing between Members of Parliament and Members of the Scottish Parliament—and I ask hon. Members from the other constituent parts of the United Kingdom to forgive me if I concentrate most of my remarks on the situation in Scotland.

Like my hon. Friend the Member for Inverness, East, Nairn and Lochaber (Mr. Stewart), I am in the unusual position of being in a different party from that of the Member of the Scottish Parliament representing my constituency there. One might therefore think that, if such a situation causes tensions, I would be aware of them. However, I am happy to report that it is possible to have good working relationships with members of other political parties.

It is important for my constituents in Aberdeen, South that I should work with, not against, the Liberal Democrat Member of the Scottish Parliament representing my constituency. In fact, the two of us met and decided how we should deal with the various cases that will come our way. It was not terribly difficult to reach a decision on a procedure, and other hon. Members may want to copy the model—which essentially boiled down to dividing a Member's role into an advocacy and a policy-making function.

In determining which of us should fulfil the advocacy role, the primary consideration should be to whom the constituent went first. However, if a constituent came to me saying that Scottish housing policy, for example, should be changed, I would pass on the case to the Member of the Scottish Parliament. Conversely, if someone had a query on social security policy but went to the MSP, the case would be referred to me. The arrangement is not terribly difficult to understand.

Nevertheless, I believe that there is a case for an evolutionary approach to dealing with those matters, as we cannot know what other issues will arise. Moreover, various grey areas between the two Parliaments will inevitably become apparent.

As a Scottish Member of Parliament, I find it difficult to know which Minister we should approach on various issues. Health, for example, is a devolved matter. Therefore, one might expect that, as a Scottish Member, I should not write to United Kingdom Health Ministers on health policy, which has been devolved. However, some health matters have not been devolved.

To use a personal example, I have a single-gene defect. However, genetics is not a devolved matter. So if I wanted to lobby on my condition—or on one like it, such as cystic fibrosis—the appropriate Minister to approach would be the Secretary of State for Health, not the Scottish Minister for Health. Needless to say, I should hope that the Member of the Scottish Parliament would be lobbying the appropriate Scottish Ministers on precisely the same issues. In dealing with research into genetics and the cure for certain conditions, I would hope that any advances would be applied United Kingdom-wide and not only in Scotland or in England. That will be for the benefit of everybody in the United Kingdom.

That is a personal issue, but others are not so clear-cut. A constituent wrote to me about the fact that her child was born with an eye defect because she had been in contact with toxoplasmosis before he was born. I see no contradiction in a Scottish Member of Parliament alerting the Secretary of State for Health, because the issue will affect people throughout the United Kingdom. I am sure that other hon. Members would want to be involved in campaigning on changing the policy.

These grey areas are important. That is why the relationship between the two Parliaments should be of an evolutionary nature until we see how matters work out. The golden rule in those relationships should be common sense and maturity. The First Minister called the devolution settlement a grown-up Parliament. It will need maturity in both Parliaments to make commonsense decisions on who should take up cases or whether it is appropriate for both Parliaments to deal with issues at the same time.

I support the comment of my hon. Friend the Member for Paisley, South (Mr. Alexander) that there is nothing to prevent this Parliament from discussing devolved matters or to prevent the Scottish Parliament from discussing reserved matters. We are looking for self-discipline in both Parliaments. When an issue is obviously a reserved matter, such as broadcasting, the Scottish Parliament should not discuss it. Issues relating particularly to Scottish broadcasting or the media in Scotland should be left to Scottish Members of Parliament to raise here. Scottish Members of Parliament should have the self-discipline not to raise most health issues or matters that are peculiar to the Scottish education system, which is very different from that in England and Wales.

We need to be mature. Perhaps there was some confusion when members of Highlands and Islands Enterprise spoke to the hon. Member for North Tayside (Mr. Swinney) about the fuel escalator. They may have been unsure whether he was sitting in front of them as a Member of the Scottish Parliament or as a Scottish Member of Parliament. Perhaps he should have said that he was wearing his other hat that day and they should have come back to see him the following day when he would be wearing his Member of Parliament's hat. Such confusion—if it was confusion—should be solved after the next general election, when I hope that the other political parties will adopt Labour's policy of saying that there should be no dual mandates. That will make it even more important for the relationships between the two Parliaments to be well established by the time of that election, so that any tensions can be smoothly dealt with.

[Miss Anne Begg]

I am pleased that the Scottish Affairs Committee has survived the report. It should continue because it has an important role to play. Interestingly, the Scottish National party's submission to the Procedure Committee lists the reports that the Scottish Affairs Committee has produced over the past two years, while I have been a member. Not all of them were on purely devolved matters. I take issue with the assertion that an investigation into multi-layered democracy was a devolved matter. Surely it would still be within the rights of this House to investigate that to see how well the devolution settlement was working.

The Scottish Affairs Committee's next report will look into poverty in Scotland. Social security remains a reserved matter, but many other aspects of poverty are devolved matters. Perhaps this report will be the model from which we can start to see this Parliament and the Scottish Parliament working together. The hon. Member for Angus (Mr. Welsh)—who is in his place—is a Member of both Parliaments, and a member of the Scottish Affairs Committee, and at least one other Member is a Member of both Parliaments.

As a dual mandate exists until the general election, we have an opportunity to set up relationships between the two Parliaments. It is important that Members of Parliament and Members of the Scottish Parliament get together often to share their experiences. For most Labour Members of Parliament, this will mean meeting someone else. I appreciate that when Scottish National party Members wish to liaise with their counterparts in the Scottish Parliament, they must speak to themselves. I hope that their relationships are cordial, although I am not always sure that they are—even within that narrow remit.

The Scottish Affairs Committee and the Welsh Affairs Committee could have a valuable role in terms of liaison at Back-Bench level. We know that liaison exists at an Executive level, and that the Secretary of State for Scotland regularly meets the First Minister. I am glad to see that happening. However, it is important that there is also liaison at Back-Bench level, and at the lower levels of the Parliaments.

I was worried for a while that there would not be enough for the Scottish Affairs Committee to look into, but I am glad that the hon. Member for North Tayside has expanded what will be relevant. He said that if the Highlands and Islands enterprise board or Scottish Enterprise was concerned about the fuel escalator, the Scottish Affairs Committee could call them in to give evidence. I had assumed that the Scottish quangos would be held to account by the Scottish Parliament, and I am grateful that there may be a role for the Select Committee in looking at those quangos.

Mr. Swinney: The hon. Lady has totally misunderstood my point. I said that on a UK-reserved matter, I saw that there was a role for the Scottish Affairs Committee in providing the opportunity for such evidence to be taken. However, that concerns holding UK Ministries to account. It is not about holding to account Scottish quangos which receive their funding from the Scottish Parliament; that is a matter for the Scottish Parliament. It is important that UK Ministries listen to what is going on in Scotland and do not ignore it, as they are currently doing with regard to the fuel duty escalator.

Miss Begg: But how will we know the views of the Scottish quangos if we do not have them down to ask them questions? We cannot depend on press reports, as we know how accurate they can be; the hon. Gentleman himself was caught out today by the press. Obviously, we need to get the story from the horse's mouth, and if there is genuine concern among Scottish bodies about reserved matters in Scotland, we need to find that out. That will be the role of the Scottish Affairs Committee.

The hon. Member for North Tayside said that Scottish Members of Parliament do not have enough to do. This week, I have tabled questions to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the Prime Minister and the Department of Trade and Industry. I have signed an early-day motion on the test ban treaty, and I have had a briefing from the Secretary of State for Social Security. I have been involved in a range of things in which I, as a Member of this Parliament from Scotland, have an interest. If Scottish National Party Members have no interest in reserved matters, I wonder what they have been doing for the past two years. There is a great deal more for Scottish Members to do than even I had anticipated. We have an important role.

I am grateful for the opportunity to debate an important report. I am sure that there will be evolutionary change. It is crucial that the issues be aired and debated both here and in Scotland so that we can come to a mutual understanding and the two Parliaments can work in harmony.

6.5 pm

Mr. William Ross (East Londonderry): I have followed this debate with interest for most of the day. Scotland and Wales have been mentioned frequently, but Northern Ireland only rarely, possibly because devolution is yet to take place there. It is well known that the late John Smith, when Leader of the Opposition, intended to establish a common pattern of devolution for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, with minor variations to take account of the different structures of local government. At that time, the present Prime Minister was shadow Home Secretary, and as such was closely involved in all discussions on the design of uniform structures for the three countries.

There is no such uniformity in the current position. Scotland has a Parliament with legislative and tax-varying powers; Wales an Assembly without tax-raising powers; and Northern Ireland a shadow Assembly, also without tax-raising powers. In Scotland, the First Minister chose to form a coalition with the Liberal Democrats to deliver a workable majority; in Wales, the First Secretary decided to proceed with a minority Administration; but in Northern Ireland, under the legislation passed in the House, the First Minister designate has to lead a four-party coalition—some call it an unholy alliance. The Executive there is different from any other in not having collective responsibility. A more awkward state of affairs would be difficult to imagine or design.

I am sure that the Prime Minister would agree that it is often difficult enough to get Cabinet agreement with only one party involved; but of course he can sack those who

disagree with him, which cannot be done in Northern Ireland. A two-party coalition, even when the two parties share some goals and values, presents further problems. How on earth is the First Minister of Northern Ireland expected to deliver sound governance when he has four parties with widely different policies, aims, values and, indeed, methods, to satisfy?

What sort of decision making would result in Scotland if the Cabinet consisted of representatives of the Labour, Liberal Democrat, Conservative and Scottish National parties? How would Wales fare under an Executive comprising Labour, Liberal Democrat, Conservative and Plaid Cymru members?

Mr. Llwyd: Very well.

Mr. Ross: Perhaps we shall see about that in time.

How does anyone expect an enforced coalition of members of the Ulster Unionist, Democratic Unionist, Social Democratic and Labour parties and Sinn Fein-IRA to produce stable government in Northern Ireland? Why should such an arrangement succeed there when it has been rejected as a model for the remainder of the kingdom and, to the best of my knowledge, in the rest of the world? If such an arrangement were to succeed, future elections to the Northern Ireland Assembly would simply be redundant, as a four-party coalition would form the Executive as long as the Assembly continued in existence. Let us not forget that all that is on the assumption that Sinn Fein-IRA can be persuaded to decommission or, to be more brutal about it, to surrender their weapons. The Gardai at least seem to be doing rather better in that respect at the moment, and we welcome that.

Once again, the Government's policy on Northern Ireland represents the triumph of hope over experience. They have a vague idea of how they want things to work and believe that they know how they should work, but when it comes to putting the theory into practice, a yawning chasm opens up.

I want to consider the effect of devolution on the oversight of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee. When the devolution order comes into force, if it ever does, responsibility for all matters relating to Northern Ireland, other than excepted and reserved matters, will be transferred to the Northern Ireland Assembly. Ministerial responsibility for those transferred matters will pass from the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland to Northern Ireland Ministers who are supposed to be accountable to the Assembly.

Ministerial responsibility for excepted and reserved matters will remain as at present and will continue to be discharged by the appropriate United Kingdom Minister. The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland will thus retain responsibility for a wide range of important policy areas, including security, policing, criminal law, public order, prisons, human rights, equality and payments into the Northern Ireland Consolidated Fund. The Secretary of State will also assume responsibilities in relation to the British-Irish Intergovernmental Council and will have a continuing interest in the British-Irish Council.

Under the terms of Standing Order No. 152, the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee's areas of oversight that are related directly to the expenditure, administration and policy of the Northern Ireland Office and other matters within the responsibility of the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland will change automatically in line with the changed responsibilities of the office and the Secretary of State. Thus transferred matters will fall automatically outside the Committee's terms of reference—although the finance that will flow to those particular expenditures will come from the United Kingdom tax revenues. I shall say more about that later.

The establishment of devolved Administrations in three areas of the United Kingdom marks a major constitutional shift, and I believe that people throughout the United Kingdom—and particularly those in Northern Ireland—have not yet fully grasped the long-term downstream consequences. We are departing from the traditional British model of an unwritten constitution, whereby change is gradual and evolutionary, and arriving at a written constitution. An inevitable consequence of this shift is that future Government decisions will be more open to legal challenge, as occurs under the federal system of the United States, in Canada to a lesser extent and in Australia.

Any discussion of the procedural consequences of devolution must take account of the United Kingdom's only previous experience: the Stormont model under which the government of Northern Ireland was conducted between 1921 and 1972. Under the devolved Stormont parliamentary system, which was established in 1920—another system was set up in Dublin, but never functioned—the central Government retained certain functions. Under present devolution arrangements, specified bodies have been given several specified powers. So the approach is very different: in the latter example, certain things are devolved and, in the original example, certain things were retained. Those who have examined the original arrangements—the present Secretary of State for Wales has had to consider them in relation to Northern Ireland in the past year—will know that certain things were transferred that should not have been. I believe that the present system is much better.

Hon. Members must recognise that all elected bodies try to increase their powers. The most recent example—we do not have to look far to find it—is the European Union and its efforts to increase its scope and powers. It would be naive in the extreme to expect our devolved assemblies to behave any differently. It will inevitably diminish the power and influence of the House of Commons as elements in those devolved bodies seek constantly to probe and push the boundaries of their powers, and to extend them in all sorts of ways and in all directions where a Government have competence.

If hon. Members read the speech of the hon. Member for North Tayside (Mr. Swinney), they will see that he has spelled out clearly the nationalist methodology. I am familiar with it and other hon. Members will rapidly become accustomed to it. The hon. Gentleman is, after all, a nationalist: his party believes in a Scotland that is free from any oversight by this place. Members of the Welsh parties undoubtedly feel the same. Anyone who thinks that those folk will behave any differently from Irish nationalists is living in a dream world. Indeed, these assemblies came into being not because this House had an overwhelming wish to devolve powers but because it was necessary owing to pressure on the ground. I live in the real world, not the fairytale vacuum that sometimes seems to accompany these debates in the House.

[Mr. Ross]

The Scotland Act 1998 includes over 30 powers to make subordinate legislation. Of these, 26 are subject to procedure in the Westminster Parliament only, and normal scrutiny arrangements will continue to apply. A further four are subject to procedure in the Scottish Parliament only. The procedures which it adopts for consideration of these orders are a matter for itself. Of particular interest are the five powers that are subject to procedures in both the Westminster and Scottish Parliaments. This approach has been used where both Parliaments have an interest. The relevant powers include the adaptation of cross-border public bodies, the transfer of property of cross-border public bodies and the regulation of the Tweed and Esk fisheries. I think that others will emerge later. These powers will require co-ordination between the two Parliaments and between appropriate Ministers of the Crown and the Scottish Executive. It is not possible to determine what precise arrangements will be required until the Scottish Parliament has determined the scrutiny procedures that it will adopt.

Some interesting comments were made in the memorandum from the Leader of the House and it is worth re-reading it carefully. Among other things it said:

"In order to consider instruments subject to parliamentary procedures both at Westminster and in the devolved assemblies, there will have to be some form of liaison between the scrutiny committees of those bodies to avoid the possibility of different conclusions being reached on, say, vires. The scrutiny arrangements will not apply to any instruments made in Edinburgh or Cardiff which do not need to be laid at Westminster."

There are so many hundreds of these instruments passing through the House that inevitably there will be questions. No one should imagine that the more nationalist elements in the assembly parties in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland will let slip any opportunity to portray any proper scrutiny by Westminster as inappropriate interference in their affairs. Such tensions are not only likely; they are as inevitable as the sun rising tomorrow morning.

Devolution will also have an impact on parliamentary questions, written and oral. For example, what will happen to areas of interest that cross boundaries: transport, sea transport and European Union trunk roads? A very important road to Northern Ireland passes across south-west Scotland. We wish that much more money had been spent on it by previous Secretaries of State for Scotland, but that is by the by.

Mr. Andrew Welsh (Angus): Hear, hear.

Mr. Ross: I hear support for that and I have had support from the Scottish National party in the past because the road passes through the hon. Gentleman's former constituency. It is a road that I travel several times a year to and from this place. I just wish that it was better. These areas of responsibility all receive money from central Government, so central Government will retain a strong vested interest in them.

The Select Committee on Procedure noted that when the Government of Ireland Act was in force, questions relating to matters transferred were disallowed. The Committee stated that if this precedent were adopted, the scope for questions in the House relating to Scotland would be extremely limited, although there would be greater opportunity for questions relating to Wales and Northern Ireland. The Committee considered the Stormont precedent to be too restrictive, but I believe that friction will be the consequence of extending the scope of parliamentary questions into areas that are even partially the responsibility of the Scottish Parliament. They will certainly be portrayed as such.

We need to look at how central Government will try to retain control and clout in areas with devolved government—how, indeed, they will poke their nose in there, to put it bluntly. I understand that under the Australian system of government, devolved territorial matters, which derive not from the federal arrangements but, as I understand it, from the constitution of Australia, can be raised in the Federal Parliament in Adjournment debates. That may very well present a means by which Westminster could retain a degree of control and scrutiny over Scottish, Welsh and Northern Ireland matters. I recall all the complaints that were made because Northern Ireland was not discussed in the House for 50 years. There is an opening for such discussion.

There is a proposal that Northern Ireland, Wales and Scotland Committees should be restricted to matters controlled by the relevant Secretary of State. However, the financial contribution—the tax of the United Kingdom as a whole which funds those bodies—will open a door for the House of Commons to debate those matters, again in Adjournment debates secured by individual Members.

There will be much discussion, one way and another, when people decide to stir the pot, and it will not necessarily be stirred by those who want the Union to remain intact; it is more likely to be stirred by those who want it to disappear.

One matter that has not been dealt with in the debate is the raising and spending of money, and that is the central issue in government. The control of the money supply for the public service is the issue over which the House wrestled with the Crown for centuries. That is the point of friction and the fulcrum. It will also be the test of whether the Labour party is nationalist or Unionist in character in Wales and Scotland, where it will be the dominant party. That question has not yet been answered, but it is clear from the contributions made today that not all Labour Members will be on the same side of that dividing line, and some day they will all have to make up their minds. I look forward to that because it will be as instructive for that party as it will be for the country at large.

I turn now to the question of concurrent meetings between the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee and the Committee of the Northern Ireland Assembly. This issue applies also in Wales and Scotland. Aside from the obvious difficulties of the extent of co-operation and responsibility, another problem presents itself, which was mentioned by the hon. Member for Macclesfield (Mr. Winterton) and by a Welsh Member. Some Members of the Northern Ireland Assembly were elected also as Members of this House, but they did not take the oath, do not sit in the House and take no part in it. They do not recognise it. If they had to be present at concurrent meetings between the Committee of this House and the Committee of the Assembly, that could cause difficulties for everyone concerned.

There is, however, a precedent, which was mentioned earlier, for a Committee to be given the power to call into consultation persons who are not Members of the House.

In the Sessions of 1932-33 and 1933-34, the Joint Committee on Indian Constitutional Reform was given power to call into consultation representatives of the Indian states and British India. Although the delegates were allowed to discuss matters with the Joint Committee—we all know what that means—they were not allowed to participate in the Committee's final deliberations.

Using that precedent as a model for future co-operation is more likely to be satisfactory than using the analogy of a joint Committee of Assembly and Parliament or of other devolved institutions and Parliament, since it would avoid the legal problems caused by the differing status of Committees, which was also mentioned earlier. That would get round the whole question of the absolute privilege that we enjoy when speaking in the House and the issue of papers that have to be brought before Committees. That is dealt with in the report and it is well worth reading.

Unlike its Scottish and Welsh counterparts, the Northern Ireland Executive, comprising as it does four parties, will not be easily able to formulate clear policy. However, the problem is even worse than that. The Northern Ireland Assembly cannot endorse anything using a simple majority; rather, the agreement of a majority of Assembly Members from the Unionist community and a majority of those from the nationalist community must be achieved. Although to some observers that may appear to be an example of what is meant by the new buzz words, "inclusive government", it appears to me and many others a recipe for inertia and stagnation, and it will almost certainly ensure that hard choices will be shied away from. Once again, Northern Ireland is being asked to accept a system that the Government would not dream of foisting on Scotland and Wales, let alone applying to themselves.

The appearance of the whole affair, especially regarding Northern Ireland but also regarding Scotland and Wales, is that the Government have not clearly thought out the long-term consequences of their policy. That was borne out by the recent experience of the Welsh Cabinet as it sought to pursue its own line on agricultural issues in Europe.

Lord Roberts of Conwy said in another place:

"our experience of devolution to date—brief as it is—suggests that only the fullest possible co-operation and mutual support between the executive elements in the new system are required if the best interests of the peoples they govern are to be served".

His sentiments were echoed by Baroness Farrington of Ribbleton, who said:

"I share with the noble Lord the belief that we are all working together to overcome any minor difficulties at the beginning of the process."—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 13 October 1999; Vol. 604, c. 358.]

The trouble is that those minor difficulties will be like Topsy—they will just grow.

Experience of Northern Ireland leads one to anticipate something more serious than "minor difficulties". If the Government continue to pursue their present policy of "no Executive without Sinn Fein-IRA", the people of Northern Ireland will be faced with two possible outcomes.

Either Sinn Fein-IRA will disarm so that they may take their place in the Executive, or they will not. Even if those concerned are successful in forming the four-party coalition to attempt to govern Northern Ireland, and even if they can secure the support of a majority of both Unionist and nationalist Assembly Members, there will be difficulties. If they are not successful—which has seemed increasingly likely in the past day or two—the Government must assess the position once more and decide whether a majority of democratic Members or Sinn Fein-IRA dictate policy for the future government of the Province.

In closing, I would refer to the comments of Baroness Thatcher in her memoirs. She said:

"In dealing with Northern Ireland, successive governments have studiously refrained from security policies that might alienate the Irish government and Irish nationalist opinion in Ulster, in the hope of winning their support against the IRA. The Anglo-Irish Agreement was squarely in that tradition. But I discovered the results of this approach to be disappointing. Our concessions alienated the Unionists without gaining the level of security co-operation we had a right to expect. In the light of this experience it is surely time to consider an alternative approach".

I believe not only that the time may well come again, but that it is practically upon us. However, I believe that the West Lothian question, which was raised by the hon. Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell), will be with the House for a very long time. It will increase in importance, and those who think that Santa Claus will come and take all their troubles away will be very severely disappointed.

6.28 pm

Mr. Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield): The debate has been vigorous and interesting. That may be characteristic of debates not on a Government issue or narrow party political issue, but on a Procedure Committee report.

The Secretary of State for Scotland said, as he has said previously, that he seeks the co-operation of those parties that believe in the Union to make the Union work. Although I am aware that he sometimes criticises the official Opposition for their approach to devolution, I should tell him that it is our aim to make the Union work. I regret, and am disappointed by, the fact that Labour Members do not always accept that our commitment to making devolution work, and our commitment to the Union, are total.

However, at times the way in which the Government approach the consequences of devolution—it is their creature, and they have risen to the challenge to produce it—makes Conservative Members worry whether the Government are willing to take the challenge past the Scotland Act 1998 and the Government of Wales Act 1998, and make the relationships work. That is what the debate is all about.

It is worth while starting with a few basic principles. The speech of the hon. Member for Aberdeen, South (Miss Begg) appeared to me to be a model of its kind in the way in which she personally was setting about making devolution work. It was a most impressive performance and I listened to it with great interest.

The principles are clear. There must be fairness between the different parts of the United Kingdom. There must be openness in the relationship and a recognition of the real transfer of power that has taken place by the vote of this Parliament. If we fail to take those approaches, we shall be heading for trouble. Required also is a willingness to address the knock-on consequences of what we have done.

[Mr. Dominic Grieve]

There is a major challenge for us all. There is a challenge for the Government, a challenge for those of us in the House who are firm on the Union and determined to make it work and thrive far into the next millennium and, above all, a challenge for common sense. The hon. Member for Aberdeen, South might almost be said to be espousing the commonsense revolution of my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition—using those very words in addressing devolution.

The issue is how we shall meet the challenge. It is significant that nine members of the Procedure Committee which produced the report were Labour Members who support the Government. It is greatly to their credit that the report of the Committee, chaired by my hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield (Mr. Winterton), should have come up with such creative solutions. Even if we, the official Opposition, would wish to go further on some issues and even if we, as we have stated clearly, believe that there can be no long-term solution to the West Lothian question without English and Welsh Members having a monopoly of vote on English and Welsh issues in this place, much creative good sense has come out of the report. That being so, we welcome it.

The report is perhaps a classic example in the House of what happens in the more informal framework of discussion in Committee, when party political mantras are abandoned and Members start objectively to consider some of the problems that have arisen.

One of the principal areas that we have discussed is procedural issues. Above all, there is the question of how legislation is handled in this place. The Government's response, which was published only yesterday, seems to be hopelessly inadequate. Why is it that in an area where it is acknowledged by the very occurrence of devolution that there are diverse interests within the United Kingdom that need to be recognised, Bills that relate solely to Scotland or Wales or England—we might go further and say England and Wales together—should not be referred to a Second Reading Committee for consideration?

We are certainly not going as far down the road as Opposition Members would wish in respect of English rights, but Second Reading Committees would at least provide a forum where the public could see how issues were being addressed in the different areas of the United Kingdom by their representatives. If the Government did not like it at the end of the day, it would be open to them, by putting Bills in the Chamber on Second Reading, to overrule whatever conclusion the Second Reading Committees had come to. I suggest that the Government do not want to go down that road because in the event of there being massive opposition from representatives from the particular—the only—part of the United Kingdom to be affected by the legislation, it might be an unwise Government who started to ignore the views that had been expressed.

When considering the way in which the Government have approached devolution, one of our anxieties is that the way in which matters have unfolded since the devolved Parliament or Assembly has come into being suggests that having given with one hand they are trying to claw back with the other, largely through the back-room mechanisms of the Labour party. Such a system is bound to fail and has already shown clear signs of creating the very tensions that the hon. Member for Aberdeen, South was at such pains to diffuse.

Mr. Browne: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way, and I realise that he is short of time. I have one simple point to put to him. There is no such thing as an exclusively English public spending measure in respect of health or education. Because of the way in which the block grant is calculated for Scotland, every single public spending decision that is made in the House has a knock-on effect on Scotland.

Mr. Grieve: I accept that the way in which the Budget is set will be a United Kingdom matter, but once that has been done and the Barnett formula has been brought into operation, there is no good reason why English Members of Parliament should not determine how the expenditure is spent in England. I do not follow the hon. Gentleman's argument on that point.

The second issue that exercised us considerably during the debate was the future of the Grand Committees. I confess that I find the Government's position inexplicable. As was rightly said by several hon. Members in the debate, the Grand Committees were set up as an alternative to devolution. Devolution has occurred. Although I accept that there may well be occasions when Scottish and Welsh Members of Parliament may wish to express a view in debate that is particular to the problems facing their own regions in reserved matters, I do not see why that cannot be done in a forum such as Westminster Hall, where Members of Parliament from English constituencies—or, indeed, from Welsh constituencies if the matter under discussion related to Scotland—could also contribute to the discussion.

The hon. Member for Edinburgh, South (Mr. Griffiths) highlighted the loss of cross-fertilisation of ideas between Members from different parts of the United Kingdom. I heartily endorse that view. One way of making sure that such cross-fertilisation continues is by ensuring that we have far more debates, for which Westminster Hall provides the very forum, and by ensuring that hon. Members who participate in those debates are drawn from all parts of the United Kingdom with interests in those matters.

The Grand Committee is a dinosaur relic. I was astonished when the hon. Member for Paisley, South (Mr. Alexander) suggested that the justification for the Grand Committee lay in the existence of the regional Standing Committees which, unless I am entirely mistaken, have not met since the late 1970s. That is a poor analogy. Regionalisation in England is not desired, and I would not wish to go down that road. There should be maximum opportunity for hon. Members to pool their ideas in a forum such as Westminster Hall, not through the Grand Committee.

The only proposal was that the Grand Committee should be suspended, not abolished. Such a measure could easily have been taken, but the Government have funked it, possibly because it has been a device that they could throw as a sop to their own Back-Bench Members from Wales and Scotland, to maintain the illusion that they would be able to continue as before. That is a failure to accept the reality of devolution, which the Opposition have shown themselves much readier to accept.

The role of the Secretary of State is a critical issue underpinning the Procedure Committee's report, although there is an exceptional lack of clarity on the matter. I hope that the Secretary of State for Scotland will not take my comments amiss. I fully recognise that through his efforts he is attempting to make sure that devolution works, even if I sometimes think that he is doing it wrongly, and that he is also attempting to define the relationship between himself and the First Minister in Scotland.

It is perhaps inevitable, but it is undoubtedly an unsatisfactory state of affairs that, several months after the devolution settlement has started, it is unclear what the Secretary of State is doing—whether he is simply dealing with the remaining reserved matters which belong to him, or whether he is acting in some sort of ambassadorial role as a broker and facilitator between the Scottish Parliament and the Scottish Executive and this House and the United Kingdom Government.

It is important that we should have some more clarity because, as I said earlier, in fairness to the Procedure Committee, it is difficult to decide what questions should be allowed until one knows what answers can be given, and, above all, what answers can be given without those answers being a gross intrusion on the remit of powers that has been devolved to the Scottish Executive. It is an area that is ripe for conflict which the House needs to consider. The fact that the Procedure Committee has been unable to consider it completely is not its fault; it is because we have never had any clarity on the issue.

Simply by looking at what is in the concordats and then at what is said by the Government, one can see clear differences of emphasis about the role of the Secretary of State for Scotland. It would be helpful if we could have some further clarification from the Secretary of State on the issue.

The second problem, which appears to Conservative Members to be considerable, concerns the nature of the concordats. They, too, must underpin how procedure develops in the House. The concordats were published late and we may well have to have a far more detailed debate on them at some later date, but it is worth looking at what they say to start to understand some of the problems.

To begin with, the second paragraph of the introduction of this extraordinary document presented by the Lord Chancellor and, I presume, drafted by him, states:

"This memorandum is a statement of political intent and should not be interpreted as a binding agreement. It does not create legal obligations with the parties. It is intended to be binding in honour only."

The last person I heard say that he was bound in honour only was a gangster who was about to appear in court, and it concerned his relationship with fellow gangsters. It all ended rather badly when the honour code under which they were operating collapsed.

But there is a point to this. The relationship between the different parts of the United Kingdom will work only if those who live in different parts of the United Kingdom wish it to work. There is no other basis to the concordats. There is no other basis to devolution. One of the most stunning aspects of the concordat document is that it blindly assumes that the Northern Ireland Executive, once set up, will be willing to sign up to it in exactly the same terms as has been done in Wales and Scotland, something which they have no obligation to do within their own devolved areas.

Therefore, the concordats will have to be renegotiated every time there is a change of Administration in Edinburgh or Cardiff—I think that the Secretary of State will have to accept that—unless they command such widespread acceptance in conventional matters that no one would wish to gainsay them.

That is why it appears to Conservative Members that the Government's approach in the matter is badly flawed. During the past three months there has been ample evidence that resentments are being stoked up—resentments with regard to the relationship between the Government and the Scottish Executive, which have been making newspaper headlines in Scotland virtually every day of the week; resentments which we English Members of Parliament pick up from our constituents in relation to the unfairnesses of devolution. In those circumstances, it is for the Government to ensure that public opinion triumphs in wanting to make devolution work. Accepting the Procedure Committee's recommendations would have been a good start.

6.44 pm

The Secretary of State for Scotland (Dr. John Reid): We have had a wide-ranging and useful debate this afternoon. I start by thanking the hon. Member for Macclesfield (Mr. Winterton) and all the members of his Committee for the obvious work that they have put in. We are all deeply grateful to them.

As the hon. Member for East Londonderry (Mr. Ross) said, the debate is not taking place in a vacuum and I shall remind the House of why we are having it. The Government came to power in 1997 with a clear commitment to modernise our constitution and to decentralise power throughout the United Kingdom. Devolution is about modernising the way in which we govern ourselves in this United Kingdom, decentralising power and empowering local institutions. I say that because devolution did not have the universal support of the House or of the parties represented in it.

Throughout the two decades during which we were working out the details of devolution, two parties opposed it tooth and nail: one party is represented on the Benches opposite me; the other is the Scottish National party. They were adamantly opposed to devolution. One party wanted to keep everything totally central; one wanted everything totally separate in Scotland. There has been a remarkable coincidence of views tonight, and the remarkable feature of tonight's debate is that the same two parties are still opposed to the devolution settlement.

Those parties oppose the role of the Secretary of State and of the Scottish Grand Committee—and what is, in practical terms, the outcome of the referendum. I am not for a minute suggesting that of hon. Member for Macclesfield, but merely pointing out the context in which the debate is taking place: the same unholy alliance of Tories and the SNP is doing everything to impede the practical working out of the devolution settlement, in the same fashion as they opposed the establishment of this partnership of Parliaments over the past 20 years.

Mr. Swinney: Can the Secretary of State inform us of any devolution measures put before the House in the past 20 years that Scottish National party MPs voted against?

[Mr. Swinney]

Will he say which political parties campaigned on 11 September 1997 for the Scotland Act 1998, which was enacted by the House?

Dr. Reid: It does not surprise me that the Scottish National party votes for every piece of legislation that takes power from the House outwards; it comes as no surprise to anyone. The fact is, and I am choosing my words carefully, that for 20 of the 22 years that we were debating the practical proposals of this devolution settlement, the hon. Member for North Tayside (Mr. Swinney) and his colleagues opposed it. They underwent a conversion of Pauline proportions 18 months before the referendum, when they decided that they would back it. They support the Scottish Parliament the way a rope supports a hanging man, and they support devolution in order to strangle a devolved settlement because they recognise that devolution means a Scottish Parliament within the United Kingdom. Just as my party opposed centralism, it will continue to oppose the separation, divorce and break-up of the United Kingdom which the hon. Gentleman and his party represent.

Mr. Welsh *rose—*

Dr. Reid: If I may make some progress, I shall come back to the hon. Gentleman.

Devolution is not about nationalism and it is not about separatism. On the contrary; in its practical implications for the House it is a response to the perception in the United Kingdom that the Government had become too remote, too centralised and out of touch with the needs of real people. The nationalists—the separatists—have exploited that perception, but I make it clear that devolution is as much about rebuilding and modernising the partnership that is the United Kingdom as it is about responding to local needs.

There is another important point about devolution being a process: empowerment does not begin and end in Scotland or in Wales. I hope I speak on behalf of the whole House: we hope that we are united in believing that the continuing efforts to solve differences in Northern Ireland and to enable the Good Friday agreement to be implemented will be successful.

The Greater London Authority Bill, which is close to completing its passage in the other place, will pass substantial executive powers downward, and elsewhere in England we are addressing the concerns of regional economic development by setting up regional development agencies. Regional chambers are being established in all regions where local authorities and other partners can come together to give voice to the interests of their region. The Government have made it clear that they are prepared to give regions of England directly elected assemblies where there is a demand for them. Devolution is a process, but not one that will inevitably lead to the break-up of the Britain.

Devolution is a process of empowerment that should be spread geographically to all areas of the United Kingdom. It is not a one-size-fits-all solution; it is a policy that has been tailored to suit the various parts of the United Kingdom and the Union as a whole.

Many of the points that Opposition Members made tonight were about inconsistencies, as if devolution and the British constitution had for centuries been free of inconsistencies; as if both Chambers of this Parliament were elected—that is an inconsistency. I notice no opposition to that inconsistency from Opposition Members. The British constitution is strong because it can deal with inconsistencies, whether they are on the grand scale of one elected Chamber and one appointed Chamber, or whether it is because a male Roman Catholic Scottish Member of Parliament can vote on whether the Church of England has women ministers. The British constitution is riddled with inconsistencies. That is not its weakness; it is the strength of the United Kingdom.

That is why, with all our inconsistencies, we have gone for centuries avoiding coups d'état, civil wars and the disruption that occurs throughout Europe among people who have little, neat, consistent, written constitutions. The more the Opposition denigrate our constitution and its flexibility, the more they illustrate that they do not understand what it means to be British and, in practice, to support the Union.

Mr. Grieve: I heartily endorse all the Secretary of State's comments about the strength of the inconsistencies of the British constitution. However, are they not there because they are accepted? It is when they no longer command acceptance that they need addressing, which is in a sense exactly what the right hon. Gentleman did over devolution and should now do over the knock-on consequences.

Dr. Reid: That is exactly the point to which I was coming—at last we find something on which we agree.

The question, therefore, is not whether we have a neat, tidy, symmetrical equation that matches up on every side; the question is, does it work? Does it respond to the needs and aspirations of the people of the United Kingdom? We have devolution precisely because it responds to those questions. As we decentralise, and empower people throughout the United Kingdom, we must change at the centre, and we are prepared to do so. That is precisely why we are having this discussion. We are prepared to change. I speak with a Scottish accent and I accept that we must have fewer Scottish Members of Parliament.

I accept that there must be a diminution in the time that we spend on Scottish questions, but I do not accept the implication of the hon. Member for Beaconsfield (Mr. Grieve) and his nationalist allies that, now that they have failed to stop one side of the devolution settlement—the establishment of our Parliament—they will not stop until they have completely diminished the presence of Scottish or Welsh Members in this Union. I do not doubt their sincerity and motives No one was more sincere or purely motivated in defending the United Kingdom than Baroness Thatcher however, and no one did more to break up the fabric and unity of the UK than that same lady, whatever her motives.

Mr. Welsh: The Secretary of State is a unionist and a nationalist. We accept those as honourable standpoints, and argue for and against them. However, I cannot allow him to rewrite history. He will find that the Scottish National party supported the Labour party on devolution. I was in the Chamber in the 1970s, and some of the biggest opponents to devolution included Neil Kinnock and some of his colleagues in the Labour party.

Dr. Reid: I do not want to get involved in private grief within the SNP, but it is now in a peculiar position.

Its candidate for the Hamilton, South by-election said that she did not really want to come to Westminster in the first place. I presume that she came here to watch Alex Salmond. Alex Salmond does not come here. The Queen comes to this House once a year, which is slightly more frequently than the leader of the SNP. He says that he comes here to keep an eye on the British Government. Meanwhile, Margo MacDonald says that she does not want to go to the Scottish Parliament in Holyrood because she opposes that, but she goes there only to watch Alex Salmond to see whether he is selling out there—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. I remind the right hon. Gentleman that he is referring to another Member of this House. He should therefore do so not by his name but by his constituency.

Dr. Reid: I thought that Margo MacDonald had left the House, but perhaps she attends with the same regularity as the leader of the SNP and I have just missed her.

I can tell members of the Scottish National party that no one in the House is fooled by anything they do. They have only one reason for being, which is to break up Britain and to divorce Scotland from the United Kingdom and from the House.

Mr. Nicholas Winterton *rose—*

Dr. Reid: I will however listen to the criticisms of the hon. Member for Macclesfield.

Mr. Winterton: In the last five minutes of the debate, could the Secretary of State direct his attention to the fourth report of the Procedure Committee, which we are discussing? I am interested in his response, because the Committee hopes that in due course the Government will implement more of our recommendations.

Dr. Reid: Of course I shall do so. I was merely trying to be courteous to our visitors.

One of the great areas of debate was the Grand Committee system. I have an interest in that, not just because of the report, but because I awoke this morning to hear that I was to be decimated on this issue by the hon. Member for North Tayside (Mr. Swinney). As usual, he has turned out to be a horizontal champ. He took issue with our decision to disagree with the Select Committee on this matter. He forgot to mention that he supported the Grand Committee system in his submission to the hon. Member for Macclesfield, and he was abandoned by the Welsh nationalists, who supported the Government's position.

The major areas of policy in legislation that affect the everyday lives of men and women in Scotland and England are reserved to Westminster. They are hugely important matters that apply to the whole of the United Kingdom, although they may have a distinct effect in different areas. It is the Government's view that we should have a forum to discuss such matters. There could, for instance, be the controversial issue of the disbandment of the Scottish regiments, but it appears that the SNP would no longer want to have that discussion, because they do not want such a forum.

The Government accept that the Grand Committee system should apply to Wales, and believe that it should also apply to the regions of England. That is why we submitted proposals to the Modernisation Committee for a Standing Committee on Regional Affairs, which would allow, for instance, MPs from Yorkshire or from Lancashire to discuss issues that would be implemented at UK level, but which would have a distinct effect on the people in their area as a result of local demography, local geography or local history. That is eminently sensible. I have read that it is my intention to use Grand Committees to duplicate the work of the Scottish Parliament. That is not my intention. There are many important matters to discuss, and I am more than happy for English MPs to discuss them as well.

There was much talk arising from the report about the unfairness of Scottish MPs, participating in English debates. That argument would carry slightly more weight if I had not read the list of questions at the previous Scottish Question Time in the House. Hon. Members may be interested to know that Question 1 was from a Conservative, the hon. Member for Lichfield (Mr. Fabricant), followed by my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Mr. Mackinlay). The hon. Member for Beaconsfield (Mr. Grieve) obviously spoke during Scottish questions. The hon. Members who spoke on Question 2 were the hon. Members for Sevenoaks (Mr. Fallon), for South Staffordshire (Sir P. Cormack), for Vale of York (Miss McIntosh), for North Norfolk (Mr. Prior) and for Beaconsfield (Mr. Grieve).

The number of questions that English MPs table at Scottish Question Time is considerable. I have no complaint about that: it is appropriate and proper. However, it is not proper for the Opposition to argue one thing when it comes to English MPs, but to argue the opposite when it comes to Scotland.

I commend the Government's response to the report, and I hope that the House will accept it.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House takes note of the Fourth Report from the Procedure Committee on The Procedural Consequences of Devolution (HC 185), and the First Special Report from the Committee (HC 814) containing the Government Response.

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

Ordered,

That, at the sitting on Monday 25th October, the Speaker shall put the Questions necessary to dispose of proceedings on any Motions in the name of Margaret Beckett relating to Financial Services and Markets Bill (Suspension), Thursday Sittings, Meetings of Standing Committees, Sittings in Westminster Hall, Questions to Ministers, Select Committees (Devolution) and Advocate General for Scotland not later than Ten o'clock, and such Questions shall include the Questions on any Amendments selected by the Speaker which may then be moved.—*[Mr. McNulty.]*

COMMITTEE OF PUBLIC ACCOUNTS

Ordered,

That Jane Griffiths be discharged from the Committee of Public Accounts.—*[Mr. McNulty, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.]*

Rural Post Offices

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. McNulty.]*

6.59 pm

Mr. Archy Kirkwood (Roxburgh and Berwickshire): I am pleased to be able to raise this issue so early in the overspill period. I welcome the Minister to the debate: he has some experience in these matters, and we are delighted that he has a chance to bring it to bear in the Department.

During the summer, my hon. Friend the Member for Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale (Mr. Moore) and I engaged in consultation in our respective constituencies on the impact of some of the proposed Government changes on the future viability of closed offices. With your permission, Mr. Deputy Speaker—I believe that the Minister has no objection—my hon. Friend may seek to catch your eye later.

Three things were made clear by our consultation. The first—I am sure that the Minister does not need to be told this, for everyone knows it in their heart of hearts—was the importance of the social role played by post offices, especially small community and sub-post offices, in village communities. They have a social dimension, and they are often a focal point. Their value goes beyond their economic importance.

Secondly, it was clear that there was considerable uncertainty, indeed confusion, in the minds of sub-postmasters and sub-postmistresses in regard to the future, and how their financial viability would be sustained in the wake of some of the changes that will come on the back of the legislation for the Post Office that we expect to feature in the Queen's speech.

The third thing that was made starkly clear involved profitability. The Post Office representatives whom we consulted spoke with a single voice: they all said that their profitability was being continuously and inexorably undermined, to the extent that some were wondering whether they could remain profitable. In my constituency, post offices have recently been closed in Wilton Dean, in Hawick and in Heiton, just outside Kelso. There have been closures because of a lack of candidates for the job of postmaster or postmistress in other parts of my constituency, such as Auchincrow, Birgham and Burnmouth. There is a lot of stress out there, and a lot of anxiety.

For many years, the rural post office network has been supported by the peculiar dependence on transaction charges for benefit payments. It mainly involves pension books, but it involves the whole range of benefits. In the recent past, post offices have derived their core income from those sources, on which they have come to depend. An average of 35 per cent. of annual income is derived from them in typical rural sub-post offices. I am told that in inner cities the figure is even higher: it can be as high as 60 per cent., and apparently some 80 per cent. of annual income is derived from the giro-cheque system of benefit payment in one post office in inner-city Glasgow.

The National Federation of Subpostmasters estimates that at present some 5,000 post offices are on a financial knife edge. We all know—the trends can be seen in the records and the statistics—that between 200 and 300 sub-post offices are closing each year, before the introduction of any changes, and I believe that making automated credit transfer payments compulsory could well be the last straw for many businesses. When we talked to people in south-east Scotland—in the borders—in the summer, we learned that many were planning to get out before things became worse. Many have mortgages, and their homes are part and parcel of their businesses. They live above the shop. They are concerned about the capital value—the capital assets—represented by their businesses: they are so worried about the possibility that those businesses will become unsustainable and debts will begin to accrue that they may leave.

It is a mistake to scaremonger, but I believe that the next six months will be crucial. Either the Government will be able to give some encouragement to professional people who provide communities with a valuable social service—as well as an economic service—about their viability in the medium and longer term, or many will leave. That would be a very bad thing.

We must go back to 1996 and look at the original conception of the Horizon project. The previous Administration had a good idea, which had a dual benefit in the Horizon programme. They decided to introduce a Benefits Agency payment card. We all remember the pictures of the former Secretary of State for Social Security, the right hon. Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Mr. Lilley), waving the card at the Conservative party conference. It was one of the years when he did not sing. The audio-visual aid was the new benefit card, which never saw the light of day.

That was an anti-fraud initiative by the Department of Social Security and had value for that reason alone, but it was used to spearhead the automation of the Post Office network. The two separate policy items had a synergy. They complemented one another. They were an imaginative way forward.

Those two strands of policy are being disaggregated. Automation of the Post Office will be carried forward without any assistance from the benefit payment card. In 2003, the DSS will move directly to automated credit transfer. There are plans to begin to make all payment of benefit cheques via automated credit transfer and banks. That will start in 2003. The process is due to be completed by 2005.

Obviously, there are massive Government advantages with that. The Benefits Agency budget, about which I am concerned as Chairman of the Select Committee on Social Security, will be £400 million per annum better off. The Department will have better control, particularly over new resource and accounting procedures, where Government Departments have to trace where their assets are at any given time. It will obviously give wider choice. E-commerce is, rightly, a priority for the Government. I encourage them to go in that direction. It will do something to remove the distinction between people in work and people who depend on benefits. All those things are good. I make no secret about that. There are clear advantages.

Having said all that, the Government may intend that people who wish to continue to collect their benefit cash via post offices will be able to do so after the move to ACT in 2003, but they will do that only after the Post Office has introduced suitable bank technology. If people think, and some do, that they will continue to be able to

opt out of ACT compulsion in 2003, take their giro book and collect their pension from the post office, they are wrong, as far as I understand the Government's scheme.

If I am wrong, it will be helpful to me, if to no one else, if the Minister puts me right. I do not think that there will be the option to cash any benefit giro cheque in a post office after 2005. It might be done through hole-in-the-wall ATMs—automatic teller machines. It might be done by some clever Barclays scheme, but it will not be done by benefit giro cheque book.

I urge the Government to make that position clear—I nearly said, "Come clean." I do not want to be pejorative, but there is much confusion about what the consequences of the change will be. I am worried about that for several reasons; I again refer to my responsibility for the Social Security Committee.

I was interested to see recent research—it was published in April 1999—by Thomas and Pettigrew called "Attitudes Towards Methods of Paying Benefit." It was instructive. It examined how claimants wanted their benefits to be paid.

The study's main findings were clear. It found that, in general, those who received benefits often budgeted in cash on a weekly basis, as opposed to those who were better off, or in employment, who were much more likely—like, I guess, the Minister and me—to budget monthly through a bank. Benefit claimants clearly prefer a cash-based weekly budget.

We can understand why that is important. People saw order books as providing a guaranteed amount of money on a guaranteed date. That is important for people who live in a financially insecure context. The reasons why they did not want to opt to use ACT included the perceived cost of running a bank account—they will have some real worries about that if Barclays bank gets its hands on the system—concerns about reliability and, in rural areas, closure of local bank branches.

People were also concerned that the system would mean that they would be able to withdraw only whole pounds of money at any given time. Some claimants—it is an important point; I cannot stress it enough—did not want their money to be put into a bank account because their account was overdrawn and the benefit would be used by the bank to cover the overdraft. Therefore, we have some very serious concerns on matters that may dramatically affect how benefit claimants live their lives.

As I said, there are also real worries that, if banks do not play the game properly, although they will still be providing a service, they will do so in a way that is not conducive to the interests of those in the bottom decile of household incomes.

I was very pleased to see in today's *Financial Times* an exhortation by the Minister for Small Business and E-Commerce—who is also a distinguished former member of the Social Security Committee—to the banks to take action to deal with financial exclusion. She said that, if necessary, she will shame banks into providing a service. She is absolutely right on that issue, and I am pleased that the Government are taking action on it. There is a real worry that charges will increase.

Postmasters are concerned that they will lose money because they will have less Benefits Agency business, that they will receive less money per transaction for any business that remains after 2005, and that they will have fewer customers through the door to take advantage of other services and goods that they provide. For all those reasons, the owners of those small businesses are on a very difficult financial footing.

I am delighted that today's written answer from the Prime Minister states that he has asked the performance and innovation unit

"To identify the contribution made by post offices to the vitality of local communities . . . and in the process formulate objectives for the Post Office network."

I very strongly welcome such action, particularly if it is taken as recommended at paragraph 37 of the 12th report of the Select Committee on Trade and Industry, which deals with the need for the Government to recognise the network's value and to support it financially. The Government should not simply leave the issue of support to the postal services and to ancillary retail outlets, but recognise that there is a social role for rural post offices and support them accordingly. If the innovation unit's report is to tackle that agenda, I should very much welcome it.

I draw the Minister's attention—although I am sure that he is already a subscriber—to *The Subpostmaster* magazine's September editorial, which states:

"There will always be those in society who need personal care, not just the elderly, but those who find it difficult coping with modern living.

We have always provided that service in our offices as part of our daily routine.

There is so much essential and unpaid service provided in sub post offices of which those who prowl the corridors of power are unaware and that society will not miss until it has gone".

The editorial was entitled "Does anyone care?" I hope that the Minister cares, and that he will tell us why.

7.13 pm

Mr. Michael Moore (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale): I am grateful to have the opportunity of speaking very briefly in this important debate. I am particularly grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Roxburgh and Berwickshire (Mr. Kirkwood) and to the Minister for agreeing to my participation.

This debate is on a very important issue. As my hon. Friend has made clear, this summer, as we travelled round our constituencies and the borders, the Post Office's future was identified as a concern not only to those who run and work in post offices, but, most important, to many of those who use post offices.

Time and again, people stressed to us the importance of rural post offices to the communities they serve, not only in providing the more obvious Post Office services, but, as my hon. Friend said, because of the important role that they play in servicing the Department of Social Security and, equally—this is the unsung part of the work done by rural post offices—the general advice they hand out and information on the community that they know, simply because they are the focal point of those communities. In a world in which forms are getting ever more complicated and demands on people are getting ever more pressing, it is very important that that role played by rural post offices should be recognised.

We believe that the viability of rural post offices is under threat because of a process that has been in train for some time. Post offices worry that, in the next few months, if the Government's proposals remain

[Mr. Michael Moore]

unamended, their viability will be seriously in doubt. However, the post offices are also keen to stress that none of them want handouts. They are not looking for a Government subsidy, but want to do real work of benefit to their communities and to run profitable businesses. Many now stare the future in the face concerned that the business is going to dry up and that their pension, which is built into the capital value of the business, will be eroded.

The White Paper on the future of the Post Office properly focuses on some of the big issues facing the Post Office generally, but there is real concern that issues affecting rural post offices are not being tackled seriously or sensibly. The post offices in our constituencies across the Scottish borders are the centrepieces of most rural communities. They are already struggling and most are fearful. They need reassurances from the Minister this evening about their future.

7.15 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (Mr. Alan Johnson): I thank the hon. Member for Roxburgh and Berwickshire (Mr. Kirkwood) for his kind remarks. To quote the National Federation of Subpostmasters journal, I am now prowling the corridors of power, but for many years I was up at four o'clock in the morning as a rural postman dealing with the rural network. I am pleased to be able to make my maiden speech as a Minister on the subject of rural post offices.

I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on picking this subject for his debate. It is an issue of concern to many people living in rural areas. We opposed the previous Government's plans to break up and privatise the Post Office for many good and valid reasons, but none was more important than our concerns about the effects that privatisation or separation would have had on the rural network of post offices. We understood then, and we understand now, the important role that post offices play in village life and their importance to the poorer and less mobile members of the communities. Their unofficial services are exceeded only by the official services that they provide. I know from my experience of postmasters and postmistresses who go to find out what is wrong if a pensioner does not arrive to collect his pension. That is a crucial part of the social obligations that post offices carry out.

The debate takes place against the background of the announcement by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister that he has asked the performance and innovation unit in the Cabinet Office to carry out an urgent study on the post office network. The reasons behind that move are the same as the concerns that the hon. Gentleman and his hon. Friend the Member for Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale (Mr. Moore) have expressed this evening. The PIU study will seek to identify the contribution made by post offices to the vitality of local communities, to consider how the post office network can best contribute to the Government's objectives for the future and in the process to formulate objectives for the continuation of the post office network.

I pay tribute to those post office managers who have done a superb job over the years balancing social needs against commercial objectives. It is a credit to them that 60 per cent. of rural parishes have a post office, whereas only 5 per cent. have a bank. That has been achieved by a combination of remuneration scales that offer additional help to the least viable offices and efforts to ensure a continuing post office presence when sub-postmasters and postmistresses retire and the existing premises close. The social, technological and demographic environment in which post offices operate has undergone considerable change. The process seems likely to speed up rather than slow down, so it is timely to pause and take stock. I very much welcome the PIU study, which will enable the issues and concerns to be fully aired and properly considered.

I should like to confirm again as categorically as I can the message of my immediate predecessor, my right hon. Friend the Member for Makerfield (Mr. McCartney) and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry: the Government are fully committed to the maintenance of a nationwide network of post offices. In addition to launching the PIU study, we are backing our words with specific positive actions. In our White Paper "Post Office Reform" we have said that, for the first time, we shall publish access criteria for post offices, which the new postal regulatory commission, assisted by a revamped Post Office Users National Council, will have a duty to monitor. We are determined to ensure that everyone has reasonable access to the services provided by Post Office Counters.

We have taken a further important and practical step—we have put the Horizon project back on track. The House will recall that that is the project to automate the counters network. That project is crucial to the future of that network, since it will allow the business to streamline its internal processes and offer an improved service to clients and customers. The project that we inherited from the previous Administration was immensely complex and was running some three years behind schedule, with consequential cost overruns.

We have reconstructed the project in a form that greatly simplifies it, both technically and contractually. As a result, every counter position in every post office in the land—18,000 post offices and 40,000 counter positions—will be equipped with a modern on-line information technology platform by 2001.

As part of the process, we decided to discontinue work on the development of a benefit payment card as an integral part of the Horizon project. After a long and careful review of the project—making extensive use of independent experts—we had serious doubts about the ability of the contractor to deliver the project as originally configured. This is not an attempt to apportion blame. I genuinely feel, as did the hon. Member for Roxburgh and Berwickshire, that the previous Government made an honest attempt to move to a more up-to-date system. However, the decision to streamline and simplify the project by removing the benefit payment card was taken on wider grounds also.

The reality is that increasing numbers of benefit recipients choose to have their benefits paid directly into

their bank accounts. Thus, 54 per cent. of new child benefit recipients and 47 per cent. of new pensioners now choose to be paid by automatic credit transfer to their bank accounts. Against this background, we saw the priority as ensuring that post offices were equipped as quickly as possible with the facility to enable both benefit recipients and other bank customers to access their accounts at post offices. The key to this is to equip the network with the Horizon platform as quickly as possible, and that is what our decision will achieve.

Horizon will enable the Post Office to extend its commercial arrangements with the banks to enable benefit recipients and others to access their bank accounts at post offices. We have given a clear assurance in the White Paper that all benefit recipients who wish to do so will be able to continue to access their benefits in cash at post offices after 2003 when the Benefits Agency plans, over a two-year period, to move to a more modern and efficient means of payment, using the existing ACT system.

To assist the Post Office, the Government have agreed to make a substantial contribution to the capital cost of the restructured Horizon project, which represents a major investment in the future of the counters network.

Looking further to the future, the post office network—with its nationwide reach—represents a valuable channel for the delivery of Government and other services. This reach, coupled with the deployment of Horizon, should ensure that the Post Office is well placed to bid competitively to deliver electronic Government applications. We are, of course, ready to look at any new proposals that the Post Office may come forward with to diversify into new areas of business.

I have outlined some of the positive steps and initiatives that we have taken, and are taking, to secure the future of the nationwide network of post offices, including those in rural areas. However, I assure the hon. Member for Roxburgh and Berwickshire and the House that there is absolutely no complacency on the Government Benches. Over the last four years, the network of post offices has shrunk from 19,607 to 18,775—an average annual net loss of around 208 offices. The majority of these losses have occurred in rural areas.

That net figure hides a still greater number of closures, offset by the reopening of offices that had closed in previous years, and the creation of "community offices", which are open typically for just a few hours a week to carry out a limited range of services. In Scotland as a whole, there has been a net loss of 65 post offices over the same period. In the hon. Member for Roxburgh and Berwickshire's constituency, a total of 55 offices in March 1995 has shrunk to 46 offices, a net loss of nine offices.

It would be unrealistic and undeliverable for the Government to claim that no post office will ever close. About 18,000 out of the total network of approaching 19,000 post offices are run on a franchised or agency basis, the majority of them by individual business men and women, usually in conjunction with some other retail outlet.

That is the position with virtually the entire rural network, and, without that partnership, the rural network as we know it today would certainly not exist. It is estimated that sub-postmasters and sub-postmistresses have collectively sunk around £1 billion of their own money into their sub-post offices.

The ability to share overheads between the two sides of the businesses is often a crucial factor in the viability of each. The footfall generated by customers collecting their benefit payments or carrying out other post office business at the counter and then making purchases on the private side of the shop is an important part of the symbiotic relationship. The village store with its associated post office frequently becomes a focal point for village life: a place where people meet and information is gathered and exchanged.

The sub-postmasters and sub-postmistresses—I wish that we could find a generic term for them—are the backbone of their rural communities and are rightly held in huge regard by the people whom they serve. There is not time in this short debate even to begin to do justice to the many examples of exceptional dedication, but I am sure that all hon. Members here tonight will have examples from their constituencies and join me in paying tribute to that exemplary level of public service.

Those independent business men and women need to know that there is a viable future for their businesses. The viability of the network depends partly on Government, but also in large measure on local communities continuing to make sufficient use of their local post office and village shop. If customers stay away, it is unlikely that Government initiatives alone can suffice.

I do not want to disguise the undoubted difficulties that the transition from paper-based to electronic methods of paying social security benefits will cause for Post Office Counters Ltd. The transition, and its financial consequences for the counters business, will be an area to which the performance and innovation unit will pay particular attention in its work over the next month. The hon. Gentleman was right to say that the next six months will be crucial to the network's future.

The network needs to have the flexibility to be able to adapt to changing demographics and social preferences. More and more individuals are happy to interact electronically with a range of institutions, including banks and building societies. Increasingly, institutions—including Government—are keen to promote and encourage those modern means of communication. The Horizon platform should leave the counters network well placed to take advantage of those trends.

We should not forget that the network of Post Office Counters brings some formidable strengths. I have already referred to the skills and dedication of the sub-postmasters and sub-postmistresses, and the trust and high regard in which they are held by their customers. Despite some shrinkage of the network over the past decade, it remains the largest retail network in Europe. Within the United Kingdom it has an unrivalled reach, with 10 times as many outlets as Boots, Tesco and W. H. Smith combined, and more than all the banks and building societies put together. It is ubiquitous with a capital U.

The business has shown that it is more than capable of taking on new areas of work, and making a success of them. Recent examples include bureaux de change—the Post Office is now the biggest bureau de change operator in the country—the national lottery, the sale of basic insurance products and the extension of banking facilities to customers of the Co-operative bank and Lloyds TSB.

[Mr. Alan Johnson]

The arrival of the Horizon platform, which will shortly celebrate its 1,000th installation, should greatly enhance the attractiveness of the counters network to a range of potential new clients and business opportunities.

This evening's debate has been about the future of rural post offices but I would not want to lose the opportunity to pay tribute to the offices that the Post Office runs and staffs directly—the so called Crown offices—where we have agreed in the White Paper that 15 per cent. of transactions will continue to take place.

Those are the reasons why the post office network in urban and rural areas is crucial to the Government's plans for the future. It is crucial to our policy on ending social exclusion and to the future of our rural communities.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at half-past Seven o'clock.

House of Commons

Monday 25 October 1999

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

SOCIAL SECURITY

The Secretary of State was asked—

Stakeholder Pensions

1. **Mrs. Jacqui Lait** (Beckenham): What criteria he plans to issue to investment managers on investment policy for stakeholder pensions. [93744]

The Minister of State, Department of Social Security (Mr. Jeff Rooker): As with existing pension arrangements, the overall investment policy for stakeholder pensions will be a matter for those running the schemes. We propose that schemes should prepare a statement of investment principles, including social, environmental and ethical considerations, but policy action will be up to those running the schemes.

Mrs. Lait: I am grateful to the Minister for that reply. Can he assure me that all pension trustees will have the absolute right to manage pension funds to achieve the best possible return for their pensioners, and that the pensions will not be affected by considerations other than the right of best return?

Mr. Rooker: Yes, I can give the hon. Lady that assurance.

Mr. Michael Trend (Windsor): I welcome the Minister to his first Question Time in his current capacity. On appointment, he was the fourth pensions Minister in 27 months, so I wish him luck.

I understand that the Minister may be reluctant to adopt a position that is being urged on him by the Opposition, but has he decided whether pensioners, and stakeholder pensioners in particular, should be obliged to take their pension in the form of annuity at the age of 75, or whether he intends to sweep away that rule for stakeholder and other appropriate pensions?

Mr. Rooker: Neither I nor any of my colleagues in government have taken the approach of simply sweeping away ideas and suggestions from the Opposition. There is plenty evidence of that in legislation that has gone through the House. The hon. Gentleman will understand that, given the changes made in the other place to a Bill that has not yet completed its passage through the other place, I cannot answer his question in detail.

Mr. Kevin McNamara (Hull, North): May I take it from my hon. Friend's reply that he is quite happy for pension funds to invest in tobacco companies?

Mr. Rooker: It is for those who manage the funds and the trustees in charge of the funds to make such decisions. They are the ones who are accountable, not Ministers.

Mr. John Wilkinson (Ruislip-Northwood): What provision will the Government make to ensure that adequate advice is available to those who take out stakeholder pensions? According to the *Financial Times*, no less than half the population of the United Kingdom have total savings of less than £750. Is that not a disturbing comment on the lack of real disposable income, and does that not make it all the more important that the investment choices to be made through a stakeholder pension are properly made?

Mr. Rooker: I saw the report in the *Financial Times*, although I have not seen the document to which it refers. I got the impression under the previous Government that everyone was awash with funds. The vast majority of those at whom stakeholder pensions are targeted—people on moderate earnings, say between £10,000 and £20,000 a year—have no second pension provision. We estimate that their total earnings amount to £60 billion a year, and we believe that allowances and second pension provision can be made from that.

Appeals

2. **Mr. Anthony D. Wright** (Great Yarmouth): What steps his Department is taking to improve social security appeals procedures. [93745]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Social Security (Angela Eagle): As part of our plans for modernising the social security system, we are bringing in important changes to procedures for making decisions on social security claims and child support assessments and for handling appeals. The changes will be completed by November this year.

Mr. Wright: I thank my hon. Friend for her response. I welcome the setting up of a new appeals procedure, which we hope will prevent unacceptably long delays in making decisions. One of my constituents, who suffered from myalgic encephalomyelitis, had to endure 18 months before his appeal was won. Can my hon. Friend give us an assurance that all the old appeals will be tackled in the near future?

Angela Eagle: I understand my hon. Friend's frustration with the system that we inherited, where the average wait for an appeal decision was seven months. Clearly, if the average waiting time is seven months, some cases will go on for much longer. The backlog of old appeals, which in February stood at 70,348 cases, which was 50 per cent. of all outstanding appeals, was down to 15,405 in September, as a result of the changes that we have made in decision making and appeals. That is a

substantial improvement, and I take this opportunity of complimenting the staff of the tribunal service, who have done so well to produce that result.

Miss Anne McIntosh (Vale of York): Does the Minister accept that the appeals procedure was reviewed only because of pressure exerted by the Opposition? Will the hon. Lady, on behalf of the Government, undertake to go back on the means-testing provision that is written into the Welfare Reform and Pensions Bill, to avoid a burdensome appeals procedure when that comes into force?

Angela Eagle: I have never heard such nonsense in my life; I am afraid that the hon. Lady is living in fantasy land. It is quite clear that streamlining, which maintains people's proper rights, had to be introduced for the cumbersome appeals procedure that we inherited, and that is what we have done.

Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody (Crewe and Nantwich): Although everyone welcomes the clear acceleration in the hearing of such appeals, will my hon. Friend bear it in mind that there is some doubt about the quality of some of the evidence that is being given to tribunals? Many of the most vulnerable people in our society are losing their benefits and having to appeal. The length of time in which an appeal is heard is essential. I know that she understands that, but will she keep a close eye on the situation?

Angela Eagle: I certainly agree with my hon. Friend and also, I hope, can reassure her that one of the main principles behind the changes to appeals procedures is avoiding the need for appeals altogether. In other words, we want to collect the evidence properly and ensure that benefit is awarded correctly first time so that we can take a lot of appeals, which are caused by mistakes and confusion, out of the system completely.

Pensioners

3. **Mr. Oliver Letwin** (West Dorset): What steps he is taking to ensure that all pensioners receive the benefits to which they are entitled. [93747]

The Minister of State, Department of Social Security (Mr. Jeff Rooker): Research on barriers that pensioners face in claiming income support was published as recently as 15 October. Later this year, we will publish the evaluation of our pilots, which are aimed at encouraging pensioners to claim. That work is the most comprehensive analysis of pensioner take-up—or non-take-up, as the case may be—so far.

Mr. Letwin: I am grateful to the Minister for that deeply illuminating reply. What explanation can he give pensioners who are claiming benefits today of the fact that their basic state pension is worth only a fraction of what it would have been worth had it been placed in a fund when they were making their national insurance contributions?

Mr. Rooker: The hon. Gentleman asked me about ensuring that pensioners receive the benefits to which they are entitled. It is a deep cause of concern that some pensioners are not receiving the benefits to which they are entitled because of the barriers to claiming. Some of them believe that they still have to go to the social—to the office—to claim, for instance, income support or the minimum income guarantee. That is not the case. Claims can be made through a home visit or, in some parts of the country, over the telephone.

The hon. Gentleman has asked about the important issue of take-up of benefits before. An estimated 800,000 pensioners are not receiving the benefit to which they are entitled and for which the House has legislated, and we want to do everything we can to encourage take-up. There will be a Government-sponsored take-up campaign next spring.

Mr. Frank Field (Birkenhead): I also congratulate my hon. Friend on his new post. Can he confirm that, generally speaking, the poorest pensioners are the oldest pensioners and that the national insurance fund is, to use a phrase he used a moment ago, awash with funds? Can he also confirm that the Government have records of pensioners aged over 80, because we pay them a few extra pennies a week, and that perhaps the most effective way of tackling pensioner poverty would be to give an increase of about £15 to those pensioners?

Mr. Rooker: I thank my right hon. Friend—and, indeed, the hon. Member for Windsor (Mr. Trend)—for their welcome. My right hon. Friend is absolutely correct. Indeed, of the estimated average number of pensioners not taking up their entitlement to income support—which varies between 530,000 to 870,000; one cannot be precise—230,000 are single females aged over 80, so there is a major problem. The figure for single males aged over 80 is 40,000.

When I walked into the Department of Social Security, I thought that, by twiddling the keys on my keyboard, I would be able to bring up the information necessary for finding those people in a detailed and systematic way, but the way that the information technology arrangements in the Department have been made in recent years prevented that from happening, which is why we need a Government-led take-up campaign.

On my right hon. Friend's further point, he will know better than I do that we cannot make a decision that could have consequences for 10, 20 or 30 years on one year's figures for the national insurance fund.

Fraud

4. **Mr. Peter Lilley** (Hitchin and Harpenden): What steps he has taken to involve the public in the campaign against social security fraud. [93748]

5. **Mr. James Gray** (North Wiltshire): What recent representations he has received over his proposals for eradication of social security fraud. [93749]

The Secretary of State for Social Security (Mr. Alistair Darling): We are strengthening the social security system to cut down on fraud and error, and the reforms that we are making will strengthen public confidence and support.

Mr. Lilley: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for that reply, but can he confirm that the truth is that the

Government have run down the beat-a-cheat line and closed down the spotlight on fraud campaign, which was succeeding in saving more than £100 million a year? They have so starved the Benefits Agency fraud investigation service that it has had to shut down its operations because of lack of money. Is not the truth that the Government have gone soft on fraud?

Mr. Darling: No, it is not. I shall deal first with the national benefits hotline. We receive about 13,000 to 14,000 calls a month on the hotline, and from 1 November we shall spend nearly £500,000 on another advertising campaign because we believe that the public support and information that we get are invaluable in support of the fight against fraud. Since we came into office, we have increased by a third the number of serious cases that are prosecuted, which has resulted in a 50 per cent. increase in custodial offences. Many of the spotlight on fraud campaign features that worked have been incorporated into the Department's fight against fraud.

I remind the right hon. Gentleman that, at the end of his term as Secretary of State, two out of every five income support cases were being paid without sufficient evidence to justify them. Because of the changes that we have made to ensure that we get benefit claims right in the first place, we shall save £1 billion on that benefit alone during this Parliament.

Mr. Gray: Surely that smells of complacency. Is the Secretary of State aware that, in the last year of the previous Government, we achieved our fraud savings target by more than £50 million, whereas he is below his target by some £200 million? He says that he is not soft on fraud. Why, then, has he cancelled LOFIT—the London Organised Fraud Investigation Team?

Mr. Darling: That project was wound up—it was run not by my Department but by London boroughs—because of internal difficulties that made it impossible for it to carry on. That decision was taken by the London boroughs responsible for it. I remind the hon. Gentleman, that in addition to ensuring that we get income support cases right, since October we have insisted that every claimant establishes his identity before his claim can be accepted, which never happened under the Conservatives. We have stopped the Post Office redirecting housing benefit cheques to bogus addresses, something that the previous Government did not pursue. We have ensured that the benefit fraud inspectorate examines the 30 councils that spend the most on housing benefit to ensure that their procedures are tightened up, and we are now cross-checking information held by the Inland Revenue, the Benefits Agency and local authorities. There are more inspections because we are concerned not just about detecting fraud, but about preventing it from entering the system in the first place. Above all, the approach that we are now adopting is not only more robust, but supported by the National Audit Office, which, as the hon. Gentleman should know, expressed concern about the DSS accounts in just about every year that the Conservatives were in office.

Ms Ruth Kelly (Bolton, West): Will my right hon. Friend congratulate Westminster council on its anti-fraud strategy, which has resulted in one of its Tory councillors spending some time at Her Majesty's pleasure? Will he assure me that his new anti-fraud strategy will be implemented by councils throughout the country, because fraud is completely unacceptable, wherever it is found?

Mr. Darling: I agree with my hon. Friend. It is important that not only the Benefits Agency but the local authorities that administer the housing benefits scheme understand that fraud is a serious problem. It undermines the general public's confidence in the system and is bad for the perception of those who legitimately claim housing benefit. We have offered much help to councils to ensure that they have access to Benefits Agency systems, that we all hold the same information and that we get claims right. We started a joint initiative with councils to ensure that housing benefit cheques are not redirected to bogus addresses.

All the steps that we are taking are causing a significant change of culture in the system, because we must make inroads into the sums lost in the past through fraud and error.

Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours (Workington): My right hon. Friend referred to claimants having to establish their identity at the point at which they receive benefit. Is the national identity card back on the agenda?

Mr. Darling: No, what we are asking is that everyone who claims benefit must establish his or her identity, which means producing either a national insurance number or sufficient information to ensure that we can identify the national insurance number. The problem in the past was that many officers paid out benefit without checking that people were who they said that they were. It is all very well for Opposition Members to sneer, but for 18 years they did absolutely nothing about those problems.

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): Surely what the Government have been doing has undermined the efforts of local authorities to tackle this serious problem. Will the Secretary of State give us details about the amount of successful fraud detection by local authorities between, let us say, May 1997 and now?

Mr. Darling: I do not agree with the right hon. Gentleman. If he had thought for just one moment before he asked his question, he would have realised that the Government have taken many initiatives with local authorities. I mentioned the service that will prevent redirection of housing benefit cheques, and the fact that we are giving local authorities, for the first time, access to the Benefits Agency system to ensure that the information that we all hold is exactly the same. We are sharing information in a way that never happened in the past. In addition, we have set up two pilot projects to find better ways of ensuring that the Benefits Agency and councils work together, so that there is one interview with an individual, the same information is held by both organisations and we get claims right.

The difference between this and the previous Government is that we are determined to tackle the causes of fraud and error rather than spending all our time trying to chase the symptoms. I think that the majority of the public would support us in doing that.

Incapacity Benefit

6. **Mr. Tony McWalter** (Hemel Hempstead): What proposals he has for defining the qualifications needed by the personal advisers who will be implementing the successor regime to the all-work test for incapacity benefit. [93750]

13. **Mr. Bob Blizzard** (Waveney): What progress he has made in devising a replacement for the all-work test. [93760]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Social Security (Mr. Hugh Bayley): Our proposed replacement for the all-work test will collect information about what people can do, as well as what they cannot do. We are considering the results of a first pilot study of a proposed personal capability assessment, and we are also training personal advisers in disability awareness.

Mr. McWalter: I thank my hon. Friend for that answer. The qualities required by personal advisers may be significant, given that they will have to analyse the capacities of people with Asperger's syndrome and other difficult conditions, and the state of the workplaces where those people may have the capacity to work. Given those complexities, will my he assure us that personal advisers will be fully trained and highly qualified?

Mr. Bayley: My hon. Friend makes some important points, and I can give him the assurance that he seeks. The training that personal advisers receive will be tailored to their individual needs. For instance, someone who has previously worked as a disability employment adviser will have different training needs from someone who has worked on housing benefit. To date, personal advisers have gone through an average of 200 hours training; some have received 300 or 400 hours. Particular emphasis is placed on all special client groups, although more time is spent on disability awareness than on understanding the needs of other groups. We have had input from a wide range of voluntary organisations, such as Scope, Mencap, MIND and the National Schizophrenia Fellowship, on the content of the training programmes.

Mr. Blizzard: Does my hon. Friend agree that nothing discredits the system that we inherited from the previous Government more than the all-work test? In devising a new test, will he ensure that more decisions are reached correctly at the first time of asking, so as to avoid lengthy appeals? Will he ensure that the questions asked elicit the real nature of the disability, because disabled people often say that they can perform a particular function but do not mention the extreme difficulty that they have in performing it? Sometimes that renders them ineligible for the benefit. Will he deal in particular with the problems of people who suffer from ME?

Mr. Bayley: The trend in appeals shows that, as a result of the changes that our Department has made, more people are getting the right decision first time, but there is some way to go, and we shall press ahead with that. The all-work test remains the same for the gateway to incapacity benefit: we have not tightened up the system. However, we are taking a wide range of measures to improve the quality of the advice that Benefits Agency medical services practitioners give on claims, including those involving ME. My hon. Friend has taken a special interest in chronic fatigue syndrome, so he will know that the advice to personal advisers and to doctors making assessments that is published by the Department in the "Disability Handbook" provides much detail about ME and states that it must be taken seriously.

Mr. Julian Brazier (Canterbury): Is there not something rather cruel about the idea of slackening the medical criteria, while at the same time introducing means-testing for incapacity benefits? Is it really fair to fund this easing of medical criteria on the back of the savings of seriously disabled people?

Mr. Bayley: The hon. Gentleman misunderstands what we are doing. We are not slackening the medical criteria; we are not changing them in any way. What we are doing is expanding the all-work test into a personal capability assessment. As well as taking into account what a person cannot do, and thereby assessing that person's entitlement to benefit, we take into account what that person can do. The information will then be fed in to assist disabled people who want to return to work to achieve their aim.

According to the Government's labour force survey, 1 million people who have been consigned to life on benefits in the long term by the policies of the last Government say that they want to work, and we are providing the help and advice that will enable more of them to do so.

Mr. Desmond Swayne (New Forest, West): Can the hon. Gentleman explain the change in Government policy that occurred between the passage of the Bill that became the Social Security Act 1998, when the Government rejected Conservative proposals that there should be legally qualified chairmen and that doctors should be present when appeals were being heard requiring complex medical evidence, and the passage on 18 May this year of a statutory instrument making precisely that provision?

Mr. Bayley: We have made provision for a medically qualified person, as well as a legally qualified person, to be on the board when appeals relating to incapacity benefit are being heard. We have done that because we believe it is right. As for the arcane debate in relation to the 1998 Act, the Opposition can take responsibility for it. Nothing in the legislation prevented the Government from doing what we believed needed to be done, and that is what we have done.

Sir Robert Smith (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine): Will assessments of people who can perform a task take into account whether it is medically advisable for them to undertake that task? I have a constituent whose joints were damaged by a wasting disease, and who has to have replacement joints. The surgeon has said that, if the task is carried out, another operation will be needed far sooner than it would be if my constituent rested the

joints and engaged in limited activity with them. Although that person is able to perform the task in question, that task in itself will worsen the condition.

Mr. Bayley: I would be extremely concerned if any doctor recommended that a person should return to work if work would worsen the person's condition. That is certainly not the Government's intention.

I hope that this will reassure the hon. Gentleman. It will be made clear to anyone discussing with a personal adviser the scope that exists for that person to return to work that any job seeking, or job taking, is entirely voluntary. Once the service is up and running, people on incapacity benefit will be required to discuss what scope there is for a return to work, but they and they alone, as individuals, will decide whether to convert that scope into job seeking.

7. **Mr. Nigel Waterson** (Eastbourne): What proposals he has to amend the rules relating to incapacity benefit. [93751]

The Secretary of State for Social Security (Mr. Alistair Darling): We are determined to bring the benefits system up to date, and to do more for those who need help most. During the Report stage of the Welfare Reform and Pensions Bill, I made it clear that the principles that underpin these reforms were right, but that I was prepared to consider the details in the light of future representations. That remains the case.

Mr. Waterson: Does the Secretary of State accept that applying means-testing to incapacity benefit not only undermines the contributory principle, but constitutes a massive disincentive for constituents—including mine—who have disabilities, and who want to save and make provision for themselves?

Mr. Darling: No, I do not accept that. I think it right that, when people draw down a pension early after retiring through incapacity, and when they have a significant income, that income ought to be taken into account. I bear in mind the fact that about 300,000 people who receive incapacity benefit along with an occupational pension have an income of some £400 a week, and the fact that nearly 50 per cent. of incapacity benefit recipients with occupational pensions are in the top income brackets.

I believe that the social security system needs to do far more for those who need help most. That is why we are increasing the amount of help that we give to severely disabled children by nearly £27 a week, and in some cases—involving those with particular difficulties—by more than £35 a week. If we are to do that, however, there will come a stage at which we must consider where else the system is paying benefits to people on whom, owing to changes in circumstances over the past 50 years, we might not wish to focus our activities. I believe that the principles that underpin the Government's approach are absolutely right. I have said that I am prepared to look at the detail. I am doing that and will have further proposals, but the principle that the Government's efforts are best directed towards those who need help most is right.

Mr. David Winnick (Walsall, North): Will my right hon. Friend listen very carefully to those on our side who have criticised his proposals, particularly those who have campaigned for disability benefits for years on end? I have in mind Lord Ashley and Lord Morris. Will my right hon. Friend bear it in mind that, although many of us recognise the improvements that have undoubtedly taken place in the past two years for many people who are affected by his Department—some of us have taken the opportunity to point that out on many occasions—there is deep concern over what is being proposed? To avoid what occurred on 20 May in the House of Commons happening again, I hope that he will bear in mind our concern.

Mr. Darling: I made it clear that I am and have been listening to representations over the past few months. I will have further proposals, but I repeat that I believe that the principles that underpin the approach that we are taking in this and other parts of the Bill are absolutely right.

The Government have given other help to disabled people. We have introduced the disabled person's tax credit, the disability income guarantee and the new deal for the disabled—all those are new and were introduced by the present Government. None of them came from the Tory Government.

The Tory opposition to this part of the Bill is wholly opportunistic. I respect the views of some of my colleagues and, indeed, some Cross Benchers in the other place. I will listen to them, but I hope that my hon. Friend will accept, when he looks at what the Government are doing in the round, that we are greatly helping people who are disabled and doing far more than any Government have for those who need help most. I hope that, when it comes to the final vote, he will look at those matters in the round, support the Government and not go into the Lobby with Conservative Members.

Mr. Steve Webb (Northavon): The arguments that the Secretary of State has used for means-testing incapacity benefit—the fact that some recipients have big company pensions—would apply equally to retirement pensions, yet the Government think that it is wrong on principle to means-test the national insurance retirement pension. Why is it wrong to means-test the retirement pension, but right to means-test incapacity benefit?

Mr. Darling: Pensions that are drawn early after someone has retired because of incapacity are meant to replace income; incapacity benefit was originally designed in the same way. When the hon. Gentleman reflects that 50 years ago, less than 30 per cent. of people had occupational pensions and that now nearly 86 per cent. of men have such provision, he will realise that we cannot go on ignoring that fact. I understand that the Liberal Democrats' view is sometimes different and that they have all sorts of spending proposals without any means of financing them. However, there comes a stage when, if we want to do more for those who are most severely disabled, particularly children who have been disabled from birth or at an early stage, we will have to look at what is happening throughout the labour market and ensure that the social security system reflects those changes. At the moment, such people are paid so little that they are living on income support for the whole of their lives. Our changes will lift them above income support.

Mr. Barry Gardiner (Brent, North): I welcome the Government's statement in another place that those on the

higher care component of disability living allowance will be exempted from the clawback in incapacity benefit. However, can my right hon. Friend assure me that the Government, in modernising welfare, will continue to protect those in greatest need, particularly people who, through the severity of their disability, have never been able to work?

Mr. Darling: I strongly agree with my hon. Friend. I confirm that Baroness Hollis, the Under-Secretary of State, made it clear in the other place that the Government, having listened to representations, would exempt from the proposals those who are most severely disabled. That change will be widely welcomed. I accept the arguments in respect of it. The Government will ensure that the appropriate amendments are made to the Bill.

As I was saying to the hon. Member for Northavon (Mr. Webb), when I took over this job I was struck by how little we were doing for those who are most severely disabled. I do not think that any Labour Government could complete a term of office and simply allow that to continue. I am therefore determined to do more and more to help those who are severely disabled—those who will never, ever work—and I feel very strongly that, as a matter of decency, we owe that to them.

I feel equally strongly that the current benefits system is increasingly out of date, and that it will have to keep abreast of changes in society and in the labour market. I therefore believe that the principles underlying our approach are right, but am listening to representations on the detail.

Mr. David Willetts (Havant): Does the Secretary of State understand that there is so much cross-party opposition to his proposals not because of points of detail, but because of points of principle, such as the principle of a contributory incapacity benefit? I remind him that it is also a matter of holding him to account for his own statements about encouraging people to save for their own retirement.

How can the Government say that they want to encourage people to take out pensions—we heard it again today from the Minister of State, Department of Social Security—but at the same time penalise them if they have an occupational or personal pension—but only if they a pension; the Government are interested in no other type of savings—by depriving them of their incapacity benefit? That is manifestly an attack on saving and is inconsistent with the Government's own statements.

Mr. Darling: We are talking about sums that are drawn down early by someone who has come out of the labour force because of an incapacity. The hon. Gentleman said that it was a matter of principle. I was interested in a letter—a copy of which someone was kind enough to send me—sent to all Tory Members by the hon. Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Mr. Pickles), saying that today's Question Time would be a useful opportunity to see how determined the Government were to reverse the amendments in the other place. The hon. Member for Brentwood and Ongar said, however, that

"a degree of subtlety is required in that the Government is keen to brand the defeats as Tory plotting."

The letter goes on to invite Tory Members to a plotting meeting, at 1.15 pm, in the Tea Room.

The Tory opposition to the changes that we are proposing in the Welfare Reform and Pensions Bill is wholly opportunistic. When people see what the Government have done for disabled people and judge that against what the previous Government did—blocking the changes that we tried to make in establishing the Disability Rights Commission, and at every turn disadvantaging disabled people—most of them will realise that our position is one of principle, in stark contrast to the position taken by Conservative Members.

Mr. Willetts: My hon. Friend the Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Mr. Pickles) is renowned for his subtlety, and it is a great asset to have him on the team.

The Secretary of State still does not seem to realise the significance of the defeats that the Government suffered in the other place the other week. In the media, he claimed that the defeats were inflicted by some sort of backward-looking alliance of hereditary peers. Does he not realise that, even if not a single hereditary peer had voted, the Government would still have gone down to a humiliating defeat? Does that not tell him something about how wrong the proposals are?

Mr. Darling: No, it does not. On the Welfare Reform and Pensions Bill and other measures currently being considered by the other place, it is quite clear that the Conservative party and hereditary peers are determined to squeeze every last opportunity out of the time they have remaining in the other place.

I take with great seriousness much of what many Members said in the other place, but find it difficult to take seriously what the hon. Gentleman has to say. Two weeks ago, at the Tory party conference, he gave a pledge to cut social security spending as a proportion of national income. However, his colleagues—Conservative Members—in the other place have now backed amendments totalling £3.5 billion of expenditure commitments. The hon. Gentleman invites us to believe that he is a man of principle and that he will cut social security spending, but Conservative Members never did that in all their time in government. In real terms, the previous Government increased social security spending by 90 per cent., although the gap between rich and poor and the number of people born in poverty increased year after year. That is a damning indictment of the failure of the previous, Tory Government.

Earnings Disregards

8. **Mr. Jim Cousins** (Newcastle upon Tyne, Central): What is his policy on the uprating of earnings disregards. [93753]

The Minister of State, Department of Social Security (Mr. Jeff Rooker): The earnings disregards are reviewed annually as part of the uprating process.

Mr. Cousins: I welcome my hon. Friend to his new position. As he well knows, for many years the previous Government restricted the weekly earning power of those on means-tested benefits to £5 for a single person and £15 for those with families. Through that policy they

ring-fenced the shame and misery of those without work, bringing the fear of fraud to millions of decent families and taxing the energy and enterprise of the poorest in a way that no one has ever suggested should be done to the richest. They made women fearful of looking after their grandchildren and men fearful of mending their mate's car or painting their auntie's house. They restricted self-employment and limited community business. Following the introduction of the minimum wage, the disregard is worth 90 minutes of earning power or four hours for someone with a family. Is it not time that that, too, was modernised?

Mr. Rooker: My hon. Friend is right. He asks what our policy is. It is to review the disregards annually as part of the uprating process. They have not been uprated for several years—not since 1988 for income support or since 1996 for the jobseeker's allowance. However, there have been other changes in the welfare benefits system, not least the working families tax credit, which means that it is no longer possible for any family person to claim that they are better off on benefit than in work.

Mr. Eric Pickles (Brentwood and Ongar): May I associate myself with the words of my hon. Friend the Member for Havant (Mr. Willetts) in welcoming the Minister to his post? It is a difficult one and I wish him well.

What incentive does the Minister's response give to people on low incomes? The Government have been in power for two and a half years, but their latest "Households Below Average Income" document clearly shows that the number of people at the poorer end of the income scale has increased and that the trend is upwards. Will he name a year when poor people will be better off under a Labour Government? Will it be next year or the year after? Will it be 2000, 2001 or 2002? Or is what he has said an example of spin over substance? Does he believe that the Government are tackling poverty merely by saying that they are going to do so? Will he name a year?

Mr. Rooker: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his generous welcome. I know that it was not well meant. [HON. MEMBERS: "Oh!"] No one has ever accused me of being subtle, so I have no apology to make. Our document measures the year before our changes came into force and shows the legacy of the previous Government, which will still be rolling along for some time. The hon. Gentleman asked for an example. Constituents of mine—and those of most hon. Members—who have been claiming family credit and have now gone on to the working families tax credit will be substantially better off under this Government, notwithstanding those—

Mr. Pickles: Which year?

Mr. Rooker: This year. I am talking about those who are transferring now as family credit comes to an end. Those who are on the minimum wage will be substantially better off this year.

Jobseeker's Allowance

9. **Dr. Brian Iddon** (Bolton, South-East): What plans he has to review the jobseeker's allowance regulations. [93754]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Social Security (Angela Eagle): A large-scale research programme to evaluate the jobseeker's allowance has been conducted and the final report in the series will be published early next year. The findings from that programme will enable us to consider what changes we might need to make. In the meantime, we will consider changes to the jobseeker's allowance when problems occur or when a reason for amendments is identified.

Dr. Iddon: I thank my hon. Friend for that announcement. Does she agree that the Tories introduced the present regulations not only as a means of cutting benefits for those made unemployed by their policies, but as one of 30 fiddles to hide the true unemployment rate at the time? Is she aware that people who are made redundant when their firm goes into receivership or liquidation cannot claim this allowance at the moment? Previously, such people were able to claim unemployment benefit, which was recovered from any payment due in lieu. Will she consider correcting that unfairness?

Angela Eagle: We are aware that people who have money owing because their employer has gone bankrupt are not able to receive benefit. We will therefore propose regulations at the earliest opportunity to remedy that anomaly. In future, jobseeker's allowance and income support will not be refused because of earnings owed to people when their jobs end.

Child Support Agency

10. **Mr. Graham Brady** (Altrincham and Sale, West): What recent representations he has received about his proposals to reform the Child Support Agency. [93755]

The Secretary of State for Social Security (Mr. Alistair Darling): We have received a wide range of views on the detail of our proposals since the White Paper was published. I am glad to say that there is widespread support for the radical changes to the current system.

Mr. Brady: To inform future contributions to the debate, will the Secretary of State tell the House how many parents will have their entitlement to maintenance [illegible]ed, and by how much?

Mr. Darling: We expect that about 1 million children will gain because of the changes. That contrasts with the fact that, at the moment, some 66 per cent. of children do not see all the benefit to which they are entitled under the present system.

Mr. Bill O'Brien (Normanton): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on introducing changes to the CSA regulations, and on offering the prospect of greater fairness in the making of maintenance assessments. Will he consider people who are working part time or in seasonal labour? The CSA often takes into consideration

only the income based on periods when such people are in employment. Would not it be much fairer to take into account annual income when assessing maintenance, rather than three or four weeks when such people are in employment? The CSA has applied that principle in some cases, and it is difficult to understand how it can do so in some instances but not in others.

Mr. Darling: My hon. Friend raises a difficult point which also concerns people whose income can change dramatically because of the availability of overtime. The difficulty is that, at the moment, it takes up to 100 pieces of information to make a basic calculation. Under the new system, we will be able to calculate the sum due in a matter of days, rather than months. That means that where someone's income fluctuates because of the circumstances described by my hon. Friend, it will be far easier to make a more accurate assessment of what is due. There is a balance to be struck in terms of what is fair to the parent without care, as well as to the parent with care. However, I am sure that if we simplify the system to ensure that the calculations are made more quickly, we will have a better chance of making sure that we do the right thing by both parents—but above all, by the children concerned.

Mr. Elfyn Llwyd (Meirionnydd Nant Conwy): In the new proposals, what will deal with a parent without care who is self-employed and decides to ignore the CSA? I have constituents who have been waiting two and a half years for any payment, and some people are getting away with blue murder.

Mr. Darling: In the White Paper, we are considering what greater civil penalties can be imposed where parents will not co-operate. I hope that the hon. Gentleman will welcome the fact that the CSA will be given powers, where appropriate, to get to the records held by the Inland Revenue to find out how much someone earns. Many of us have constituents who are not receiving a penny from, usually, the estranged husband, who can be seen driving around town in a BMW and leading a life style that is wholly inconsistent with his assertion that he has no money. I am sorry to say that, as I understand it, the Conservative party is against our proposal.

Ms Claire Ward (Watford): I welcome my right hon. Friend's statement that more will be done to give the CSA power to investigate fathers who are not paying their children's maintenance, but will he ensure that the agency does not tackle only the soft targets: those who are already making a contribution and are being persistently pursued for more? Will he also ensure that bureaucracy is cut back so that my constituents can get a reply to their letters and telephone calls within a reasonable time?

Mr. Darling: My hon. Friend raises two points. One concerns the administration of the Child Support Agency, which we are overhauling. Part of the problem is that its case load has increased dramatically—by about 60 per cent.—in the past couple of years, and that is putting a strain on staff. The agency has a high staff turnover, a problem which we are seeking to tackle, and the complexity of the rules and regulations under which it has to operate leads to difficulties. I regard the situation as wholly unsatisfactory, which is why we are simplifying the rules and regulations so that instead of 100 pieces of information, three or four will be sufficient to get claims into payment.

I agree with my hon. Friend's other point, which was that equity demands that people believe that the CSA will pursue anybody who does not pay, and not only those who are more readily accessible. Currently, far too many staff are employed assessing claims and very few enforcing them. I believe that as a result of the changes that we are making far more attention will be given to enforcement, carried out in a fair way.

Miss Julie Kirkbride (Bromsgrove): Will the Secretary of State answer the question that my hon. Friend the Member for Altrincham and Sale, West (Mr. Brady) asked? How many parents with care will have their maintenance assessment reduced under the Government's proposals?

Mr. Darling: I understand the hon. Lady's point, but let me repeat that, as a result of the changes that we will make, 1 million more children will get the maintenance to which they are entitled. It is perfectly true that, as a result of the simplified formula, which was published in the White Paper—the ready reckoners are there—some parents will pay more, and some less, but the fundamental point that concerns Labour Members is the fact that those 1 million more children will receive their benefit. I wish that Conservative Members would pay more attention to those children rather than concentrating on those who seek to dodge their responsibility.

12. **Helen Jackson** (Sheffield, Hillsborough): What responses he has received to the White Paper, "A New Contract for Welfare: Children's Rights and Parents' Responsibilities", (Cm 4349); and if he will make a statement. [93759]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Social Security (Angela Eagle): As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has already said, responses to the White Paper show continuing support for radical reform of the child support system.

Helen Jackson: Have the responses reflected the total muddle, confusion and inefficiency that have dogged thousands of children and families because of the way in which the Child Support Agency was introduced in the previous Parliament? Thousands have been driven into our advice surgeries, desperate for some response from Government. Will my hon. Friend assure us that the Government will concentrate on prioritising the needs of children; offering wherever possible a face-to-face consultation as opposed to the thousands of telephone calls that people currently have to make; and, above all, ensuring that there is an efficient and fully prepared set-up to deal with the changes?

Angela Eagle: We are acutely aware that, because of the muddle that the agency got in when it was introduced and the extreme complexity of the formula that it has had to try to implement, what my hon. Friend describes has come to pass. As constituency Members, we have all seen a string of people who have been affected in various ways by the agency's inability to do its job effectively. That is why the move to a much simpler formula for calculating maintenance has been widely welcomed. Changes to child

support regulations are at the centre of our fight against child poverty. It is essential to get maintenance into payment efficiently and effectively.

Sir Teddy Taylor (Rochford and Southend, East): In considering these responses, will the Minister consider offering congratulations to the chief executive of the Child Support Agency, Mrs. Faith Boardman, for her speedy, thorough and comprehensive replies to letters from Members, of which there are many? In so doing, will the Minister consider whether this splendid example of public service might not be taken up by Ministers, some of whom appear to treat Members' letters with contempt and delay replies for four months or more?

Angela Eagle: I am more than happy to pass on my congratulations to Faith Boardman on the job that she does in extremely difficult circumstances. As far as I am aware, delays in ministerial replies are not as long as the hon. Gentleman says, except in very occasional circumstances.

Dr. Phyllis Starkey (Milton Keynes, South-West): May I pass on to my hon. Friend the support that I have received from my constituents for the changes that are proposed for the Child Support Agency? Their only concern is the length of time that it will take to bring in the new and simplified procedures. Has my hon. Friend received any assurances from the Conservative party that when the necessary legislation is introduced, Conservative Members will help to speed its passage through the House, so that we can implement the changes, which are much desired, as soon as possible?

Angela Eagle: I cannot tell my hon. Friend that we have received any assurances from the Conservative party. If I had been responsible for the mess that it introduced, I would be less happy about coming forward to criticise how things are going now.

Mr. David Willetts (Havant): You voted for it.

Angela Eagle: We voted against the Second Reading of the Bill that introduced the CSA. Many of the things that we warned against during the passage of the Bill in 1991 came to pass.

I can reassure my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes, South-West (Dr. Starkey) that at the centre of our deliberations are the issues that her constituents bring to her, and my constituents bring to me, about the difficulties that have been caused. We must remember that we have an absolute duty to ensure that the 1.8 million children who are left without any support as a result of their parents having abandoned the family home are supported. The Government need to facilitate that in the most effective and efficient way.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): In legislating for parents' responsibilities, would the Minister agree with me that it is essential in each case to be absolutely certain who the parents are? Further to that obvious point, and given the fact that one of my constituents has been instructed by the Child Support Agency to make payments of £111.92 per week, a sum which he cannot afford, to support a child who he insists to this day is not his, will the Minister agree that in any reform package for the CSA my constituent should have a right to demand a DNA test, which he has thus far unavailingly requested since February, to establish beyond doubt whether he is or is not the parent?

Angela Eagle: I never thought the day would come when I agreed with the hon. Gentleman—the week may even get better as it goes on. Clearly it undermines the whole system if parentage is not properly established. We want to do our best to establish DNA testing to solve the few instances where there is controversy over parentage.

New Deal (Disabled)

14. **Mr. David Watts** (St. Helens, North): What lessons his Department has drawn from the working of the new deal for the disabled in helping disabled people obtain employment. [93761]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Social Security (Mr. Hugh Bayley): There is clear evidence that the new deal for disabled people is helping people to move from incapacity benefit into work. One thousand people have found jobs through these new deal pilots so far.

Mr. Watts: I thank the Minister for his reply. May I ask my hon. Friend to ensure that any problems that have been highlighted during the pilot scheme are resolved before the scheme goes national? Given the concern about the closure of Remploy factories, will he give me a guarantee that when the new system is up and running, when pilot schemes are extended, and when there are new deals for the disabled throughout the country, there will be better, not fewer, options for the disabled?

Mr. Bayley: Yes, I can give my hon. Friend those assurances. We have learned a great deal from the new deal pilots. We have found that it is possible to help people with a wide range of disabilities, including some who have been extremely seriously disabled. When I visited one of the pilots a few weeks ago in the north of Scotland, I met a man who had been unemployed because of incapacity for 29 years. The new deal had provided him with an opportunity that he had sought for a long time—the opportunity to work.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Employment is making available additional resources to pay for supported employment. That will help Remploy and other organisations that are providing supported employment.

Mr. Tim Boswell (Daventry): Will the Minister ensure that he takes more seriously than it has been taken before the research commissioned from the Institute for Employment Studies that suggests an alarming shortfall in future supported employment placements? The figures suggest that there may be a deficiency of between 40,000, on a narrow estimate, and up to 179,000, on a broad estimate, of potential future demand for supported places. Will he therefore ensure that if he implements a national roll-out of the new deal for disabled people, he and his colleagues will provide the places before the scheme

comes into effect, so that they do not disappoint the many disabled people who would wish to avail themselves of those places?

Mr. Bayley: There is certainly a need to provide supported employment, but it would be wrong to characterise the new deal as a scheme that simply provides opportunities for people to work on Government-financed or Government-subsidised schemes. It is far wider than that. We have to ensure that work pays by changing the benefit and tax systems that we inherited; and we have to ensure that people who are disabled and seek work get the personal advice and support that they need to obtain employment. We are doing that. We must ensure that barriers to work—some employers are good but others are much poorer—are removed, which we are doing through the disability discrimination legislation. We must advance on all fronts, and we are doing so.

Points of Order

3.32 pm

Mr. Andrew Robathan (Blaby): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. Most Members of this House, whatever their political party, are justly proud of the hard-won freedom of speech we have in this country and the freedom of legitimate, peaceful protest. We were surprised last week that the Home Secretary did not come to the House to discuss the public order situation surrounding the visit of President Jiang Zemin. Have you heard whether the Home Secretary intends to come to the House to discuss the unprecedented suppression of the demonstrators last week?

Madam Speaker: As far as I am aware, neither the Home Secretary nor any other Minister is coming to make a statement. Of course, when the Home Secretary comes to answer questions, the hon. Gentleman may table a question on this matter. No doubt he will do so.

Orders of the Day

Financial Services and Markets Bill (Suspension)

3.33 pm

The Parliamentary Secretary, Privy Council Office (Mr. Paddy Tipping): I beg to move,

That the following provisions shall apply to the Financial Services and Markets Bill:

1. Standing Committee A shall report the Bill to the House, so far as then amended, not later than Thursday 11th November.

2. On the report of the Bill to the House in accordance with paragraph 1, further proceedings on the Bill shall be suspended until the next session of Parliament.

3. If a Bill is presented in the next session in the same terms as the Bill reported to the House in accordance with paragraph 1, it shall be read the first and second time without Question put, shall be ordered to be printed, and shall stand committed, in respect of those clauses and schedules not ordered to stand part of the Bill in this session, to a Standing Committee of the same Members as the Members of the Standing Committee on the Bill in this session.

I am pleased and privileged to move the motion. Its effect is to stay proceedings on the Financial Services and Markets Bill in Standing Committee A at the end of this Session and to carry it over into the next Session. The Bill will then be resumed in the next Session at the point in Committee that it reached before Prorogation.

This is the first occasion on which a motion has been moved to carry over a public Bill and I am grateful to Opposition Front Benchers for their agreement to apply this procedure to this important Bill. I think that we can all agree that it will receive better and more detailed parliamentary scrutiny through being considered to a timetable that will not be constrained by the end of the current parliamentary Session. I hope that, in time, this procedure will become regular parliamentary practice because it will help to maximise parliamentary time and will lead to more thorough scrutiny.

The carry-over procedure was recommended to the House in the first report from the Modernisation Committee in July 1997. That report was agreed unanimously by the Committee, which included representatives of the official Opposition. The report said:

"The Committee agrees with the principle that, in defined circumstances and subject to certain safeguards, Government bills may be carried over from one session to the next in the same way as hybrid and private Bills".

The Modernisation Committee's first report was approved by the House, without a vote, on 13 November 1997. In that debate, the right hon. Member for South Norfolk (Mr. MacGregor), a distinguished former Leader of the House, said:

"On the carry-over of Bills and paragraph 102 of the report, I think that it is right to have the flexibility that applies to private and hybrid Bills, not least because it is one way of handling the too frequent problem where many amendments come back from the House of Lords and we rush them through in the last three or four days.

No one could argue that this is satisfactory. The problem arises because, inevitably, some Bills will be introduced later in the Session; they cannot all be done earlier. A genuine pressure on time causes that. Used sensibly, this proposal is a way of ensuring better scrutiny at that stage.—[*Official Report*, 13 November 1997; Vol. 300, c. 1080.]

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): Is the Minister really saying that it is a good thing to bail

[Mr. Eric Forth]

the Government out of difficulties caused by the bad management of business? It is bad management for a Government to leave the conclusion of important Bills to such a late date in a Session that a large number of amendments from another place cannot be handled properly in the House of Commons. The reason that the Minister has given for introducing this new policy is not very convincing. Should not he concentrate on getting the Government's act together and managing business more effectively?

Mr. Tipping: The right hon. Gentleman is right to say that we need to manage business effectively and make good use of parliamentary time. I have no criticism of any of his tactics in the House, as he uses the conventions properly. With the support of Opposition Front-Bench Members, the Government advocate this approach in the case of the Financial Services and Markets Bill because we believe that it is a complex and important measure with important principles that require careful thought and analysis. It would not make sense to lose the Bill, and the City would not support that.

The Modernisation Committee subsequently produced another report on the more detailed arrangements. That report recommended, first, that Bills be carried over by ad hoc motions, rather than under a general Standing Order. Secondly, it recommended that the procedure should be used on Bills that had not yet left the House in which they originated, rather than on ones already going through the second House. The Committee's third recommendation was that the eligibility of Bills for carry-over must be settled by agreement through the usual channels. That report was also unanimous and was agreed by the House, without a vote, on 4 June 1998.

The Committee set out a number of conditions for carry-over. The first was that the Government should identify as early as possible any Bill that they wished to be carried over. The second was that carry-over should be used only for Bills that were to be subject to Select Committee-style scrutiny, or which were introduced after a certain period in the Session. The third recommendation was that no Bill should be carried over more than once. The Financial Services and Markets Bill fully satisfies all those conditions.

Mr. Andrew Tyrie (Chichester): Will the Minister say whether the Labour party in opposition ever pressed for carry-over provisions to be introduced?

Mr. Tipping: The introduction of such provisions is one of those matters that the House must consider very carefully indeed. For my part, I have long advocated the notion of carry-over. As I said, the Financial Services and Markets Bill has satisfied the conditions for carry-over set by the House.

The Government gave the earliest possible notice of their intention by announcing at the time of last year's Queen's Speech that they would seek agreement to carry the Bill over.

Mr. Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham): Does the Minister think that carry-over would have been necessary if the original draft Bill, which was published on the last day before the summer recess in July 1998, had been halfway decent? Instead, it was so heavily flawed that much additional work had to be done on it.

Mr. Tipping: The Bill is a complex measure, and it has the support of the City. Clearly, such Bills can be improved by parliamentary scrutiny, and I am delighted that this Bill was able to benefit from new procedures. A Joint Committee was able to look at the Bill and make recommendations, many of which have been accepted.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): The Minister's emollient style—it resembles that of a good general practitioner—is almost universally admired in the House. It seems, however, not entirely to atone for the relative weakness of his argument. Will the Minister reflect on the fact that, if the logic of his answer to my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Mr. Loughton)—that a good and complex Bill can be improved by scrutiny—is pursued too far, it may come to justify rolling over every legislative measure that the Government introduce to the House?

Mr. Tipping: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his generous comments—emollience in a great dose. For my part, I admire the hon. Gentleman's more usual rough and ready style. Individual Bills must be judged on their merits. The Government do not seek to carry over a host of Bills to the next Session. We made it clear at the beginning of the current Session that the Bill was complex and that we would seek to carry it over.

Parts of the Bill were published in draft form in July 1998 and April 1999. The Joint Committee was set up to consider the draft Bill in March. It conducted a thorough examination, and the Government have agreed many of its recommendations. The Financial Services and Markets Bill is detailed and complex. It has been improved by the Joint Committee, and I expect further improvements to be made by the Standing Committee and during the remaining parliamentary stages.

Mr. Loughton: If such great consideration and so much time was given, why had the Joint Committee less than two months to complete its deliberations before the deadline for the first report? The Committee was limited to looking into only six areas among the 367 clauses of the Bill. If the Government offered time so generously, why was the Committee, which was so important and which did such a good job, not given more time for scrutiny?

Mr. Tipping: I thank Lord Burns and the Joint Committee for their work on the Bill. My impression is that the Committee examined the key points and made helpful and valuable adjustments to the Bill, many of which the Government have been prepared to consider. The Committee's report, when it eventually came, was unanimous, but—let me be emollient again—we are proposing a new procedure and it may be that we should in future look again at the timetabling of Bills.

Today marks another stage in the implementation of the Modernisation Committee's work to adjust the procedures of the House to the needs of an effective Parliament, ensuring greater parliamentary scrutiny of an important Bill. Many people outside the House will benefit from the Bill, which has substantial economic implications. I thank,

again, the Joint Committee for its work, and the members of the Standing Committee for their current and future work on the Bill. I commend the motion to the House.

3.43 pm

Mr. David Heathcoat-Amory (Wells): The Minister has outlined a case for modest constitutional reform in line with the proposals of the Select Committee on Modernisation. I approach such proposals with considerable caution. As a member of the forces of conservatism, I recognise that these proposals are not always brought forward entirely with the public good in mind. There is usually a strong element of party advantage in any reform proposal. A healthy dose of scepticism is, therefore, in order when reforms are proposed. I do not go quite as far as the Duke of Wellington who, when presented with a proposal from one of his Ministers, is supposed to have responded: "Reform! Reform! Aren't things bad enough already?"

Nevertheless, without going quite as far as that previous leader of my party, I believe that any proposal of this nature should be carefully approached and circumscribed. For instance, I do not accept the Minister's observation that the occurrence should be a regular one and that the carry-over of Bills from one Session to another should take place more than infrequently. This proposal—if used—should be used with great precision; for example, it is certainly not appropriate to use it when a Bill has become bogged down in another place. Furthermore, it should be considered only when the Bill in question is of a technical nature.

After those opening observations, I turn to the Financial Services and Markets Bill, which could have been dealt with in one Session of Parliament if it had been brought forward more speedily and in better order. Undoubtedly, in the past, the rule of the House has been that a Bill should complete all its stages in both Houses in a single Session. This Bill—currently in Standing Committee—could have satisfied that rule if the Government had better understood, earlier, the complexity with which they were dealing.

The proposal to reform the regulatory arrangements for financial services was announced soon after the 1997 general election. At that time, the important issues of justice and fairness were not fully understood by the Treasury; nor was the possible conflict with the European convention on human rights—a convention which the Government are simultaneously incorporating into British law. The Bill published a year later, in 1998, was seriously defective; indeed, it was unworkable in a number of respects. To improve that draft Bill, it was submitted to a Joint Committee. It was planned that the Committee would sit in January this year, but it was eventually convened in March. As I pointed out on Second Reading, all participants found that the innovation was successful. The Committee did not examine the whole Bill; because of the shortage of time, it concentrated on only six areas. It produced two reports—the latter of which appeared in May this year.

The Government accepted the majority of the Committee's conclusions. I am glad that they did so. Indeed, they stated:

"The Government finds itself strongly in agreement with the great majority of the Committee's conclusions, although in some cases our proposed way forward is not identical to that recommended by the Committee."

Based on the recommendations and the Government's statement, the Opposition agreed that an amended Bill should be introduced immediately, and that its Committee stage should start in July and carry over to the next Session. Thus, we intended that the financial services industry should acquire a Bill that it needs urgently—indeed, without legislation, the present uncertainty is damaging to the market. It is also damaging that, in effect, the Financial Services Authority is operating without proper statutory cover. On the one hand, our intention was to get a Bill on the statute book without unnecessary delay. On the other hand, we intended further to improve the Bill—especially to ensure that the recommendations of the Joint Committee were fully implemented.

Mr. Loughton: My right hon. Friend is being overly generous to Treasury Ministers. The Parliamentary Secretary, Privy Council Office, said that "very many" of the Burns Committee's recommendations had been accepted and that was later downgraded to "many", whereas my right hon. Friend has said that "most" of the recommendations were accepted. In fact, analysis of the final Bill shows that fewer than half of the Burns Committee's recommendations were taken on board when drafting the Bill.

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: In the light of my hon. Friend's remarks, I shall briefly outline some of the Bill's provisions that were recommended by the Joint Committee. The Bill introduced in July was an improvement on the original draft. However, I and others, including my hon. Friend, said on Second Reading that the improvements, welcome though they were, left considerable gaps in the legislation and that we expected further major improvements to be made thereafter.

In some cases, our concerns centred on the items recommended by the Joint Committee that were not accepted by the Government. I refer particularly to the proposal to split the role of chairman and chief executive of the Financial Services Authority after the current incumbent leaves that—

Madam Speaker: Order. The right hon. Gentleman has given the House a long explanation and he will now come to his arguments relating to the procedural matters on the Order Paper.

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: I bow to your judgment, Madam Speaker. I thought that it would be for the benefit of the House to set out the stage we had reached in our deliberations on the Bill, so that the House could assess whether it was appropriate to carry the Bill over to the next Session.

Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours (Workington): Will the right hon. Gentleman give me a simple answer to the following question: is he in favour of the Bill being carried over—yes or no?

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: If the hon. Gentleman had been alert to the earlier part of my speech, he would have heard me say that the Opposition agreed to the carry-over, and I am now outlining the reasons for that. I hope that the hon. Gentleman will not weary the House by asking me to repeat matters that I have already covered.

[Mr. Heathcoat-Amory]

I have mentioned one or two of the Joint Committee's recommendations that the Government did not accept. I am also concerned about certain of the Committee's recommendations that the Government did accept, but which have not yet been fully incorporated in the legislation—for example, recommendations relating to market abuse. Those who engage in that practice can be fined, but that is not properly defined in the Bill as it stands. That defect in the Bill has attracted widespread criticism from outside.

Substantial areas of the Bill were not scrutinised at all by the Joint Committee and defects in those areas have become apparent only under scrutiny. During sittings of the Standing Committee in July and in the past week, we have found several examples. I have time to give only one example—that of internet trading or e-commerce, which is not satisfactorily dealt with in the Bill. The Bill attempts to regulate financial services on the basis of country of reception, whereas the Government as a whole, including the Department of Trade and Industry, have been urging this country to adopt country of origin regulation. Unless that part of the Bill is corrected, there will be a standing contradiction between the legislation and the Government's overseas negotiations.

Mr. Forth: My right hon. Friend makes a powerful case, which would persuade me that we should drop the Bill completely at this stage and rethink it properly, so that it can be re-presented at a future stage and dealt with carefully. The logic of my right hon. Friend's case is not that we should do some fudge and carry-over, but that the Bill should be dealt with in the proper, traditional way. It should be taken away and rethought entirely. All the weaknesses that he is so admirably pointing out should be resolved, and the Bill should be brought back to the House in a proper manner.

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: The Bill is proceeding in Standing Committee. I hope that my right hon. Friend will interest himself in our future deliberations. We have reached clause 52 out of 367 clauses, so there are plenty of opportunities for him to engage in the debate and seek the improvements that we all want.

The course of the Bill will depend on how the Government respond to the concerns, of which I have mentioned just two or three. The timing is also in the hands of the Committee. Although we are aware that the City and the financial services industry as a whole do not want any unnecessary delay, we all agree that it is better to produce a good Bill than one that proceeds on an unrealistic time scale.

We want a Bill that regulates a huge and very important British industry, but it must be the right Bill. We will support the Government when they do something right in the Bill—parts of the Bill have been significantly improved—but we will oppose the Government when there is something wrong in the Bill or when they refuse to accept the necessary improvements. The motion will assist the House if it helps the process of scrutiny and thereby gives the industry an Act of which the House can be proud.

3.57 pm

Sir Nicholas Lyell (North-East Bedfordshire): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak briefly on the procedural motion relating to a complex Bill, which the Government seek to carry over and which, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Wells (Mr. Heathcoat-Amory) said, we agree should be carried over into the next Session.

As this is the first time that any Bill has been carried over, it is important to put down one or two markers, as the Parliamentary Secretary did. I fear that unless we are careful, and unless future Governments of all persuasions are disciplined about the carry-over procedure, it will come to be used at times when legislation has been held up because it is highly controversial, or has been brought in late because other highly controversial legislation was held up and took too long.

I remind the House of the old nostrum, which has certainly been true during my 20 years here, that one of the few weapons, if not the only weapon, of an Opposition is delay. The proposed modernisation reduces the power of opposition. That should be done extremely carefully. Practically no one who has entered the House has not at some stage during his or her period here parroted the notion, which has a great deal to recommend its being parroted, that there is far too much legislation, it is far too complex and most of it is too little thought out. That would certainly apply to the Bill.

I am not saying that a great deal of work has not gone into the Bill behind the scenes and in Committee, but the fact that it has 367 clauses and 16 schedules is not a compliment to the Bill. It is an indication that Pascal's famous nostrum—"I am sorry I have had to write you such a long letter, but I did not have time to write you a short one"—applies in the present case, as elsewhere.

It has been noted in Standing Committee more than once, and perhaps more than half a dozen times, that the Bill will effectively achieve two things: it will create a framework within which the new Financial Services Authority can regulate and govern almost every aspect of financial services in the City; and, getting down to the nitty-gritty, it will give almost unfettered powers, to both the Treasury and the FSA, to regulate exactly how they choose. The Bill's 228 pages, which contain those 367 clauses and 16 schedules, are nothing more than broad guidelines that frequently descend into detail, but which always, I think I am right in saying, have a mop-up clause that provides for reopening the widest possible discretion for the Treasury and the authority.

For that reason, it is no exaggeration to say that, if he had been invited to do so, the parliamentary draftsman could have published a 50-page Bill, and it would have been a great deal better if he had. Then, at least, what I have described, and what I believe to be entirely true, would have been seen by the public at large and either accepted or not accepted. That would have enabled us to focus better on one or two fundamental points, which we may get wrong, and which we would have found easier to do without the obfuscation of length and detail. I shall give two examples.

First, we have frequently said, and have voted for the fact, that competition or competitiveness should be one of the objectives of the authority when regulations under the Bill are drafted. It should be included in the Bill. We would have no difficulty with that, because we have

argued for it, but any Minister or Opposition Front-Bench spokesman backed into a corner would undoubtedly say on "Question Time" or elsewhere that he strongly believed in the competitiveness of the City. There are four objectives, which rightly deal with proper regulation, but I do not think that we would have the slightest difficulty in combining those with competitiveness. That would help to keep the regulators, who will have massive discretion, on the right lines thereafter.

I am afraid that I am a lone voice on my second point. I said on Second Reading, and I repeat now, that one aspect of the Bill is deeply unwise: it makes anybody without the proper regulatory authority a criminal—I am not complaining about that—which of course puts enormous firepower into the hands of the FSA, but it goes on to say that anybody who fails, for one reason or another, to get himself properly authorised will be unable to enforce the deals into which he enters unless he can slot himself into some very narrow exceptions.

I am quite prepared to see unenforceability as a principle that is available for the safeguarding of citizens who do business with those who are unregulated, but I have emphasised more than once—and as anyone who has sat in the House and watched financial affairs debates over the past decade or two knows—that there are sharks on both sides of the water at all times in the City. There are sharks who will seek to prey on those who invest their money and there are investors who will seek to escape their legitimate liabilities by fair means or foul.

Are we to create a regulatory system that will enable someone to escape what would otherwise be his legitimate liabilities because of some technical mistake, which may have been caused by carelessness? It is a grave mistake to make something totally unenforceable. One should leave it to the discretion of the court so that the citizen who is trading, if he is in the wrong, can at least fall back on the court's discretion without fetter.

A 228-page Bill covers this area, as do mountains of useful paperwork produced by the authority in consultation, regulation and technical books. The one that I have had the pleasure of reading was written in part by a lawyer who has given us a great deal of help. It amounts to 400 pages of detail that could not possibly be read by anyone who is not merely a lawyer, but a lawyer specialising in the field. It simply could not be understood by anybody else.

Mrs. Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside) *rose—*

Sir Nicholas Lyell: I give way to the hon. Lady.

Madam Speaker: Order. May I bring the right hon. and learned Gentleman and the House back to the procedural motion on the Order Paper? It is interesting to have some of the examples that have been given, but I now ask hon. Members to stay within the motion before us. Given my ruling, does the Hon. Lady still wish to intervene?

Mrs. Ellman: Yes, Madam Speaker.

Does the right hon. and learned Gentleman agree that the Bill has involved so much time because detailed consideration is being given to every precise point that Opposition Members, including him, are making? Does he agree that that is a strength of the Bill and the reason why this procedural motion should be agreed to without much more ado?

Sir Nicholas Lyell: I am most grateful to you, Madam Speaker, and to the hon. Lady for bringing me back to the point. The answer to her question is yes and no. Yes, there has been valuable scrutiny and, without wishing to praise the Opposition too much, we have made and tested some sensible points and shall continue to do so for some months to come. However, it is not too unfair to those with the job, in both the Government and the Financial Services Authority, of getting the Bill into workable order to say that they are still busy consulting and thinking through much of the detail, which, ideally, should have been thought through before the Bill began.

This brings me solidly on to procedural ground, Madam Speaker. Had the Bill been thought through before we started, we would have been far less likely to need a carry-over motion. Such motions should be extremely rare. The Government should be as good as their word and should not table carry-over motions without giving full notice in advance—to be fair, that was given—except when the matter is technical and highly complex or when such a motion is absolutely necessary for proper scrutiny. I take exception, politely, to what the Minister said. Carry-over motions should not be used simply because a Bill was started late in a Session. They should certainly not be used for that reason without agreement behind the scenes.

4.8 pm

Mr. Andrew Stunell (Hazel Grove): As a member of both the Modernisation Committee and the Procedure Committee, I welcome both the general proposal and the specific proposal in relation to the Bill.

On the carry-over procedure, the House has an underlying difficulty because those with the power to change procedure are inevitably the Government of the day, while those most in favour of reinforcing the powers of the House are inevitably those who sit on the Opposition Benches. Thus, at any stage of any Parliament, a delicate balancing act must be performed if the House's procedures are to be moved forward constructively. Our carry-over procedure achieves that delicate balance and will achieve some extra capacity for the House to keep a grip on legislation that the Government put before it.

The right hon. and learned Member for North-East Bedfordshire (Sir N. Lyell) made some of my points for me. This is a difficult and complex Bill. The alternative to carrying it forward is not to abandon it, as the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) might hope, but to rush it through in the remaining fortnight of this Session. That is traditionally how Governments have dealt with complex Bills when they have got to the end of their time and the end of the Session.

This motion enables us to give complex Bills proper consideration right the way through, and thereby improve them. I am a new Member and, like every inhabitant of the United Kingdom, I have been subject to the laws of the House since the day of my birth—and probably even before that. The laws produced by various Governments and endorsed by the House in various configurations have frequently had serious defects and have had to

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be revisited. Those defects have often arisen because proper consideration had not been given to the detail of the Bill. I am sure, Madam Speaker, that you would not want me to illustrate that at great length; it can be taken for granted.

This provision will allow the House to exercise better scrutiny in better time, which it is hoped will produce better outcomes. The Bill has already gone through consultative procedures that are new to the House and to the other place, and they have produced improvements. More improvements can be made if we proceed with this motion.

The right hon. and learned Member for North-East Bedfordshire asked whether the carry-over procedure should become more widely used. I hope that it will be more widely used. Legislation is sometimes rushed and fumbled, because our legislative cycle inevitably compresses the consideration of detail into the end of the parliamentary Session when we are least able to manage it. If we were rational, not only would we have an announcement in the Queen's Speech of the Bills that the Government propose to introduce during the Session, but we would be given the order in which they would be introduced so that the work on those Bills could proceed in an orderly and thorough way through the procedures of the House. Inevitably, Bills introduced in the second half of the Session might require the carry-over procedure.

Mr. Graham Brady (Altrincham and Sale, West): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that another rational approach would be to introduce fewer Bills, thus allowing the House of Commons to do its job more effectively all the time, not just when carry-over is permitted?

Mr. Stunell: The hon. Gentleman may have a point that fewer and better laws would be good for everyone, and perhaps our summer recesses would be even longer. However, given the complexity of our modern society, every successive Government since the war has introduced more Bills than their predecessor, regardless of their political complexion. I do not foresee that changing unless we get a legislative benefit from devolution, but I shall not hold my breath on that. Although it is a nice wish, it is not a realistic proposition.

Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody (Crewe and Nantwich): Does not the hon. Gentleman realise that there is a benefit in the House of Commons having a limited time to examine legislation? In other legislatures, including the so-called European Parliament, which do not have that discipline, consideration of legislation goes on for ever, and they often do not have the ability to take legislation off the books when it manifestly should not be proceeded with, and when any sane person would say that it should be dropped. Does the hon. Gentleman accept that there is a benefit in the House of Commons having a set timetable and knowing that at the end of that time it must deal with a Bill?

Mr. Stunell: I am grateful for the hon. Lady's intervention, because it enables me to say that the Modernisation Committee considered the point very carefully. That is why the carry-over procedure allows a Bill to be carried over only once, which I consider appropriate.

It has been suggested that if we had had more time, we could have had a shorter Bill. That is along the lines of the observation by the hon. Member for Altrincham and Sale, West (Mr. Brady) that perhaps we should have fewer laws. In fact, we are not likely to have either fewer or shorter laws in the future. What comes before the House needs to be considered carefully by hon. Members. We may or may not be able to make Bills shorter: I would not want to hold my breath on that. The main point is that output from the House must be good law which is enforceable. That may involve a little extra time and effort, but I believe that that is what we are here for.

I consider the case for carrying over this Bill to be practically overwhelming. It is a complex Bill, and hon. Members have argued that it should have been shorter and simpler—but it is not. It is before us now, and the choice is not good. We can try to get it through in the next fortnight, or we can do as the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst suggested and withdraw it completely. The City is anxious for the Bill to be passed. Its regulatory procedures need attention, and the Bill addresses that need. I do not honestly think that the right hon. Gentleman is really signing up to a crooks charter, with the Bill withdrawn and no progress made on the regulation that is required. That cannot be what he intends to achieve.

What we are left with is a perfectly sound procedure for this Bill, which will allow it to be examined properly and returned to the House in good order, with proper discussion. I strongly believe that the House should welcome this opportunity to use the carry-over procedures, and should be happy for this Bill to be the first example of legislation dealt with by that means.

4.17 pm

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): I strongly oppose the measure, so I am disappointed that my right hon. Friend the Member for Wells (Mr. Heathcoat-Amory) indicated his acquiescence to it. I say that for a number of reasons. The first is a matter of principle: I have never accepted the argument that it is desirable for us to find means of allowing more and more legislation to emanate from this place, rather than less legislation, including fewer Bills.

I have never seen this place as a legislation factory. I have always supported procedures making the passage of legislation more difficult rather than easier, because I believe that, although there is an enormous propensity among politicians to produce more legislation in order to justify their existence, it must be in the greater interest of people for there to be fewer Bills. I therefore feel that any measure facilitating an increase in the amount of legislation is counter-productive and undesirable, which is why I was not in favour of the so-called Modernisation Committee's so-called progressive measures to facilitate that.

An important issue has arisen in the context of this motion. It is the first time that it has arisen in the House. The discipline imposed by the one-Session principle that we have employed up until now has always struck me as a good one. Governments should be forced to give proper priority to their measures, and to give greater priority to more important and more complex Bills so that they can be dealt with in the time available. That discipline is about to disappear. If we approve the motion, a major step will

have been taken in the removal of an extremely desirable discipline which we have always—perhaps "enjoyed" would not the right word—imposed on ourselves.

Mr. Robert Sheldon (Ashton-under-Lyne): The right hon. Gentleman referred to the discipline of a complex Bill. Few Bills are more complex than the Finance Bill, which comes before us every year. We used frequently to sit throughout the night to discuss it. On Wednesday, we shall be discussing the consequences of the Pepper *v.* Hart ruling, which occurred at a very awkward time and which arose from the proceedings of the Finance Bill. Decisions were taken, and were subsequently considered. What is most important, however, is that if the pressure of time is there, Committees can meet more frequently. Will this proposal not stop them from meeting more frequently, and sticking to their timetables?

I am in favour of the motion, but I think that it should be used only in exceptional circumstances, rather than being taken into account just because a Committee is rather slow in making decisions and rather leisurely in carrying out its responsibilities.

Mr. Forth: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman, whose experience in the House is great and almost unparalleled, for pointing out that, if it were the will of the House to find mechanisms better to examine and to scrutinise Bills, it should be able to find them, rather than take the risks that are inherent in what it is doing. He is the second right hon. Member, following my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for North-East Bedfordshire (Sir N. Lyell), to say, "We will allow it in the case of the Financial Services and Markets Bill, but I hope that it will not happen too often." Both of them have been here long enough to know that that is a pious hope. Having opened the door, the Government are almost certain to want to walk through it ever more frequently. I would never use the word "naive" in the context of right hon. Gentlemen, but it is a triumph of hope over expectation.

Mr. Bercow: Although I naturally endorse and support with enthusiasm the stance of my right hon. Friend the Member for Wells (Mr. Heathcoat-Amory), does my right hon. Friend agree that possibly the real motive behind the carry-over of the Bill is nothing to do with the public interest or the rights of the House, but is the pressing need for Ministers who are not professionally qualified in these important matters to get their minds round the 367 clauses and 228 pages of said Bill?

Mr. Forth: That is entirely possible, but, having had the honour of serving on the Committee, I would hesitate to make that judgment. All I would say in the context of the comments of the right hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Mr. Sheldon) is that, if I may point it out to the House, I was largely instrumental in guiding a Bill of almost identical size through the House in the 1992–93 Session. It had 350-something clauses and 21 or 22 schedules. We managed to do that. It was, of course, a magnificent Bill. It was virtually flawless. As a result of my guidance through the parliamentary process, it completed its passage on time and without the need of any chicanery of the sort that we are being asked to consider today.

My second reason for opposing the measure is simple: I still cling to that, sadly, apparently diminishing idea that it is the job of Her Majesty's Opposition to oppose, not to connive in the passage of Government legislation. That is why I am still mystified, despite the superb and elucidatory speech by my right hon. Friend the Member for Wells, about why the Conservative Opposition should find themselves conniving with this Government, of all Governments, in the passage of legislation. I cling to the view that Oppositions are here to oppose. I see no reason to overturn that excellent principle, even in the current case. I am not persuaded that it is an exception.

My other reason has been touched on by one or two hon. Members. One of the most undesirable principles in the House is of all-party, or consensually agreed, legislation. Over many years, some of the worst measures that have emanated from this place have been agreed by all parties and driven by consensus. I am sure that the list is familiar to right hon. and hon. Members, so I will not repeat it, but it makes me rather uneasy when I am told in emollient tones, "Do not worry, we have all agreed to the measure."

The Liberal Democrats apparently agreed to it, somewhat to my surprise. My right hon. and hon. Friends agreed to it and the Government want it. That would be bad enough, but another reason has been given to the House—it has been mentioned a couple of times: the City wants the Bill, so it must be rushed on its way.

Usually, if we are told that an outside interest group wants legislation, that makes us more than a little nervous and suspicious. In other circumstances and cases, I would be suspicious if I were told that a powerful interest group was anxious to have legislation. That would make my antennae tremble more than usual and I would want to know why. In this case, however, we are being told by hon. Members on both sides of the House that the City is very anxious to have the legislation—with the implication that the House should hurry its proceedings, to ensure that the City is pleased by having the legislation in place as soon as possible.

Mr. Tyrie: I am very sympathetic to the argument being made by my right hon. Friend. However, on the point that he is now pursuing, I think that he is slightly off-beam. The City is very keen to have certainty—any type of certainty will do—rather than the uncertainty of being caught between two loads of legislation. The City is dead scared of the Bill—it thinks that it is a ghastly leviathan—and would rather it had never been introduced in the House. That strongly supports my right hon. Friend's argument that there should have been a much longer, more careful and thoughtful process before such comprehensive legislation was introduced to replace current regulations.

Mr. Forth: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. If he has accurately summarised the rationale behind the City's argument on the legislation, I am even less impressed with the City. If the City is saying, "This is a rotten piece of legislation and we fear it greatly, because we think it might damage us—but, please, may we have it quickly, because it is better than uncertainty", I am not very impressed with it.

I think that probably all hon. Members have today received a document appealingly headed "Justice in Financial Services". It was sent to us by a man—whom I

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do not know personally—named J. R. S. Egerton. He makes some interesting assertions in his letter, dated 21 October. He states:

"The Financial Services and Markets Bill has been condemned by the City editor of the *Evening Standard* as the greatest threat to individual liberty and the rule of law for a generation."

I am not familiar with the views of the *Evening Standard*'s City editor on the Bill, but can assume only that the letter gives a reasonably accurate interpretation of them.

The letter goes on to say that the Bill's

"excesses have been denounced by the *Times* and the *Telegraph* and received unfavourable notice in the *Financial Times*."

I am not suggesting that we should be driven in our legislative deliberations by the press any more than by the City, but if those press experts are making those types of arguments, it seems to be a factor that should be taken into consideration and give us pause before finding ways of hurrying the Bill's passage. As has already been alluded to in the debate, the deliberations of the famous Joint Committee—which has been hailed as such an advance in the legislative process—on the Bill were less than complete.

I have only briefly quoted the two-page letter from the Justice in Financial Services organisation. I do not know that body or its provenance, but am simply trying to make the point that there are different points of view on the matter—rather than the cosy apparent unanimity that was in danger of emerging before I managed to catch your eye, Madam Speaker.

It simply is not good enough for us to be told that we should pass an exceptional motion to give the Bill a second wind and further consideration, overturning all the House's previous tradition, because the Bill is large and complex and was introduced too late in the Session. Such a move makes me uneasy. I am not persuaded that the Bill is an exception—I do not think that there should be any exceptions.

Nevertheless, let us not use the motion as a first example of what I fear will become much more normal than my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for North-East Bedfordshire and the right hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne have said. I should perhaps defer to them, as they have been Members longer than I have, but do not share their confidence—if that is the right word—that such motions will be a rare exception or one-off.

I suspect that, in future, the motion will be used by the Government as a precedent. I hope that the comments of my right hon. Friend the Member for Wells reflect much more accurately the position that the Opposition will take in future. Even if we have been persuaded, or conned, to go along with the motion on this occasion, I hope that we will learn a lesson from it. If the House—in my view mistakenly—gives its go-ahead to the motion today, I hope that it will be the last time that we approve such motions, and that we will not see its like again.

4.30 pm

Mr. Andrew Tyrie (Chichester): There are two issues relating to the suspension motion that need to be considered: the points of constitutional principle and parliamentary procedure to which my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) referred; and the reasons why the suspension motion should be applied to the Bill. I should like to say a few words about both issues, more on the latter than on the former.

I am sympathetic to the points made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst on constitutional principle and was almost completely persuaded by them. A carry-over sounds nice in theory, but it hands a good deal of further power to the Executive. The power of delay is almost all that the Opposition have and I was flabbergasted to hear the hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Mr. Stunell), who will undoubtedly be in opposition all his life, saying that its use should be further curtailed.

The relationship between the delaying power of the House of Lords and the carry-over provisions has not been mentioned so far. In certain circumstances, there is a risk that its power of delay could be eroded. That is set out clearly in a note prepared by the Clerks in the third report of the Modernisation Committee. The crucial two sentences say:

"But if such a Bill were sent to the Lords late in the Session, with the intention of its being carried over, the Lords would have inadequate time to give it proper consideration. Nonetheless, the Parliament Act provisions could, legally, be applied by the Commons in the ensuing Session."

In other words, in those circumstances the key power of delay—perhaps the only major power left in the hands of the Lords after the Parliament Act 1911—would be greatly eroded.

In their desire to assist the Modernisation Committee with their support for the idea, the Clerks suggest some possible safeguards to deal with that further erosion of Lords power. Those safeguards are not well thought out and I should like the Government to come forward at the earliest opportunity with their proposals on how the House of Lords power of delay can be thoroughly safeguarded if, as the Minister said a moment ago, carry-over provisions are to become more common.

My second point relates to the Bill. We are not debating the general issue of whether carry-over provisions should be permitted. We are considering the specific issue of whether the Financial Services and Markets Bill should be subject to the provisions. That depends on two points. First, it was understood between the usual channels that there should be general agreement across the House for the Bill being carried over. Secondly, the circumstances of the Bill and the progress made on it should be relevant to the decision.

The Bill underwent pre-legislative scrutiny from a Joint Committee to enable a consensus to be developed. However, I am not convinced that the Government have stuck to their side of the bargain in delivering responsiveness and flexibility to proposals that have been made. They have not responded favourably to the proposals of the Burns Committee, and they have not shown much flexibility towards Opposition proposals in Committee. In fact we have had a mixed reaction to the Burns Committee proposals, to which I shall refer in a moment.

I wish to raise some general points on which little flexibility has been shown. First, everyone agrees that the Bill is creating a leviathan—a huge and extremely powerful body such as we have not seen in Britain before.

The Government have put in insufficient checks and balances on the authority, and on its power. Secondly, a tendency to err on the side of reducing risk for the regulator at the expense of the industry pervades the Bill, and thirdly, little attention has been given to the need to make the Bill flexible to take account of changing market conditions.

It is worse than that. We need a review procedure so that, every few years, we can come back to the Bill to see how it ought to be amended. However, we have the opposite. We have clauses enabling the Treasury to institute reviews—and to make them independent—if it feels like it, or not if it does not. Indeed, the Bill states that independence itself will be defined by the Treasury.

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Miss Melanie Johnson) *indicated dissent.*

Mr. Tyrie: The Minister shakes her head, but that is clearly the case. I urge her to read clause 10 and, if she has done so, to explain where I have got it wrong.

On the leviathan point, we must remove the FSA's immunity from prosecution. I will not elaborate that point, as now is not the time to do so. However, there must be some consideration of that matter. There must be further consideration also of the need to strengthen the tribunal procedure.

Mr. Stunell: Does the hon. Gentleman accept that the very weaknesses that he outlines are the justification for this House accepting the carry-over, so that we can improve the Bill? Is this not a case of strengthening the hand of the House against the Government and not weakening it, as he suggested?

Mr. Tyrie: It is extraordinary to suggest that we should allow the Government whatever timetable they want, and that, by doing so, we will always strengthen and improve Bills. If we use this procedure, we must at least make ad hoc assessments of whether there has been flexibility and whether the Bill has been improved. That is what we are doing today. We must also look at the progress that is being made on the Bill to make a judgment on whether to support the motion.

To return to the leviathan, there has been some progress—but by no means enough—on the tribunal procedure, in response to the Burns Committee. We should have an opportunity to debate that in Committee shortly, and I hope that the Government will show flexibility. On over-regulation, the Bill must include the objectives of competition and competitiveness to counterbalance the other objectives. The former are not included in the Bill as an objective, but as a justiciably weaker "principle", and that is unacceptable.

On the huge enabling powers given to the Treasury—including the power to make further legislation by order—we must have a commitment to regular, thoroughgoing reviews.

Mr. Forth: Does my hon. Friend think that if we agree the motion today and allow the Government more time, the chances of what he thinks should happen to the Bill being accepted will be improved or diminished?

Mr. Tyrie: That judgment hangs on a knife edge. I am concerned that my right hon. Friend may be right and there may be less flexibility. I said earlier that I was well on the way to being persuaded by his argument.

Everyone in the City to whom I have spoken agrees with the three points about creating a leviathan, over-regulation and the excessive enabling powers and inadequacy of review; but people in the City are too scared to speak up—as they have been prepared to say privately, at length—because they have been cowed by the powers of the FSA, the fear of investigations and the size of Labour's majority, as they know that they will have to carry on working with Labour, although we hope that before long that will no longer be the case

Mr. Nigel Beard (Bexleyheath and Crayford): It is not the universal view of the City that there will be a leviathan. There is a widespread view that, having had nine different regulators operating different codes, it is time to sort out the confusion. The Bill has been widely welcomed, as has the flexibility that has been built in by leaving regulations to secondary legislation. On both those points, the hon. Gentleman's comments are inaccurate; and they have been debated on several earlier occasions.

Mr. Tyrie: Yes, and I am sure that they will be debated again. I would be fascinated to see evidence from anyone in a position of influence in the City who is prepared to say in writing that this Bill is creating the opposite of a leviathan: a tame creature that will show the flexibility that the City wants. That is inconceivable; but there is an element of truth in the hon. Gentleman's point that the mishmash of regulation that is being replaced needed attention. I am not suggesting that it has been easy to regulate in this area: it has been very difficult, and the previous Government made mistakes in the mid-1980s, as I have been the first to concede.

We are straying off the main issues, and I do not want to get into what could, if we are not careful, become a Second Reading debate. The crucial point is that Conservative Members agreed to go ahead with the suspension order on the general understanding, some months ago, that the Government would show flexibility towards the recommendations of the Burns Committee. An assessment of how far that flexibility has been forthcoming is crucial to the judgment whether we should go ahead with the suspension.

I commissioned a study of that and I have had a good look at the question myself. I shall not list the 20 or 30 areas in which the Government failed to respond to the Burns Committee, but I will mention a few major areas in which they have given an inadequate response or ruled out the Committee's proposals.

Paragraph 45 of the Burns Committee report recommends that the market confidence objective in the Bill

"should be expanded to include a reference to the management of systemic risk".

There is a memorandum of understanding between the FSA, the Bank of England and the Treasury on the matter, but it is a pretty feeble document which has not been adequately considered in Committee.

We are debating the fundamental question whether, in its present form, there might be an increased risk of the banking system collapsing under stress as a result of changes in the rules and the way in which we interpret them. The Government's response that all the

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Committee's concerns had already been met, but that they would continue to reflect on the issues, was inadequate and feeble.

In paragraph 98, the Burns Committee recommended a review of the challenges posed by communications and technology—e-commerce—and the Government's response was that that was not thought necessary: as simple as that. Paragraph 113 also recommended that the chairmanship and the post of chief executive of the FSA should be separated, to provide a quasi-constitutional check on the huge powers given to the first chairman and chief executive. The Government decided that they were content with the present arrangements.

An issue pertinent to the House was raised by the Burns Committee in paragraph 122 of its report, when it said that there should be parliamentary confirmation hearings for the FSA chairman and chief executive appointments. That was dismissed by the Government as undesirable, so we shall probably not have any confirmation hearings.

Paragraph 133 of the Burns report raised the issue of whether the FSA should be required to consult the consumer and practitioner panels and to publicise their disagreements. The Government decided that there should be no requirement to consult.

There is also the issue of compensation awards. In paragraph 146 of the Burns report the Government were asked to consider allowing the investigator to award compensation or allowing the FSA to make ex gratia payments. That was dismissed out of hand.

There are 20 more recommendations to which I could refer, but I think that I have dealt with quite enough of these matters. I think that those to which I have referred give a feel of the extent to which the Burns Committee recommendations have been ignored. As I have said, the principle that lies behind the Opposition's acceptance of the motion hinges on whether joint consultations yield fruit in terms of the Government's being responsive to our proposals and those of the Joint Committee. We have not seen enough of either.

I am worried about the suspension order. The Bill is of very mixed quality and I am not convinced that, by carrying it over, we shall improve its quality. We have seen the Government's relative unresponsiveness to proposals to try to make it better. My inclination would be to argue that that unresponsiveness is close to being a breach, if it is not an actual breach, of the agreement that was reached through the usual channels about the use of suspension orders.

My colleagues on the Opposition Front Bench are all gentlemen. I think that, if there were a Division, they would honour the deal. I think that, on balance, they have decided not to break the agreement. With some reluctance, I shall go along with their judgment. However, that still leaves me with my constitutional objections in principle to this procedure. I believe that it increases the power of the Executive and puts at risk one of the very few powers that the House of Lords possesses.

I am a member of the Committee that is considering the Financial Services and Markets Bill, and, in thinking through these constitutional issues, I am left deeply sceptical about the carry-over provisions. If the Government had shown more flexibility in this case, I might have been more inclined to be supportive of the process generally.

4.49 pm

Mr. Peter Brooke (Cities of London and Westminster): I apologise to you, Mr. Deputy Speaker and to those on both Front Benches for not being present to hear the opening speeches. I remark in passing that the manner in which the Government are conducting the passage of the Greater London Authority Bill—the amendments to it are approaching 500—within a month of the Queen's Speech is putting a bit of a strain on London Members, and it was that Bill which kept me out of the Chamber. I shall return to that Bill in my brief remarks.

I declare an interest as chairman of the Building Societies Ombudsman Council, which is obviously affected by the Financial Services and Markets Bill. Given my role as chairman of the council, I have deliberately not spoken on the Bill up to now. I shall speak only on the principle of the carry-over. I declare a further interest as I am the Member responsible for the City of London (Ward Elections) Bill, a private measure which is subject to a somewhat different procedural climate, but is in the same area.

I entered the Chamber to hear my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for North-East Bedfordshire (Sir N. Lyell) advance a powerful argument for exceptionality, with which I wholly agree. I disagreed with the speech of the hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Mr. Stunell), though he and I both have some mutual sympathy with each other. We both sat through the debate on procedure last Thursday in our respective capacities without either of us being called. We are veterans of different campaigns. I disagree with the hon. Gentleman's argument that this procedure should be used more often rather than less. As so often, I agree with the general thrust of the remarks by my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth). The Greater London Authority Bill—we both served on its Committee and, as he will remember, occasionally disagreed during that time—has had some 500 amendments tabled to it in the House of Lords, mainly by the Government, and that will set this House a considerable task between now and the Queen's Speech for obvious reasons. The House of Lords has not even reached Third Reading yet.

One could argue, and the hon. Member for Hazel Grove might do so, that the Greater London Authority Bill would therefore be a good candidate for a carry-over, in the interests of good legislation. However, it left Committee in this House at the end of March and it is extraordinary that it is still at Report stage in the House of Lords at the end of October. If the pressure on Governments to attend to the details of their Bills is lifted in the way that the hon. Gentleman suggests, we would soon get in a pretty pickle. It would not be good if the procedure became less exceptional.

Sir Nicholas Lyell: Is my right hon. Friend satisfied that the safeguard that the procedure can be used only if those on the two Front Benches agree is sufficient to prevent the situation that he rightly warns against?

Mr. Brooke: My right hon. and learned Friend, with salient perception, has anticipated a point that I intended to make later. I am grateful to him for having provided a trailer and harbinger of my later remarks. It would be a bad habit to carry over several technical Bills into another Session. Professor Parkinson's great law that work expands to fill the time available is a classic example why the procedure should be restricted, not open-ended.

I also disagree with the hon. Member for Hazel Grove about this House's historic practice on technical Bills. I agree that procedure may have to be hurried at the end, but it is not my experience in 22 years—the experience of the right hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Mr. Sheldon) is even longer—that time cannot be found for, for example, the Finance Bill, provided that people think in advance about how much time will be needed.

The Greater London Authority Bill would certainly qualify as large and complex, but it would not satisfy the requirement that notice must be given. The point made by my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for North-East Bedfordshire about agreement is a critical element of the safeguards against the misuse of the carry-over procedure. If the Government cannot secure agreement that carry-over is appropriate, a Bill cannot undergo the procedure.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst is an eloquent advocate, but sometimes I find when I listen carefully to his speeches that if there are five points that relate to an argument, he—like the writers of some editorials—covers the first four but does not include the fifth. On this occasion, I did not hear him deal with the issue that agreement between both sides of the House is a definitive way to ensure that too many Bills are not subjected to the procedure.

Mr. Forth: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for allowing me to fill the lacuna. It may be that my right hon. Friend, with his infinite courtesy and consideration, has total trust in and admiration for our Front-Bench colleagues. I do not.

Mr. Brooke: That is a highly pertinent observation for my right hon. Friend to have made. However, he will recognise—and I mean it in the nicest possible way—that the view that he has just expressed does not wholly surprise me.

I heard my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst assert that the Minister had said that he expected the carry-over procedure to be used more often. As I was not in the Chamber at the time, I did not hear the ipsissima verba that the Minister used, or the reasons that he gave for putting forward that view. I apologise for missing those reasons and I hope that the Economic Secretary—who I take it will wind up the debate and whom I congratulate on her promotion to the Front Bench—will explain why there will be more use of the carry-over procedure in the future. I share with my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for North-East Bedfordshire, and with the right hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne, a feeling that the use of that procedure should be exceptional. I sincerely hope that history will not find any of the three of us naive for having taken that view.

4.56 pm

Mr. Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham): I, too, must apologise, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for not being present for all the debate, although I was able to catch the opening speeches. However, I had a meeting with a Home Office Minister about a constituency case that has occupied me for some three years. That meeting was arranged a long time ago: I was loth to miss it, and I hope that I have been able to achieve some success in the matter involved.

In contributing my few pennyworth to this debate, I wish to declare the interests set down in my name in the Register of Members' Interests. A handful of hon. Members in the Chamber today have lived, breathed and slept the Financial Services and Markets Bill since we were made members of the Burns Committee last September. The last thing that I want, having gone through that experience, is to have to start considering the Bill all over again because its carry-over has not been allowed.

However, the carry-over of the Bill should not be let through on the nod. If the carry-over is agreed to, it must be made absolutely clear that the Opposition are helping the Government off a hook of their own making. The Bill is very important. The City needs it, as does the financial services industry. Indeed, one could also say that the Labour party needs it: before we started considering the Bill, the present Minister for Small Business and E-Commerce, when she was Economic Secretary, said that part of the process of creating new Labour was to change Labour's attitudes to the City.

The Bill has dragged on too long already, through a very sensitive period for the financial markets. Those markets could have been affected by matters such the Y2K problem and the introduction of the euro, and by big changes to capital gains tax and the savings industry. The interregnum in regulation that has existed since last year's Bank of England Act has not helped anyone.

The City wants and needs a Bill that is workable and practical, and will help it and the financial services industry to get on with their jobs. I am afraid that this Bill—as it stands now, but even more so in its original form—does not provide that help to our satisfaction. Labour Members should worry about that, given that the industry accounts for 7 per cent. of the country's gross domestic product and, directly and indirectly, employs more than a million people.

It is the Government's fault that we are here today. The Bill has an unhappy history. It was sneaked out in July last year, on the last day before the long summer recess, in a heavily flawed form. Like my right hon. Friend the Member for Wells (Mr. Heathcoat-Amory), I was privileged to serve on the Burns Committee. That Committee did an excellent job, and Lord Burns deserves the congratulations that he has received. However, to a great degree, that Committee got the Government off the hook. The Government did not admit that the original Bill was heavily flawed: instead, they transferred responsibility for sorting out the mess to a new and innovative Joint Committee.

I believe that the Joint Scrutiny Committee did a good job and that it has a role to play in connection with exceptional pieces of future legislation—those highly technical and detailed Bills to whose consideration expert witnesses may contribute.

The time constraints imposed on the Burns Committee were crazy—two months for the first report, and rather less than four weeks for the second, on market abuse. The Committee was able practically to consider only six subjects during that time—statutory objectives, scope, accountability arrangements, discipline arrangements, market abuse and the ombudsman.

The whole consultation period for the Bill has been highly haphazard. The Treasury and the Financial Services Authority have prided themselves on pushing out

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a lot of purple consultation documents. When the Joint Committee began to consider the legislation in detail, 20 or so documents had been published. Only one of them had received a response from the Government. We were flailing around in the dark. The Government had not decided how to respond to their own consultation exercise responses. That was highly unsatisfactory. Both the Joint Committee and the Standing Committee have had to tease out the Government's position. In many cases, it has become blatantly clear that the Government do not know their position and can give us no time scale within which they will know it.

Unhappily—I mean no detriment to the two Ministers present—there have been three Ministers since the draft Bill was launched. There have been two Ministers since the final Bill came before the Committee. The team of three Treasury junior Ministers has changed completely over the summer. I wish the new Ministers well, but that changeover cannot be helpful. Part of the job of the previous Economic Secretary to the Treasury—I dare say she did it well—was to roll up her sleeves and become involved in the consultation exercise. Many people went in and out of her office, although perhaps not as many from the sharp end—the practitioners—as we should have liked. However, the substitution of a new set of Ministers who were not part of the consultation process weakens that process. The change is bad for continuity.

Now that the House has returned from the summer recess, the Standing Committee has begun to study the Bill. I am unhappy to hear that the Treasury door was not very open—if open at all—to practitioners during the three months of the summer recess. That is unsatisfactory when we are faced with a highly technical—and very long—Bill. Following the year between publication of the draft and final Bills, the Government have had a further three-month breathing space during the summer, and it is worrying that the situation seems not to be improving. The revised Bill remains full of flaws.

The Government are still not ready with many of their amendments. One need only read the Standing Committee *Hansard* to confirm that. Every week, announcements come that seem to conflict with previous pronouncements. Last week, the Economic Secretary to the Treasury said that there would be a system of light-touch regulation for non-financial service firms, which raised questions about where the dividing line is drawn for financial firms. The Government are applying varying standards to different companies and altering their interpretation of rules over time. Many questions have been raised over the even-handedness of the Bill's approach. All that should have been worked out months, if not years, ago, but it was announced to us only last week.

Hansard shows time and again that the Government are not ready. The Government say:

"We therefore propose to table amendments aligning financial promotion".

Again, they say:

"We will table amendments to this effect in due course."

And, again, they say:

"We therefore propose to introduce amendments".—[*Official Report, Standing Committee A*, 19 October 1999; c. 422.]

Those statements come from just one column of one *Hansard* from last week. Sixteen months after they published the draft Bill, and four months after publication of the final Bill, the Government are not able to table proper amendments for the Committee to discuss. That means that, when those amendments are eventually forthcoming—presumably on Report—they will not have been subject to the same degree of scrutiny in Committee that one would have expected for the Bill, and that certainly should have occurred. That is most worrying.

The overriding concern is that running through the Bill are—as one newspaper expressed it—the threads of a disease that has become endemic to legislation under the Labour Government: the reserve power. When the Bill is eventually enacted, it will allow the Government to change the rules without bothering with legislation in many cases. The Treasury will decide which activities will or will not be regulated by the Bill, what financial information will or will not be allowed, and so on. As my hon. Friend the Member for Chichester (Mr. Tyrie) mentioned, the Government are creating an enormous leviathan without first defining its terms of remit.

I want to flag up a few concerns. How on earth can the Government proceed to create an authority that has statutory immunity, sold to us on the rather flimsy excuses of what happened back in 1986 and on what may or may not happen in the United States, without the counter-balance of an independent inspector with the power to award compensation? That is a major issue which should have been resolved some time ago, but has not been.

The timing under the Bill of the competition objective principle that we should like to see is extraordinary—*[Interruption.]*—Labour Members do not seem to want to touch on those facts. During the same week that we were faced with that matter in Standing Committee, Mr. Cruickshank—who had been appointed by the Government to look into competitive practices in the banking industry—produced a draft report. We are expecting the full report later on this year. That draft report quite clearly conflicted with what we had been led to believe the Government were trying to achieve in the Bill. Therein lies an absurdity: if the Chancellor is to accept the terms of that report—if the draft becomes the full report later in the year—there will be a conflict of interest with what we are trying to debate in Committee as to the terms of competitive practices in the Bill.

My hon. Friend the Member for Chichester referred to market abuse clauses; they have still to be dealt with. However, the whole problem of conflict with the European convention on human rights, to which the attention of the Burns Committee was drawn, has still not been resolved. I am not aware that any progress has been made.

Mr. Beard: Is it not true that all these questions—the tribunal, the conflict with the European convention on human rights and all the other issues raised by the hon. Gentleman—have actually been resolved, but not in the way that he would have preferred?

Mr. Loughton: If only that were so. The hon. Gentleman who, like me, served on the Standing Committee and the Joint Committee, should re-check the Burns report and the subsequent amendments to the Bill. He knows full well that those questions have not been resolved. The Bill remains wide open to be taken to the European Court for abuse of the ECHR. There have

certainly been some improvements in respect of legal aid and the non-use of incriminating statements but, as the Treasury's own solicitors said, when they accompanied the then Economic Secretary, now the Minister for Small Business and E-Commerce, to give evidence to the Burns Committee on market abuse, they simply cannot be certain.

The Burns Committee heard extremely learned judgments from legal experts that threw serious doubt on the compatibility of the Bill with the ECHR. If the hon. Member for Bexleyheath and Crayford (Mr. Beard) studies the text of the report again, he will acknowledge that. By no means is the Bill in the clear.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. We do not want to descend into too much discussion of major items in the Bill. Madam Speaker has already ruled that there can be allusion to particular points in the Bill, but we cannot have a Second Reading debate. We are debating a procedure motion.

Mr. Loughton: I am grateful, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and I shall conclude my comments. Without going into the ins and outs of certain clauses, I merely wanted to illustrate my argument as to the timing of our scrutiny of the Bill. We are expected to scrutinise legislation which the Government have not yet formulated properly. That process relies on our good will in believing that the Government will table amendments on Report. Unless the Report stage is extremely long, those amendments will not receive the scrutiny that they deserve. Without returning to specifics, I emphasise that important issues have yet to be resolved.

The Bill has so far had a bad passage. Its progress has been greatly assisted by Lord Burns and his Committee coming to the Government's rescue after the Government launched a rather ill-drafted Bill in July 1998. Let the Government be in no doubt: if the Opposition agree to the carry-over, it will be because we put the needs of the financial services industry—which desperately needs the Bill—first; and because of the threat that, if the carry-over were not to pass, the Government would impose a guillotine to push through the legislation in the new Session, regardless of the detailed scrutiny that such a Bill requires.

I hope that, if the Opposition go along with the Government's proposal today, Ministers will shape up and become more responsive to the practical concerns that we have raised on behalf of many experts in the financial services industry and that, as the Bill progresses through Standing Committee, they will adopt many of the suggestions that we have tabled in the form of practical amendments to the Bill. Let us not forget that, of the 367 clauses, the Committee has reached only clause 52. In the renewed spirit of co-operation, I hope that the Government will be able to redeem themselves in the remaining weeks and months of the Bill's passage, both before and after the Queen's Speech.

5.12 pm

Mr. Howard Flight (Arundel and South Downs): I share the dislike of a carry-over and the precedent that it sets. As the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) stated, a carry-over removes the discipline of a timetable and creates a precedent that may be abused in respect of other legislation.

I accept the carry-over of the Financial Services and Markets Bill on good faith: the Opposition agreed to carry over the Bill, subject to the Government's publishing it promptly, which they did, and subject to the Government's following the recommendations of, and resolving the issues raised by, the Burns Committee. I hope that Ministers will tell the House this evening that they will address the outstanding issues raised by the Burns Committee.

As my colleagues have pointed out, there is no practical alternative to the carry-over. Many drafting problems have been discovered in the Bill and the Government are to table an enormous volume of new clauses and amendments to the Bill on Report. The imposition of a guillotine now would be against the interests of consumers, the industry and the country. From a practical perspective, all of us are forced to agree that there is little choice but to carry over the Bill. Incidentally, I should declare an interest as set out in the Register of Members' Interests.

The Parliamentary Secretary, Privy Council Office, said that the Bill was supported by the City; in fact, the Bill is by no means supported in its entirety by the City. The financial services industry, quite correctly, accepted the majority by which the Labour Government were elected and their right to legislate as set out in their manifesto. The industry desperately wants the law to be completed, because it is unsatisfactory that the Financial Services Authority is operating without statutory cover. However, the industry—by which I mean not just the City, but the industry throughout the country and the hundreds of thousands who work in it—is not content with many aspects of the Bill as it stands.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Wells (Mr. Heathcoat-Amory) noted that the Bill does not address the conflict with the European convention on human rights, and that there is a substantial body of legal opinion that the Bill remains defective.

My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for North-East Bedfordshire (Sir N. Lyell) pointed out that, as a framework Bill, it is far too long. The framework should have been dealt with in 50 pages. My right hon. and learned Friend and others drew attention to the importance of making competition an objective of the Bill. My right hon. and learned Friend also observed that better law is often made by leaving certain issues to the discretion of the courts, rather than by seeking to regulate for every situation.

My hon. Friend the Member for Chichester (Mr. Tyrie) covered some key points not referred to by others. He said that the Bill has not fully addressed the Burns Committee recommendations with regard to systemic risk—a matter on which none other than the head of the United States Federal Reserve has been critical of the proposals in the Bill. The Bill has not dealt with the proposals that there should be confirmatory hearings by the House of Commons on the appointment of the Financial Services Authority's chief executive, or the requirement for the FSA to consult consumer panels.

My hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Mr. Loughton) expressed the very human desire for the carry-over, to avoid having to go over the

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same ground again. He made some sound practical points, and observed that it is substantially the Government's fault that this debate is taking place.

My hon. Friend reminded us that there are about 1 million people working in the financial services industry, representing 7 per cent. of our national product, and thus of the importance of getting the legislation right. He pointed out that part of the problem has been the extraordinary succession of new Ministers being required to get their minds around such a complicated Bill.

With regard to the Burns Committee recommendations, we believe that there are important areas in which the Government have not followed the deal—perhaps they intend to do so in a different way. The Burns Committee advised that the complaints investigator should be entirely independent of the FSA and should have the ability to award damages. It also recommended that individuals should be able to defend themselves under the European convention on human rights against serious regulatory offences. The body of legal opinion has made it clear that that goes well beyond the market abuse offences.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: What has that to do with the motion?

Mr. Flight: I give way to the hon. Gentleman.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. May I suggest to the hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Mr. Flight) that he does not provoke.

Mr. Flight: This has everything to do with the motion. There was conditional agreement between the Opposition and the Government, and the Opposition wish to honour that in good faith. I repeat that we agreed to the roll-over on the understanding that the Government would follow the Burns Committee, so it is of great relevance to the House to know and understand where the Government have not followed the Committee's recommendations. I hope that, when the Minister winds up, she will be able to give the House comfort, and say that the Government intend to follow the recommendations of the Burns Committee.

Mr. Forth: Is my hon. Friend saying that he will recommend that Conservative Members support the motion only if he receives the assurances for which he is asking from the Government and that, by implication, we will not support it if we do not receive those undertakings? I gather that that is what he is saying. Will he confirm that?

Mr. Flight: I thank my right hon. Friend. I have made two points: one concerns the Opposition behaving honourably—something that we should do—and the other is that there is no choice but to agree a roll-over. Although the Bill is in need of substantial further correction, we do not have the time to do that and the alternative is that a measure that would seriously damage the livelihoods of 1 million people might be enacted. However, I look to the Government to give the assurances that they will honour the basis on which we agreed to the roll-over and that they intend to address the outstanding issues on which the Burns Committee made recommendations where they have not yet done so.

Sir Nicholas Lyell: On the matter of parliamentary convention, which my hon. Friend is dealing with, does he agree that it would be impossible for the Government to take the Bill through the House of Lords in this state? Were the House to vote the motion down, the Bill would fall. However, does it not follow from that that the maintenance of the convention in good faith is absolutely essential and that he is entitled to insist on it?

Mr. Flight: I thank my right hon. and learned Friend, who has brought out the point that I was seeking to make. The Bill is in no state to be guillotined and to go to the House of Lords. Given that 7 per cent. of our economy and the jobs of 1 million people are at risk, any responsible Member of the House would want the Bill to be put into proper shape. It would be irresponsible to take any other stance.

If you will briefly indulge me, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I shall refer to areas on which the Burns Committee was silent, although it invited the Government to come up with proposals. Those are the areas in which the financial services industry itself is looking to the Government to sort out the various problems and to get the legislation right. The Bill attempts to regulate the business of non-UK branches and activities of UK-based businesses.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: This is out of order.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I ask the hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Mr. Flight) to excuse me. I do not need sedentary advice from the hon. Member for Workington (Mr. Campbell-Savours) and wish that it would cease.

Mr. Flight: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Briefly, clause 56 not only empowers the FSA to determine remuneration throughout the industry, but could deny a livelihood to the 30,000 senior executives. It is substantially too powerful.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. May I delicately say that there is a distinction between the rulings given by the previous incumbent of the Chair and those that we have just been given? Perhaps you might clarify the position.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: There has been great consistency on the part of incumbents of the Chair. We have said that the substance of the Bill can be referred to when arguments are being made for or against the motion, but the weight of emphasis should be on the procedural aspects.

Mr. Flight: As others have pointed out, there is a major mistake in the proposed regulation of E-commerce.

The Government want to support E-commerce in this country and make Britain a leader in it, but clause 19 will be extremely damaging to the interests of E-commerce.

Mr. Nick Hawkins (Surrey Heath) *rose—*

Hon. Members: He has just come in.

Mr. Hawkins: I must apologise to my hon. Friend. Although I have not been in the Chamber, I have watched a great deal of the debate in my office between meetings.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The only way in which an hon. Member can truly participate in debates in this House is by being here.

Mr. Flight: The Government have not yet demonstrated that they are keeping their side of the bargain and following the Burns Committee recommendations on certain key issues. Neither have they, by further consultation or in their proposals, responded to several key issues of widespread concern to the many people who work in the industry. We look to the Government this evening to give us comfort on those issues.

I wish to make it clear that we support this carry-over motion in the interests of common sense and of the industry, where there is little alternative.

5.25 pm

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Miss Melanie Johnson): I shall endeavour to stick to your recent injunction, Mr. Deputy Speaker, to keep to the procedural points as closely as I can, rather than stray down the path of dealing with the substance of the Bill.

After this Government came to power, we announced that the existing patchwork of financial regulators—nine in total—would be replaced by a single statutory regulator, subsequently named the Financial Services Authority. This Bill is a prime example of the Government's aim to reform and modernise Britain. It responds to the changing face of the financial services industry, brings a fair deal to both consumers and providers, and reduces the current scope for duplication and inconsistencies.

As many hon. Members have said, the Bill is complex. However, it will bring a range of positive benefits, which are pro market confidence, pro consumer protection, pro consumer awareness and anti financial crime. It will enable the FSA to be tough on City crime, malpractice and abuse, including insider dealing, rogue trading, money laundering and market manipulation, and will give the FSA wide powers to deal with those unacceptable activities. In giving the FSA a coherent set of modern regulatory powers, it constitutes a thorough and necessary overhaul of the relevant part of the statute book. That is a major task, which is why the Bill is so complex. It is a task that this Government have not shirked and on which we have been determined to consult fully. We therefore listened to and responded to the views of many individuals, institutions and groups.

Opposition Members disagree among themselves about what their response should be to the Bill, the City and this carry-over motion. This evening's debate has reflected their disagreement. We have, however, heard some voices of sanity from those who wish to honour their commitment to allow the Bill to proceed through this carry-over motion. They recognise that the Bill is extremely important and will bring substantial benefits to the financial services industry and its regulation in the UK, and therefore to the future of the global industry. It will also bring substantial benefits to consumers.

Mr. Hawkins: Will the Minister give way?

Miss Johnson: No. The hon. Gentleman has only just arrived in the Chamber.

I shall deal with some of the points made by the right hon. and learned Member for North-East Bedfordshire (Sir N. Lyell). I had some sympathy with his interest in the detail of this matter, but I sometimes felt as though I had already arrived in Standing Committee A, which will discuss the Bill tomorrow. The right hon. and learned Gentleman made a point about how much the Bill had been thought through beforehand. That needs to be addressed time and again. The purpose of the revised procedure, which the House supported, is that it enables us to produce better legislation by putting complicated Bills through the draft Bill procedure. At least two Opposition Members who are present today were members of the Joint Committee that looked at the draft Bill. That Committee arrived at its conclusions unanimously. That shows that consultation and discussion can bring about further improvements to legislation, which is why we have gone through this part of the process.

Mr. Loughton: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Miss Johnson: No, not at this point. I may give way later.

The hon. Member for Altrincham and Sale, West (Mr. Brady) suggested that there should be fewer Bills, so that they could be better scrutinised. The Bill has made slow progress because it is receiving such detailed scrutiny. Until the summer recess, the rate of progress was 19 or 20 clauses in 11 sittings. I am not criticising that rate of progress: I am merely pointing out that it is an important Bill and that some clauses require more detailed scrutiny than others. Consequently, we shall not make it through 367 clauses, and I have considerable sympathy with those who say that it would not be a good thing were the Bill to be guillotined.

The right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) believes that there should be fewer Bills. He put that maxim into practice—although not with the popular consequences that he foresaw in this case—when he killed the private Member's Bill to ban fur farming. His actions did not have the public support and acclamation that he thinks that principle should receive.

The right hon. Gentleman is seriously at odds with his Front-Bench colleagues on this Bill. He believes that they are conniving with the Government. It is sad that Opposition Members who are working to try to improve a Bill—often in opposition to the Government, but not always—are seen as conniving with the Government.

The right hon. Gentleman also attacked the City, which is extraordinary, and shows another dimension to the odd views expressed by Conservative Members. Let me make

[Miss Johnson]

it plain to the House that we have had much support from the City on this Bill. The British Bankers Association said that the

"introduction of a single legislative framework for the financial services industry in the UK is welcome, as is the creation of a single industry regulator."

The Independent Financial Advisers Association said that it

"broadly welcomes the objectives and provisions . . . fully support the objective of bringing all financial regulation under the control of a single authority."

From a different point of view, the Consumers Association said:

"We are certainly enthusiastic about the Bill and we see a variety of advantages in having a single regulator".

It is a complicated task, and no one would deny that.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Mr. Sheldon) asked whether this is an exceptional arrangement, and it is worth while addressing that issue. The agreement with the Opposition is that consideration will be given on a one-by-one basis. An individual Bill will be considered for carry-over if it has been agreed beforehand that that procedure could apply, and if the Bill is still before that House at the end of the Session. Those conditions will not vary: they are safeguards built into the carry-over provision. If we do not stick to them, there would be difficulties. However, there is no danger of our not sticking to the provisions that have already been made with the agreement of both sides of the House.

Mr. Brooke: I understand that, and it is common cause between certain Conservative Members and the Minister that that is the case. However, I understood the Parliamentary Secretary to say that he thought this procedure would be used more often. I asked him to explain why that should be.

Miss Johnson: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for giving me the opportunity to emphasise that we shall consider each Bill one by one. That is the correct way to make a decision on such matters. We should consider how strong the evidence is on an individual Bill. In this instance, the evidence is strongly in favour of putting this Bill through this procedure.

The hon. Member for Chichester (Mr. Tyrie), who, sadly, is no longer present, referred to the Burns Committee, and our response to amendments. We believe that we have taken on board most of the Committee's points; indeed, the right hon. Member for Wells (Mr. Heathcoat-Amory) conceded that we had taken on board many, indeed the majority, of those points.

Mr. Loughton: This point arose earlier. The very institution that the Minister cited has also carried out a proper audit of the Burns Committee report vis a vis the Bill—and the Government have taken on board not many, not the majority, but fewer than half of the Committee's proposals. If the Minister was so impressed by the unanimity on the Committee, why did the Government not take on board the majority of its recommendations?

Miss Johnson: We must agree to differ. I believe that we have taken on board the majority of the recommendations.

There is a danger of our losing sight of the fact that the point of a Standing Committee is to enable Bills to be debated in detail, clause by clause. Some Members are apparently tempted to try to do that here today.

We share the enthusiasm of the right hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mr. Brooke) for ensuring that the Bill reaches the statute book. We agree that its importance should be recognised. I have given the right hon. Gentleman assurances about the way in which the procedure is likely to be used.

There is a dichotomy in the views expressed by Opposition Members. They do not seem to know in which direction they are going. Some seem to believe that consultation is important, and that we have not engaged in that process well enough at times; others believe that consultation has been holding up the process, and want to know why we could not announce the results immediately, so that we could make speedier progress with the Bill. Some consider that the Bill is ill drafted, but the whole point of the new procedure is to enable Bills to be better drafted. This Bill was not ill drafted in the first place, but it has benefited from exactly the kind of discussion in which the House believes. There is no point in our spending hours debating legislation both in Committee and in the Chamber if that does not enable us to make improvements.

Some Opposition Members believe in financial services, and in support for the City—many, I trust—but there are those who do not believe in those things, and who do not believe that the City welcomes the Bill. There are those who think that the carry-over should be opposed regardless, because they do not believe in the carry-over principle, no matter how much damage that would do. There are those who have faith in their Front-Bench Members, and those who do not.

When we have accepted amendments in Committee recently, or have accepted the spirit of amendments, Opposition Members, rather than welcoming that, have criticised us on occasion, saying that it is not good enough and that there will be a longer debate on Report as a result. They cannot have their cake and eat it.

Mr. Keith Simpson (Mid-Norfolk): Yes, they can.

Miss Johnson: I am pleased to hear the hon. Gentleman say that the Opposition are trying to have their cake and eat it. That confirms what I suspected.

The hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Mr. Flight) said that the industry was not content. The industry will be even more not content if the Bill is abandoned, rather than being carried over. It is the duty of both sides in the Committee to ensure that we have a good Bill, and we believe that we have a good Bill—although no doubt we shall have a better Bill as a result of the debates that we are likely to have in Committee.

The hon. Gentleman complained about the framework, agreeing with the right hon. and learned Member for North-East Bedfordshire that it should have been tighter; but, whenever the Committee has proposed secondary legislation, Opposition Members have said that they are not happy about that either. We have to be able to address the rest of the Bill in Standing Committee in the detail that it deserves, which cannot happen in this Session.

I will not detain the House further with a list of our improvements and commitments to consider recommendations, to which we will return as the Bill

continues its passage through Parliament. The Bill is bound to provoke a technically complex and wide-ranging debate. It will transform the financial sector for the better. Our policy aims are clear: to create a world-class regulator that operates in a fair, efficient, proportionate and accountable way, combining a light regulatory touch where possible, with better consumer protection where necessary. We need the legislation to pass through as quickly and efficiently as possible, so that the many benefits that I have outlined can be gained. Against that background, I commend the motion to the House.

Question put:—

The House proceeded to a Division—

MR. MIKE HALL and MR. DAVID JAMIESON *were appointed Tellers for the Ayes, and* MR. ERIC FORTH *was appointed Teller for the Noes; but no Member being willing to act as a second Teller for the Noes,* MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *declared that the Ayes had it.*

Question agreed to.

Ordered,

That the following provisions shall apply to the Financial Services and Markets Bill:

1. Standing Committee A shall report the Bill to the House, so far as then amended, not later than Thursday 11th November.

2. On the report of the Bill to the House in accordance with paragraph 1, further proceedings on the Bill shall be suspended until the next session of Parliament.

3. If a Bill is presented in the next session in the same terms as the Bill reported to the House in accordance with paragraph 1, it shall be read the first and second time without Question put, shall be ordered to be printed, and shall stand committed, in respect of those clauses and schedules not ordered to stand part of the Bill in this session, to a Standing Committee of the same Members as the Members of the Standing Committee on the Bill in this session.

Thursday Sittings

[Relevant document: The Third Report from the Select Committee on Modernisation of the House of Commons on Thursday Sittings (HC 719).]

5.43 pm

The Parliamentary Secretary, Privy Council Office (Mr. Paddy Tipping): I beg to move,

That, in the next session of Parliament, the Standing Orders and practice of the House shall have effect subject to the modifications set out below:

(1) The House shall meet on Thursdays at half-past Eleven o'clock, and will first proceed with private business, motions for unopposed returns and questions;

(2) proceedings on business on Thursdays shall be interrupted at Seven o'clock; and

(3) in their application to Thursday sittings of the House, reference to a specified time in the Standing Orders shall be interpreted as reference to a time three hours before the time so specified, save that reference to half-past Ten o'clock shall be substituted for reference to Twelve o'clock in Standing Order No. 24 (Adjournment on a specific and important matter that should have urgent consideration).

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): I understand that, with this, it will be convenient to discuss motion No. 3.

I also announce that the Speaker has selected the amendments in the name of the hon. Member for Macclesfield (Mr. Winterton).

Mr. Tipping: In moving the motion, I will not detain the House long as it is almost identical to the one that was agreed on 16 December 1998, providing for an experiment with advancing Thursday sittings by three hours. I shall also refer to the motion to give Standing Committees greater flexibility.

Since December 1998, we have had the experience of seven months of Thursdays and an assessment by the Select Committee on Modernisation of that experiment. As the House will know, the Committee concluded:

"Although some Members of the House continue to have reservations, it does appear that the majority of Members consider that the experience has been a success".

Before I deal with those reservations, I should remind the House of the benefits of the experiment.

For many hon. Members, bringing forward Thursday sittings by three hours has enabled a better balance to be struck between Westminster duties and constituency commitments. Much serious business has been dealt with on Thursdays, including some Opposition days. Moreover, the House has sat nearly an hour longer on Thursdays than it did in the previous year, before the experiment. Those who argue that the Government are trying to reduce accountability to the House perhaps need to digest that fact.

The experiment has also shown that, on one day a week, it is possible for the House to do a full day's business within what most people might consider to be normal working hours. I do not think that that that is a bad or small achievement for modernisation.

The Modernisation Committee's report on the experiment records the practical aspects. I realise that the experiment has required some adjustments in Standing

[Mr. Tipping]

and Select Committees' Thursday morning sittings, but have to confess that I had not anticipated how imaginative individual Committees would be in using the greater flexibility in Committee meeting times—which we are also asking the House to renew today. Perhaps we have learned the merit of giving each Committee the freedom to adjust its own sitting pattern to the business of the House and the other commitments of its members.

The second motion, on Standing Committees, will continue that flexibility. The hon. Member for Macclesfield (Mr. Winterton), who is Chairman of the Procedure Committee, has tabled three amendments to extend that flexibility even further. If he is minded to move his amendments, I assure him that the Government would welcome such flexibility, and would accept the amendments.

I stress that the motions provide for a further Session's experiment. Therefore, the renewal would not be permanent, but be only for another Session, in which it will be possible to fine-tune the procedures and minimise any further difficulties. I hope that the Government's acceptance of the amendments will be a real demonstration that we are keen to make progress and to take people with us.

The change in Thursday sittings has been a significant modernisation of our sittings hours. So far, the experiment has proved worth while, and I see no strong pressure to revert to sitting from 2.30 to 10.30 pm on Thursdays. I therefore ask the House to continue the arrangements in the next Session.

5.48 pm

Sir George Young (North-West Hampshire): The two motions both relate to Thursdays and the experiment that began earlier in the year. The first motion relates to continuing the experiment, and refers to the Modernisation Committee's report—which steered a path between two opposing views. One view was that the experiment had been a success and should be made permanent, and the other was that the experiment should not have started and should be abandoned. The Minister mentioned the lively debate that we had just before Christmas, when, at the end of the debate, the House decided to go forward with the experiment. The report advocates a third way, in that it neither abandons the experiment nor suggests that it should be made permanent.

The report brings us up to date with the experiment. In paragraph 9, it quite fairly makes the point that

"The evidence we have received . . . is largely anecdotal rather than formal".

The report also makes the point, in paragraph 12, that statistics can be interpreted in different ways. The table shows that, on Thursdays, fewer Government Bills have been debated, but that there have been more Government Adjournment debates. Nevertheless, in its conclusions, the report quite fairly states:

"Although some Members of the House continue to have reservations"—

I certainly have reservations about the fact that there are now relatively few all-party meetings on Thursdays, thereby downgrading Thursday a little in the parliamentary week—

"it does appear that the majority of Members consider that the experiment has been a success."

This is personal vote territory and I am happy to go along with the recommendation on the basis that we are carrying forward the experiment, not making it permanent.

Motion No. 3 is consequential on motion No. 2. I was delighted to hear that, were my hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield (Mr. Winterton) to move his amendments, the Minister would be minded to accept them. That gives additional flexibility and is a sensible response to the experience of Standing Committees.

I hope that this may be a more consensual debate than the previous one. I shall support the motions.

Mr. Shaun Woodward (Witney): On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Have you received a request from the Deputy Prime Minister to come to the House to make an apology for a news conference that he has given this afternoon outside the House about the railway summit, and to make a statement to the House about the outcome of the summit?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: No such request has been received. The hon. Gentleman will know that the Chair is not responsible for the business of the House. It is always possible that a request to make a statement on that matter will be made or that the hon. Gentleman will find some other way of raising the matter during our proceedings.

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): Further to that point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Were you or Madam Speaker aware that the Deputy Prime Minister was apparently saying something of some importance outside the House? Were you surprised that no request came from the Deputy Prime Minister to say something in the House rather than outside?

Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody (Crewe and Nantwich): Further to that point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I shall not get into the substance of the debate, but I know that you realise that the Transport Sub-Committee took detailed evidence from the Deputy Prime Minister on the contents of the meeting last week. What he said is recorded in the Committee report in considerable detail.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Lady. I can only repeat that no request to make a statement has been received. It is entirely up to the Minister concerned whether he believes that that is the appropriate course of action. I can make no further comment on that.

5.52 pm

Mr. Andrew Mackinlay (Thurrock): I have a small point to raise and I apologise for troubling the House with it. The Speaker's procession is important to parliamentary life. I do not have to explain or justify that to hon. Members. I should like to explore with Madam Speaker whether it would be possible for the procession to stay at its traditional time. Some might find that a surprising request, but a principle is to be breached by the morning

sittings in Westminster Hall, which, the document says, are not Committees, but the House of Commons sitting, albeit in Westminster Hall and with no mace and no prayers. That is the fiction—I do not mean that disparagingly—that is being put to us. It should not be beyond our capacity to arrange for the Speaker's procession to be restored to 2.30 on Thursdays. All that I am asking is for that to be considered. It would clearly be helpful and appropriate.

Mr. Tipping *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. We are having a debate. The hon. Member for Thurrock (Mr. Mackinlay) was making a speech, to which the Minister may reply in due course, but I suspect that there are other contributions to be made first.

5.54 pm

Mr. Nicholas Winterton (Macclesfield): I am not sure whether the hon. Member for Thurrock (Mr. Mackinlay) was giving way to the Minister, but you are right, Mr. Deputy Speaker, to say that the Minister will have an opportunity to reply to the hon. Gentleman's important point.

I am pleased to be able to contribute briefly to this short debate on Thursday sittings and the meetings of Standing Committees. I should like to speak to my three amendments and to move them when appropriate. I hope that you will give me advice on when it is appropriate.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. It would be perfectly in order for the hon. Gentleman to move his amendments now.

Mr. Winterton *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order; I stand corrected. We are dealing with two motions together, so it is in order for the hon. Gentleman to speak to his amendments and then move them formally later.

Mr. Winterton: I am grateful for that sound advice. I thought that I could speak to my amendments now and then have an opportunity to move them formally a little later.

I want to follow the comments of my right hon. Friend the shadow Leader of the House about Thursday sittings and the agreeable opening remarks of the Minister. There is still debate in the Modernisation Committee on whether the experiment is a good thing. After seven months of the new Thursday sitting times, some hon. Members are still uncertain as to whether they are appropriate and have been a success. I suspect that the hon. Member for Milton Keynes, South-West (Dr. Starkey) may seek to catch your eye later, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I am not stimulating her or encouraging her to speak, but I know that she has strong views on the subject and played a major role when she was a member of the Modernisation Committee.

I have two hats in the debate, because as well as being a member of the Modernisation Committee I am the Chairman of the Procedure Committee—a job that I greatly relish and regard as a privilege. The hon. Member for Upminster (Mr. Darvill) did not succeed in getting in to speak during the major debate that we had at the end of last week, but I suspect and hope that he intends to speak today.

There is still some uncertainty. The Committee had a full debate on the subject. The Leader of the House and the majority on the Committee were sensible to strike a happy balance between the traditionalists who want to return to the former procedures of the House—

Mr. Forth: Yes.

Mr. Winterton: My right hon. Friend is clearly one of those, although he does not sit on the Committee. There are also those who feel that the new way of operating has been a success, enabling the House to perform its role properly, while allowing some Members of Parliament to return to their constituencies and fulfil their important responsibilities there. I go along with my right hon. Friend the shadow Leader of the House in wanting to give it another 12 months so that we can see, in the light of real experience, how successful the experiment has been. The statistics that the Minister drew to the attention of the House are relevant, showing that some of the views, concerns and opposition might not be entirely justified. It is important that the experiment should proceed.

I am grateful to Madam Speaker for accepting my three amendments on the sittings of Standing Committees. There are certain times when all Members of Parliament, whatever they are doing at the time, should be able to come to the Chamber. One such time is Prayers. There may be only a dozen, 20 or 30 Members present—although I am glad to say that attendances are generally higher than that—but, as long as Prayers are part of our procedures and the parliamentary day, all Members should have an opportunity to take part. That is why the amendments have been tabled.

Mrs. Dunwoody: When these changes were being considered originally, was not it always the firm intention that every Member of Parliament should have the right to be present in the Chamber for the whole of Question Time and prayers?

Mr. Winterton: The hon. Lady is right, and I am sure that the original timings failed to appreciate that Members would need to come from Committee Rooms that are some distance from the Chamber. If the adjournment of Standing Committees does not take place until the sitting of the House begins, clearly Members will not be able to come from the far-flung reaches of the Palace of Westminster—from Standing Committees and, in due course, from Westminster Hall sittings—to be present.

My amendments would ensure that people could be in the Chamber before prayers, but I am concerned that we may not be providing sufficient time. On Thursdays, there are not only questions, but business questions, which can be followed by important statements or private notice questions. Those who have been in the House for some time—such as the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody) and me—will know that Question Time and statements can sometimes continue until 5.30 pm or even longer, on a normal parliamentary day. On Thursdays, that would translate to a different timetable, but it would still mean that some Members who would wish to contribute, or merely to listen to what was going on, would not be able to do so.

[Mr. Winterton]

I am grateful to the Minister for showing flexibility on the timetable, and I hope that he will indicate that there will be a continuing disposition towards flexibility so that if, as the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich said, there are reasons for further adjusting the times that the House meets, the Government—perhaps through the Modernisation Committee—will be prepared to look at that and to propose further amendments.

The House must look at its procedures from time to time, and clearly the motions deal with matters that have received a great deal of support across the House—particularly from the Government, but also from the Opposition. However, I am not seeking to speak in any way for the Liberal Democratic party, as the hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Mr. Stunell)—who has notes in front of him—clearly wishes to speak in this debate. I welcome the flexibility and the agreeableness of the Minister's approach, and I shall be happy to follow the splendid example of my right hon. Friend the shadow Leader of the House.

6.4 pm

Mr. Andrew Stunell (Hazel Grove): I thank the hon. Member for Macclesfield (Mr. Winterton) for giving me such a warm introduction.

I support the extension of the Thursday experiment, and I hope that it will become a permanent institution of this House, as it introduces more sensible working practices. For all the reasons that have been given, I believe that it is right to continue the experiment, and I look forward to a debate at the start of the next Session in which we can confirm that permanent Thursday sittings should be in our Standing Orders.

The measures giving flexibility to Standing Committees have been welcomed, and I hope that the Committees will learn to use that flexibility to its fullest extent. I am content for the amendments tabled by the hon. Member for Macclesfield to go forward. Like the hon. Gentleman, I am a member of the Modernisation Committee and the Procedure Committee, and I believe that we are inching towards practices which more clearly reflect the modern society in which the House operates and the terms and conditions that we would expect for Members of Parliament.

6.5 pm

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): The only aspect of this matter that I welcome is the fact that the experiment is being extended for a further provisional year, so that we might have an opportunity to come to our senses subsequent to that. I say that because there is a hidden matter here which dare not speak its name. Hon. Members speak with approval about truncating Thursdays because—perhaps for understandable reasons—many want to get away from this place; it is obvious that a large number, if not most, do not particularly like being here. I sometimes wonder why they went to such great efforts to get elected.

Mr. Stunell: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Forth: Yes.

Hon. Members: Don't encourage him!

Mr. Stunell: It is not my intention to encourage the right hon. Gentleman. However, does he acknowledge that the House has sat for additional hours as a result of the changes, not reduced hours?

Mr. Forth: No. This is the sleight of hand that is being practised. It is one thing to claim that the House is sitting for more hours on Thursdays, but the hidden casualty of this has been Fridays. The number of Fridays on which the House sits has been reduced dramatically, apart from those allocated to private Members' Bills—which I very much welcome and enjoy, as not many Members here will know.

The Minister, in his coy but charming way, referred to the balance between Westminster and constituency time. The implication is that there is something undesirable about time that Members of Parliament spend at Westminster, and something positive and good about the time that Members spend in their constituencies. The tragedy of that argument is that—in so far as we, as Members of Parliament, conspire to downgrade the time that we spend at Westminster—we contribute to the lesser respect with which people at large and the media have for what we do at Westminster. If we demonstrate time and again that we want to get away and spend less time here, how can we expect people outside to have respect for what we do?

Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours (Workington): I understand that the right hon. Gentleman's constituency is about 18 miles from Westminster; mine is 318 miles away, as is the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Carlisle (Mr. Martlew). I understand that it takes the right hon. Gentleman 30 minutes to get back to his constituency; it takes me almost six hours from door to door. In the light of that, does he think that some of us can quite rightfully ask for more time in our constituencies when we spend 12 hours at least every week travelling back and forth?

Mr. Forth: I understand what the hon. Gentleman says, but I do not totally agree. Previously, I had the honour of representing a constituency in the west midlands, and there was some travelling time involved in getting to and from there. However, I would not have argued any differently then from now. I have a clear view of the priorities that a Member of Parliament should hold. The vital part of a Member of Parliament's work is here at Westminster, trying to hold the Government to account and scrutinising legislation. Constituency duties, important as they are, should be fitted in around that.

Mrs. Dunwoody: When I was first elected here, I represented a west country seat, and many of us who had a very long journey—mine took more than five hours by car—were extremely irritated when we were told that the Scots should always have preference, because they needed to get home. Since they flew, which took less than an hour, and we spent many hours on the road, some of us find not entirely realistic the suggestion that only by going home on a Thursday night can one fulfil one's duties.

Mr. Forth: I accept what the hon. Lady says, although we may be on the way to resolving the Scottish problem in a way that we did not altogether anticipate.

I accept the motion, which says that we will review the matter further at the end of the next Session, but I want to flag up the fact that we are in danger of losing Fridays almost completely as part of the parliamentary week. I would deeply regret that, because anything that diminishes the time available to the House for deliberation and scrutiny is to be regretted.

Mr. David Winnick (Walsall, North): There must be quite a number of Conservative Members or former Members who wish that my hon. Friend the Member for Workington (Mr. Campbell-Savours) had spent more time away from the House. I hope that the right hon. Gentleman is not being taken in by his own propaganda, as those of us who have the honour of being elected here consider that our duties are first and foremost at Westminster. That does not conflict in any way with our constituency duties. There is no substance to the idea that Labour Members consider Westminster an occupation of two or three days and that our main duties are in the constituency. We have always recognised that our job is first and foremost here. That is why we stood for election in the first place.

Mr. Forth: That would be all very well if there were no such thing as what I gather the Government call constituency weeks.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: They have been abolished.

Mr. Forth: I hope that they have been. I hope that they are a matter for some shame among Government Members. The fact that the Government were prepared, in the hubris following the general election result, to say, "Don't bother about Westminster; go off to your constituencies," is a shocking illustration of their contempt for this place.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: Many Labour Members were allocated constituency weeks but never took them up. I was allocated one and did not take it, and the same goes for hundreds of Labour Members.

Mr. Forth: Of course I accept what the hon. Gentleman says of himself, but if he really wants to pursue the matter, a perusal of the voting records for the first year or two of this Parliament might reveal a different story. Perhaps he and I could amuse ourselves by considering the voting records of the 417 Labour Members elected in May 1997 to see whether they bear out what he says. I am sure that he was here almost all the time, but I wonder about some of the other 416.

Mr. Mackinlay: Why does not the right hon. Gentleman take heart from the fact that sometimes experiments are abandoned? That is precisely what happened with constituency weeks. Let us move on.

Mr. Forth: I wish that most of the experiments that we have here were abandoned. That would give me great joy, but I do not hold out too much hope.

Mrs. Ann Winterton (Congleton): In the so-called move towards more modern practices, is not public access to Parliament one of the casualties? There is less opportunity for people to see their elected Members and sit in the Gallery or, most importantly, for school parties and others to be taken around both the House of Lords and the House of Commons. That can really happen only on a Tuesday morning now. Our action in consulting our own convenience is detrimental to the people who sent us here.

Mr. Forth: I could not agree more. We run a risk of being perceived as putting our convenience ahead of the access that our constituents have traditionally had and still want.

Dr. Phyllis Starkey (Milton Keynes, South-West): Does not the next item on the Order Paper reinstate Wednesday morning access to the Chamber and deal with the point made by the hon. Member for Congleton (Mrs. Winterton)? The right hon. Gentleman need not worry about access to the Chamber.

Mr. Forth: My hon. Friend was talking about Thursday mornings, because that is the item that we are debating now. I would not have had Wednesday morning sittings in the first place, and neither do I agree with the so-called Main Committee or Westminster Hall sittings, about which I will have more to say later or on a subsequent occasion, as I have now been to Canberra and seen the original and realised what a deception was practised on us when we were sold that false bill of goods.

6.8 pm

Mr. Peter Brooke (Cities of London and Westminster): I agree with the tenor of the observations of my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) and understand his unease about the present pattern of Thursday sittings. I, too, am glad that the experiment is to run for another year.

I sympathise with the hon. Member for Workington (Mr. Campbell-Savours). On Friday, I travelled to a trustees' meeting in the Lake district, in a constituency adjacent to his. I had to decant from the train at Preston because of the tragic accident suffered by the Royal Air Force at Shap, and the journey was pretty prolonged. I recognise the fact that my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst and I are both London Members and that some other hon. Members' constituencies are a considerable distance away.

There are problems—not connected with travel—with Thursdays for London Members, too. I receive almost 3,000 invitations a year in my constituency, and I regularly attend business questions, and, frankly, the fact that one does not know whether that will happen at 12.30 or later inevitably takes a great chunk out of one's working Thursday and is a complication. The private convenience of London Members is not decisive in the balance, but I mention it to make it clear that there is an alternative point of view.

I agree with the hon. Member for Thurrock (Mr. Mackinlay) that experiments can be reversed.

Paragraph 13 of the Modernisation Committee's report says:

"The number of meetings of all-party groups and backbench committees on Thursdays appears to have gone down in this Parliament compared with the last."

[Mr. Peter Brooke]

I do not know where that word "appears" comes from—either it has gone down or it has not—but I take it that the meaning is that it has gone down. The paragraph goes on to say that perhaps we are having more such meetings on Mondays.

I have a separate problem with all-party groups: at the last count, there were 266 of them and rising. The figure is becoming ridiculous. There is no way in which outside groups can get a decent attendance by Members of Parliament if there are 266 all-party groups competing for our attention on Tuesday, Wednesday and part of Monday. I hope that, when the experiment is monitored in a year's time, the present practice and performance of all-party groups will be examined.

Mr. Nicholas Winterton: It is becoming increasingly difficult to get a room in which to hold a meeting on a Monday, Tuesday or Wednesday. Does my right hon. Friend agree that that is another problem that the Modernisation Committee should consider, because of the shortened week and the fact that there are now virtually no all-party group meetings on a Thursday?

Mr. Brooke: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his question. I entirely agree that any examination of the all-party group issue in a year's time should be comprehensive and take in all considerations.

I have made the point that I wanted to make, which relates to paragraph 13. I am glad that the experiment will be given another year's run, and I look forward to the review.

6.20 pm

Mr. Tipping: I am slightly anxious because during the previous debate I was described as emollient while in this debate I have been described as coy but charming. There are two more debates this evening and I feel rather exposed.

We have had a helpful debate. There has been an understanding in the Chamber about the need for flexibility and there is flexibility within the motion on Standing Committees. It will have occurred to many Members that, apart from a slight prescription, the House is giving Committees the opportunity to meet when they want. One of the opportunities that Select Committees and Standing Committees may want to take in future is to meet when the House is not normally sitting during holiday periods. No group has yet taken that opportunity, but I do not think it will be long before groups of Members take it.

Members work hard, and one of the themes that have run through the debate has been the desire to be in the House to pursue business and causes. There is also the desire to have the opportunity to listen to constituents and other ordinary people as well as to know the tone and mood of Parliament. I was slightly surprised when the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) said that a consequence of that is that Fridays have changed. The right hon. Gentleman has been in the House longer than I and he will realise that the changes have come from the Jopling report. He and other hon. Members have recognised that it seems from the experiment that we have had so far that on a Thursday the House is meeting for an hour longer than previously. I think that during the experiment next year we shall be able to judge more thoroughly what sort of business is taken on a Thursday.

My hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Mr. Mackinlay) mentioned the Speaker's procession. I think that he was talking about his desire for a Speaker's procession on a Wednesday. If a later motion is approved, it may well be possible for Madam Speaker to recommence the procession on a Wednesday. Mondays, Tuesdays and Wednesdays will be similar meeting days. It is a matter for Madam Speaker. There are others in the Chamber with greater influence than I. I am sure that my hon. Friend's point has been heard. The traditions of the House are important. As the hon. Member for Congleton (Mrs. Winterton) said, it is important that people have the right to come and appreciate these traditions and to see the House at work. If we are minded to go forward with the Westminster Hall experiment, Mondays, Tuesdays and Wednesdays will be available for constituents to visit the House in the morning.

I have different experiences from some hon. Members of people who visit the House on a Thursday. Some groups who have come on a Thursday have been delighted to have the opportunity to see Question Time in the morning and then discuss what they have seen over lunch. We have the opportunity of giving people choices.

I want to stress that I am keen that we are flexible on this matter. We have been able to take amendments this evening and I think that there will be further changes. The right hon. Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir G. Young) said that this is a sensible third way forward. I am grateful for his comments. Perhaps I can return the compliment in buckets and say that this seems to be the common-sense approach.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That, in the next session of Parliament, the Standing Orders and practice of the House shall have effect subject to the modifications set out below:

(1) The House shall meet on Thursdays at half-past Eleven o'clock, and will first proceed with private business, motions for unopposed returns and questions;

(2) proceedings on business on Thursdays shall be interrupted at Seven o'clock; and

(3) in their application to Thursday sittings of the House, reference to a specified time in the Standing Orders shall be interpreted as reference to a time three hours before the time so specified, save that reference to half-past Ten o'clock shall be substituted for reference to Twelve o'clock in Standing Order No. 24 (Adjournment on a specific and important matter that should have urgent consideration).

Meetings of Standing Committees

Motion made, and Question proposed,

That, in the next session of Parliament, the Standing Orders and practice of the House shall have effect subject to the modifications set out below:

Standing committees shall have leave to sit at any hour and notwithstanding any adjournment of the House, subject to the following provisions:

(a) on Mondays, Tuesdays and Wednesdays when the House is sitting, no standing committee sitting at Westminster shall sit between the hours of one o'clock and half-past three o'clock, except as provided in paragraph (2) of Standing Order No. 88 (Meetings of standing committees); and

(b) on Thursdays when the House is sitting, no standing committees sitting at Westminster shall sit between the hours of half-past eleven o'clock and half-past twelve o'clock, except as provided in paragraph (2) of Standing Order No. 88 (Meetings of standing committees), with the substitution in that paragraph of "half-past eleven o'clock" for "one o'clock" and "a quarter to twelve o'clock" for "a quarter past one o'clock".—[*Mr. Tipping.*]

Amendments made: In paragraph (b), after "between the hours of" leave out "half-past" and insert "twenty-five minutes past".

In paragraph (b), after "paragraph (2) of" leave out "half-past" and insert "twenty-five minutes past".

In paragraph (b), after "'one o'clock' and" leave out "a quarter" and insert "twenty minutes".—[*Mr. Nicholas Winterton.*]

Motion, as amended, agreed to.

Sittings in Westminster Hall

6.26 pm

The Parliamentary Secretary, Privy Council Office (Mr. Paddy Tipping): I beg to move,

That there shall be no sittings in Westminster Hall under the terms of the Order [24th May] until Tuesday 30th November.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): With this it will be convenient to consider the following:

That following the Order [24th May], Mr. Nicholas Winterton, Mr. John McWilliam, Frank Cook and Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody be appointed to act as additional Deputy Speakers at sittings in Westminster Hall during the next session.

Mr. Tipping: The motion supplements the motion which was agreed by the House on 24 May, to provide for an experiment with sittings in Westminster Hall. I will not repeat the points that were made on 24 May because the motion covers only two specific points. First, it enables the four senior members of the Chairmen's Panel to be appointed as additional Deputy Speakers to take the Chair during the sittings in Westminster Hall. They are all well known to the House for a variety of different reasons, but tonight, I shall stress only two: their impartiality in the Chair and, secondly, their well-known independence in debate on a range of different matters. All four can safely be called prominent supporters of the voice of the House.

The Members in question are the hon. Member for Macclesfield (Mr. Winterton) and my hon. Friends the Members for Blaydon (Mr. McWilliam), for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody) and for Stockton, North (Mr. Cook). I believe that the House accepts that they are all well qualified to carry out the duties of the Chair during sittings in Westminster Hall.

The House will be grateful to those four Members for being willing to give up even more of their time in taking the Chair and ensuring that the proceedings in Westminster Hall, as an experiment, get off to a smooth and good start. The Chairman of Ways and Means will take the lead in those sittings. He and the existing Deputy Speakers will also take an active part in chairing proceedings.

The second part of the motion sets Tuesday 30 November as the starting date for such sittings. This is because the new Session is due to start on Wednesday 17 November. Starting the sittings in the second full week of the Session will give sufficient time for the Speaker's Office to conduct the ballots for Back-Bench Member debates on Tuesday 30 November and Wednesday 1 December. I want to make it clear that that means that there will be no morning sitting in the House on Wednesday 24 November.

6.28 pm

Sir George Young (North-West Hampshire): As the Minister said, the motion arises from the debate that we had on 24 May, when, on a free vote, the House decided to proceed with sittings in Westminster Hall on an experimental basis. There are two parts to the motion. On the first, perhaps the Minister will confirm, if he catches your eye, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that the physical arrangements will be completed in time for the sittings to start on 30 November. Is he able to say anything about the

[Sir George Young]

likely business that will be taken in the week beginning 30 November? If this experiment is to take place and be successful, it is important that there should be a series of lively debates in the first week. Within the constraints of a ballot for the motions, I hope that the Government will do all that they can to promote the debates.

As the Minister said when dealing with the second part of the motion, the House is grateful to the four Members who are assuming additional responsibilities. It may not be a matter for the Minister, but will the Chairmen's Panel need reinforcement if some of the existing Chairmen are diverted into other responsibilities? If they are to be additional Deputy Speakers, and I think that the Deputy Speakers are paid for their work in that role, I wonder whether any additional remuneration—*[Interruption.]* I see the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody) shaking her head sadly. She has probably answered my question. It seems that they will be Deputy Speakers in name.

Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody (Crewe and Nantwich): Whenever there is extra work and no pay, my name automatically leaps into the frame, in conjunction with various other right hon. and hon. Members, but when there is pay and no work somehow I mysteriously disappear off the list.

Sir George Young: The hon. Lady needs a good shop steward to represent her interests, because her generosity is clearly being abused on a monstrous scale. She has answered my question, but I hope that the Minister can reassure us that all the physical arrangements will be in place and that such decisions as the Government are able to take will be taken to ensure that the experiment starts. On that basis, I am happy to give my support to the motion.

6.30 pm

Mr. Andrew Mackinlay (Thurrock): On a superficial reading of the motion, it would probably be anticipated that it will go through on the nod, but one or two comments should be made. The point made by the right hon. Member for North–West Hampshire (Sir G. Young) about payment is relevant. Incidentally, we should congratulate the Minister, because two reshuffles ago—that is of course not very long—he started to receive salary for the first time for his work as a Minister. Generally and in politics, I do not like the idea that people should do things for nowt instead of for the rate for the job.

The question of salaries for the new Deputy Speakers is not addressed in the motion, but I am worried that we may be making appointments in a flip way without thinking through the status appropriate to the office of Deputy Speaker and the duties involved. At some stage, the House should consider the possibility of appropriate remuneration and other benefits that accompany the office of Deputy Speaker, and the question whether Deputy Speakers appointed for Westminster Hall should be part of the wider team. I am mindful of the fact that the Canadian House of Commons has the same number of Speakers and Deputy Speakers as we have, but it has far fewer plenary sessions. I take my hat off to you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and your colleagues because you sit in the Chair for many hours. There are not enough of you in the team and, in due course, we should consider whether the responsibilities of the new team of Deputy Speakers should be extended to this Chamber. If that happened, we would also need to consider the question of salary and—without embarrassing anybody by making a specific reference—the other emoluments and benefits that flow from the office.

I raise my second point with some hesitation, because all four of the hon. Members named in the motion are, to say the least, fine Members of Parliament. I consider them my friends and, contrary to their better judgment, they may have some regard for me. However, I do not believe that this is the correct way to appoint Deputy Speakers. This is the first time that we have appointed a plethora of Deputy Speakers in mid-Session. Those named are the four most senior members of the Chairmen's Panel and proven parliamentarians who are known for their impartiality, but if in future we come to appoint more second division Deputy Speakers—I do not mean that disparagingly—or indeed other Deputy Speakers, we should adopt a procedure on the same lines by which we elect the Speaker of the House.

Before the parliamentary recess, I talked to the Clerk about the procedures for this evening's motion and I asked him whether it would be possible to amend it or to divide the House. If the previous debate had continued, we would not even have been able to have this discussion, but the appointment of Members to senior offices of the House of Commons should be the subject of proper debate and involve nominations from the Floor of the House, not be handed down on the basis of seniority on the Chairmen's Panel. I hope that in future we might consider a similar selection process for the seven Deputy Speakers as applies to the election of the Speaker.

My final point may be seen as pedantic, but I first visited the House of Commons at the age of 12 and ever since I have steeped myself in its ritual and history. We are told that the sittings in Westminster Hall will be sittings of the House of Commons itself, not of a Committee. In that case, I would have assumed that the Mace would be present, as it is before us tonight, because I understood that without the Mace the House of Commons is not sitting. The Mace has been called a bauble and I did not write the rules, but I would like the point to be clarified. Is it in or out? If it is so important, it should be placed in Westminster Hall for the sittings, and if it is not, it should be put in a glass case.

Sometimes we rush to alter and vary rules and proceedings without thinking through the consequences, but the House is entitled to know whether it will be the House of Commons sitting in Westminster Hall. If so, what are the new rubrics and Standing Orders that take account of the fact that the Mace will not be in place? Perhaps we should have a whip-round to buy a new Mace.

Mrs. Ann Winterton (Congleton): I suggest that the hon. Gentleman might borrow the mace from Congleton, from which the parliamentary Mace was copied some time ago. I am sure that the burghers of Congleton would be only too delighted to lend it.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. Before the hon. Gentleman responds, I wish to point out that we are now straying some way from the motion.

Mr. Mackinlay: I am disappointed that you take that view, Mr. Deputy Speaker, because I am making a serious

point about the Mace. Why should we be so arrogant as to change 600 years of history this evening? I was upset when the Prayers were altered arbitrarily. I would have liked to submit my version, but the changes just happened without discussion. For example, I notice that the phrase about laying aside "all partial affections" no longer appears. I shall not labour the point further, but the new status of Westminster Hall, and its place in our histories and traditions, should be made clear.

6.38 pm

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): I wish to endorse the comments made by the hon. Member for Thurrock (Mr. Mackinlay). It is curious that we take great pride in the fact that we elect our Speaker—the voice of the House—but the Deputy Speakers and now these new appointments arise from that mysterious process known euphemistically as the usual channels. I am rather tired of the usual channels.

I had the privilege of accompanying the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association to Australia and to see the Main Committee in action. I also had discussions with the Clerks to the Main Committee. Afterwards, I was even more worried than before, when this ghastly new institution was introduced at Westminster. I did not know before that that party discipline in the federal Parliament in Canberra is even stronger than it is here and the opportunity for individual Members of Parliament to express views—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I remind hon. Members that the motion concerns simply the dates for sittings in Westminster Hall and the appointment of Deputy Speakers. It is quite tightly drawn.

Mr. Forth: In that case, I shall cast my remarks in such a way as to make it clear that I wish that the date proposed were different. I would prefer it to be postponed so that we could consider, for example, whether we have sufficient Standing Orders in place to protect the role of individual Members of Parliament, as the hon. Member for Thurrock (Mr. Mackinlay) mentioned. Postponing the implementation of the Westminster Hall sittings and adjusting the motion accordingly would allow us to give further consideration to the question whether the Standing Orders that we have at present cover adequately the procedures necessary to protect the role of individual hon. Members.

I fear that the new process may gallop out of the control of hon. Members. I recall that we were told that only non-controversial business would be discussed in Westminster Hall. However, on my visit to Canberra I discovered that the Australian definition of uncontroversial business covers what is agreed through the usual channels, and that the role of individual Members there is almost zero. I worry that that is what will happen here unless we are adequately and fully protected by Standing Orders.

I hope that that problem will be given proper attention before 30 November. Although I could wish that that date could be put back to allow more time for that consideration, I hope that the point made by the hon. Member for Thurrock will not be forgotten. There may be scope now to examine how appointments—such as those contained in the motion or even, dare I say it, to the Chairmen's Panel—are made. At present, the process is rather mysterious. A more open process would enable the holders of such important jobs to have even more confidence than at present that they have the support and endorsement of rank-and-file Members of Parliament.

I hope that we can return to that matter in future, and I am grateful to the hon. Member for Thurrock for raising it.

6.43 pm

Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours (Workington): Until about 10 minutes ago, I was not planning to speak in the debate, but I am worried by the wording of the motion. It describes the people who will be appointed to preside over proceedings in what, in effect, will be known as another place.

Mr. Mackinlay: No, it is the House of Commons. I must tell my hon. Friend, with the greatest respect, that I think that he is wrong. No doubt, my hon. Friend the Minister will confirm this, but we have been told that the sittings in Westminster Hall will be part of the proceedings of the House of Commons. I am not sure that I approve, but we have been told that those sittings will not be Committee sittings and that they will not be regarded as comprising another Chamber of the House.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: That is precisely my point: Westminster Hall will be another place in the sense that it will be another Chamber of the House of Commons, rather than a Committee.

The motion states:

"That . . . Mr. Nicholas Winterton, Mr. John McWilliam, Frank Cook and Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody be appointed to act as additional Deputy Speakers at sittings in Westminster Hall during the next session."

However, the second report by the Modernisation Committee states:

"We therefore recommend that sittings in Westminster Hall should be chaired by the Deputy Speakers, and that the four members who have served longest on the Chairmen's Panel should be formally appointed by the House as additional Deputy Speakers to sit in Westminster Hall. We do not envisage that those Members would be subject to the restraints on political activity which apply by convention to the existing Deputy Speakers."

I have always understood that Deputy Speakers in the House of Commons complied with the convention that constrained their political activities. It has only just dawned on me that the motion will establish a structure under which a Deputy Speaker will be free, for the first time, to be politically active on the Floor of the House of Commons. That might be misconstrued, both in the United Kingdom and in those other parts of the world where we are advocating the Westminster constitutional arrangement.

That is not a spurious point. I hope that the four eminently knowledgeable and sensible people referred to in the motion will not punish me in the future for my remarks this evening. However, the proposed change is an important one. The four hon. Members mentioned in the motion will be known as Deputy Speakers of the House of Commons. No distinction will be drawn outside the House between this Chamber and another Chamber—what I have called another place—of the House of Commons. The result will be that there will be two

[Mr. Campbell-Savours]

different types of Deputy Speakers: those who are able to engage in politics in the Chamber, and those who cannot. There is something wrong with that in principle.

However, there is a way to resolve the problem. We can describe the new appointments in a different way. They should not be referred to as Deputy Speakers of the House of Commons.

Mr. Nicholas Winterton (Macclesfield): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Campbell-Savours: I shall give way to the hon. Gentleman who, being one of the appointees, has an interest in the matter.

Mr. Winterton: Like the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody), I had no intention of speaking in this debate on this motion. However, I hope that the Minister and my right hon. Friend the Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir G. Young) will confirm that, although we shall be known as Deputy Speakers, we will be the Deputy Speakers who preside over proceedings in Westminster Hall. We will not preside in this Chamber of the House of Commons, even though Westminster Hall will be a complementary adjunct to the House of Commons as we know it.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: I warn hon. Members in advance that we will never be able to argue that distinction when we present the House of Commons to people in the United Kingdom or anywhere else in the world. They will simply not understand what we are talking about. To all intents and purposes we are creating, by means of this motion, four new Deputy Speakers in the British Parliament. Before we agree to the proposal, we should consider seriously its implications. The distinction drawn by the hon. Member for Macclesfield will not be understood outside the House of Commons.

Mr. Clive Soley (Ealing, Acton and Shepherd's Bush): As a member of the Modernisation Committee that was so keen on introducing this innovation, I must ask my hon. Friend to bear in mind that it is an experiment. As with any experiment, some of the complexities—such as the one that my hon. Friend has identified—require further consideration. Dealing with all such matters in advance in Committee would have caused our deliberations to go on for ever and a day. However, my hon. Friend is right to say that we must revisit the structure that is being established in this experiment.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: I have no objection whatsoever to the structure being created. I am in favour of it, and all hon. Members want it. However, I maintain that we should not call the four hon. Members mentioned in the motion Deputy Speakers of the House of Commons. To do so would be an error. I appeal to my hon. Friend the Minister to consider the matter very seriously. The motion is wrong. It will lead to misunderstandings and will create difficulties.

Mr. Forth: The hon. Gentleman may be slightly reassured to note that the motion specifies that the four hon. Members mentioned will be

"appointed to act as additional Deputy Speakers at sittings in Westminster Hall during the next session."

The period is therefore heavily qualified. That might give hon. Members another opportunity to return to the matter, when we can deal with the points that have been raised. The words "during the next session" mean that a backstop is available. Does the hon. Gentleman agree with me that that is reassuring?

Mr. Campbell-Savours: Although I have invariably taken a different view from the right hon. Gentleman on the changes that have been introduced, he will know, from his own experience of dealing with questions of modernisation over the past few months, that such changes, once in place, become almost irreversible. The House accepts them if they appear to be working. The point on which I am focusing is very narrow. The House will not necessarily want to reconsider it unless a dispute develops internationally, perhaps through the Inter-Parliamentary Union or the CPA. I am simply alerting the House to a problem that I know will arise.

Mr. Paul Tyler (North Cornwall): In addition to the reassurances offered from both sides of the House, would it further reassure the hon. Gentleman if "additional" were given a capital A? The motion states that the four Members named will act as "additional Deputy Speakers". By making that "Additional Deputy Speakers", would we not make matters different? I take the hon. Gentleman's point that, if the experiment extends to a year and appears to be successful, the precedent may have been set.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: I appreciate that the hon. Gentleman seeks a compromise, but even that arrangement would be wrong. The four Chairmen are not Deputy Speakers of the House of Commons as I understand that office. They would not avoid conflict in the Chamber. Indeed, some of the four appointees are controversial Members with very strong views. I welcome the controversy that they bring, and have done over the years, but giving those four hon. Members the title "Deputy Speaker" would undermine the position of Deputy Speakers under our current arrangements.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): At the risk of inflicting grave damage on the hon. Gentleman's reputation, let me say that I entirely agree with him. Does he agree that the issue is not whether the new arrangements work or not? In fact, we do not even know what "work" means in this case. If all we mean is that the four newly appointed "Deputy Speakers" should behave when they chair proceedings in Westminster Hall, we shall learn nothing that we cannot guess from the characters of the four distinguished hon. Members concerned. The point is that it is wrong in principle to designate them Deputy Speakers. It is clumsy and stupid, and we have an opportunity to prevent it.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: I agree entirely with the hon. Gentleman, and I have no difficulty in doing so as this is a House of Commons occasion, not a Government matter or a political debate. We are discussing the credibility and integrity of the House of Commons. I appeal to the

Minister not to proceed with the motion as it stands. The four named hon. Members will be Chairmen of debates in Westminster Hall. We should call them Chairmen, not Deputy Speakers.

Mr. Soley: Let me try to take my hon. Friend with me. I agree that he is a great parliamentarian—*[Interruption.]* I think that he is. The House must face up to the fact that, if we are to modernise—and everyone keeps telling me that they want modernisation—

Mr. Forth: No.

Mr. Soley: Well, not everyone on the Opposition Benches, perhaps.

We cannot dot every i and cross every t, but we can revisit matters later. My hon. Friend is forgetting that, in addition to the ability of the House to revisit the matter, the Modernisation Committee will examine how the proposals work and will recommend changes if necessary. My hon. Friend's point is a good one, but we should not use it to hold back change.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: I believe that Governments can table motions at any time that they want. There is always time to debate a motion that must pass through the House of Commons. We have learned that lesson over the years. I have never been convinced by arguments about Government time.

I am worried—I shall repeat the point so that there is no misunderstanding—because the office of Deputy Speaker is a non-political office in this Parliament. It has been so during the 20 years that I have been a Member. Long should it remain so.

As of today, however, the office of Deputy Speaker will become a politicised appointment, from which its holders may argue a political case in the House of Commons. The very silence in the Chamber convinces me that many of the hon. Members sitting here know that I am right, and that that point had not dawned on them when they passed the Modernisation Committee's report. Members are considering what I am saying, because they know that there is truth in it. We are making a mistake, and I beg the Minister to withdraw the motion.

6.56 pm

Mr. Tipping: This has been a narrow debate around two issues. The first concerns the appointment of four people to chair sittings during the Westminster Hall experiment. The second is the date on which the experiment will start. I stress that we are discussing an experiment, perhaps one of the largest modernisation experiments that the House will consider during this Parliament. As with all experiments, some things will undoubtedly go right, and others wrong.

My hon. Friend the Member for Workington (Mr. Campbell-Savours) made his point well. Indeed, he made it three or four times to make sure that I got it. I did, and senior members of the Select Committee on Modernisation, including my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing, Acton and Shepherd's Bush (Mr. Soley), also got the point. Several hon. Members have tried to reassure my hon. Friend that we will examine the point and learn from the experiment.

I was asked whether Westminster Hall would be ready. Preparations are under way and we will be ready to start on 30 November.

I agree entirely with the right hon. Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir G. Young) that Westminster Hall must get off to a good start. It is an important experiment, giving Back-Bench Members much greater opportunities. There will be 140 extra Back-Bench debates, the chance to debate three dozen extra Select Committee reports and the possibility of 17 or 18 general debates. Those figures give the lie to any suggestion that the Government are denying Back-Bench Members the opportunity to raise issues.

My hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Mr. Mackinlay) said that he had read the report and the motion superficially—

Mr. Mackinlay: No, I did not. I did not read them superficially. I said that anyone who read the motion superficially might think that it was about Deputy Speakers. It is, in fact, about much more.

Mr. Tipping: My hon. Friend used the words "on a superficial reading". One thing that I admire about my hon. Friend is that, when he reads things—even superficially—he has a tendency to read things into them. I can assure him that there has been no collusion between the usual channels about how the four names were selected. The method of selecting the names came directly from the proposals of the Modernisation Committee. Discussions have been held with the Chairmen's Panel, but the panel does not, in my experience, collude with the Government. The panel's voice is very much independent, no matter how uncomfortable that may be for the Government or for the Opposition.

We have had a long debate over whether the name Deputy Speaker is right. The hon. Member for Macclesfield (Mr. Winterton) pointed out that these would be additional Deputy Speakers sitting in Westminster Hall. These are new creatures, and their roles will develop. I do not say that we have necessarily got it right, and I repeat my undertaking to look again at that matter.

Mr. Bercow: The Minister has used the word experiment, a word used many times. If he insists on describing what we are doing as an experiment, with the unstated implication that it will be up for review, will he be good enough to tell us the criteria by which its success or otherwise will be evaluated? Will the criteria include the considerations to which the hon. Member for Workington (Mr. Campbell-Savours) has drawn attention—that is, the capacity of people outside the House and outside the United Kingdom to interpret the difference between the additional Deputy Speakers and those who hold the existing office?

Mr. Tipping: That may well be one of the criteria by which the matter is judged. The issue of whether it is confusing to have one group of people bearing the name "Deputy Speaker" or one group with the name "additional Deputy Speaker" is a fairly small one by which to judge success. The success or failure of the body will depend on whether Back-Bench Members of Parliament have the

[Mr. Tipping]

chance forcefully and robustly to raise issues that affect their constituencies. It has been said that that is a separate matter, but, for me, it is the key issue.

Mrs. Dunwoody: I understand the problem that hon. Members express; I would be happy to consider some other title. I have been called many things in my life—not always parliamentary. Surely, we have overlooked one aspect of the matter; many members of the Chairmen's Panel have the ability to swap roles. When one is in the Chair, one is impartial. All of us also participate in other parts of the parliamentary programme. Indeed, if the Chairmen, who are all volunteers, or pressed men and women, were dependent on being chosen by the usual channels, the Chairmen's Panel would be very different from the one that we have at present. That is a mildly unrealistic description of the situation, if my hon. Friend the Minister will forgive for saying so. At present, all of us take the Chair, sit there for many hours and I hope—indeed I know—that we are impartial. However, we then do other things without any difficulty. If a change of nomenclature is all that is needed, I can think of a dozen different words—including some of the things that I would call some of my right hon. and hon. Friends.

Mr. Tipping: With her great experience, my hon. Friend makes the point fairly and more forcefully than I could. Earlier, the hon. Member for Macclesfield said that he wore two hats. If the experiment goes ahead, he will have yet another hat to wear.

Mr. Nicholas Winterton: The Minister has provoked me. In fact, I wear three hats. If the motion is passed, I shall be wearing four hats. *[Interruption.]* I hear cries of "Big head". The hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody) is absolutely right; members of Madam Speaker's Chairmen's Panel undertake that job voluntarily and are wholly impartial when they are in the Chair. I point out to the Minister and to the hon. Member for Workington (Mr. Campbell-Savours) that the hon. Member for Thurrock (Mr. Mackinlay) raised a number of issues. If the new additional Deputy Speakers for sittings in Westminster Hall were remunerated, the situation would be very different indeed. In that case, clearly, we could not operate both in the maelstrom of the House of Commons—taking party political positions—and as additional Deputy Speakers. However, at present, that is not what it is about; we are asked to undertake that additional duty voluntarily as Members of the House of Commons—all four of us have the great honour and privilege of accepting it.

Mr. Tipping: The hon. Gentleman wears many hats, some of them extremely large. I know the reason for that—his constituency is one of the centres of this country's hat-making trade. I am delighted that he so vigorously argues the case for Cheshire's hat-makers. However, he makes a serious point—as does my hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody). At present, the fact that those posts are unpaid gives their occupants—whoever they may be—an independence. They are not linked to anyone's patronage, and all the proposed names will continue the long tradition of speaking vigorously and independently, while being fair, open and honest chairpeople.

Finally, I confirm that the Westminster Hall sittings will be complementary to those of this House; it will not be a Committee, but a complementary or alternative body to the House. The matter raises interesting questions about the Mace; the hon. Member for Congleton (Mrs. Winterton) is pursuing her own case—Cheshire Members are out in force tonight—to try to find a solution. We shall need to consider such issues.

Mr. Mackinlay: Paragraph 40 of the minutes of the Modernisation Committee for 3 February 1997 states:

"Ceremonial with or without a Mace and precise staffing requirements by a Serjeant at Arms, Doorkeepers, Office Keepers, Attendants and security staff will have to be discussed and agreed once more details of the Main Committee emerge."

That implies that the House as a whole would approve what those arrangements should be. I am not sure that we have done so today, either in this motion or in our debate and vote on the thrust of the Committee's report. Unless I am mistaken, the matter has yet to be discussed. If we have resolved the matter, perhaps the Minister could explain when we did so, as it is not clear to me.

Mr. Tipping: As has been said, this is a fairly narrow debate. I remind my hon. Friend that the Modernisation Committee report was discussed earlier this year, when there was ample opportunity to make points such as those that he has just made.

I return to the point made earlier by my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing, Acton and Shepherd's Bush and myself: this is a big experiment and we shall not get it right immediately. I am going out of my way to be flexible and to point out that we may not have got it right, and we may not know all the consequences, but interesting issues are being raised. However, I give an undertaking—

Mr. Mackinlay: My hon. Friend is putting in the rivets as the ship goes down the slipway.

Mr. Tipping: I want the ship to sail; I want it to be one of which we can be proud. My hon. Friends, who are members of the Modernisation Committee and have worked hard on this matter, can be confident of our good will and of our further undertaking that we are prepared to consider the experiment, and will wish the ship godspeed.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That there shall be no sittings in Westminster Hall under the terms of the Order [24th May] until Tuesday 30th November.

Ordered,

That, following the Order [24th May], Mr. Nicholas Winterton, Mr. John McWilliam, Frank Cook and Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody be appointed to act as additional Deputy Speakers at sittings in Westminster Hall during the next session.—*[Mr. Tipping.]*

Questions to Ministers

7.7 pm

The Parliamentary Secretary, Privy Council Office (Mr. Paddy Tipping): I beg to move,

That, subject always to the discretion of the Chair, and in addition to the established rules of order on the form and content of questions, questions may not be tabled on matters for which responsibility has been devolved by legislation to the Scottish Parliament or the National Assembly for Wales unless the question:

(a) seeks information which the UK Government is empowered to require of the devolved executive, or

(b) relates to matters which:

(i) are included in legislative proposals introduced or to be introduced in the UK Parliament,

(ii) are concerned with the operation of a concordat or other instrument of liaison between the UK Government and the devolved executive, or

(iii) UK Government ministers have taken an official interest in, or

(c) presses for action by UK ministers in areas in which they retain administrative powers.

This motion and the next two spring directly from the fourth report of the Procedure Committee on the procedural consequences of devolution, and the Government's response to that report. Hon. Members will recall that the issues were extensively discussed as recently as last Thursday.

I want to reinforce two points. First, I am extremely grateful to the Procedure Committee for its thorough examination of the process. Devolution will bring about change. The motions before the House implement changes that will accrue over time. Secondly, I wholly agree with the Procedure Committee and the theme of the debate that took place last week: this is not the first time that we have discussed devolution, and it certainly will not be the last time.

Dr. Norman A. Godman (Greenock and Inverclyde): I have submitted a question to the Home Secretary on the changes that he proposes, by way of the Immigration and Asylum Bill, to the Social Work (Scotland) Act 1968, the Mental Health (Scotland) 1984 and the Children (Scotland) Act 1995. It is important that our right to continue to ask questions of that nature is stressed. If we are to be given the power of questioning Ministers on the operation of a concordat, or other instrument of liaison, between the UK Government and the devolved Executives, surely it is important that this House holds a debate on the memorandum of understanding and the principles underlying the concordats themselves. I should have thought that that holds for the relationship between Cardiff and this place; the relationship between Stormont and this place, assuming things over in Northern Ireland go well this week; and the relationship between Edinburgh and this place. How can we ask questions on concordats and the memorandum of understanding without the Government first laying down the principles underlying the memorandum and the concordats?

Mr. Tipping: My hon. Friend makes important points. He is right to say that the concordat and the procedures lying behind it give hon. Members an opportunity to look at the processes occurring between the Westminster Parliament and the new Scottish Parliament—it is about the mechanics of the operation. My hon. Friend repeated a request made last week for a debate on the concordat and the memorandum of understanding. He will appreciate that, at this stage of the parliamentary cycle, time is extremely pressing and that I cannot give him a commitment today to hold that debate, but I assure him that his cry has not gone unnoticed. I am sure that we shall return to the issue he raises. My hon. Friend is also right to emphasise a point made in last week's debate—that it is important that UK Ministers here in the Westminster Parliament should continue to be questioned about issues that affect hon. Members and their constituents.

At this point, I shall say only that we had a good, long and helpful debate on these matters last week. The House is being asked to approve three motions this evening: the first on questions to Ministers, the second on changes to Select Committees and the third on amendments to Standing Orders relating to the Advocate General for Scotland. Having made those general points and reserving the opportunity to take specific points relating to individual motions later, I hope that the House will endorse the way forward I have set out.

7.12 pm

Sir George Young (North-West Hampshire): Mr. Deputy Speaker, will you first clarify whether all the remaining motions are being taken together or whether we are to have three separate debates? I understand that the Minister would like them all to be taken together; is that to be the case?

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): We are currently debating motion No. 5, on questions to Ministers.

Sir George Young: On that specific motion, I agree with the hon. Member for Greenock and Inverclyde (Dr. Godman) that it would be helpful to have debates on the concordats and the memorandums of understanding.

We had a full debate on Thursday, from which the motion arises. I make no apology for repeating a point I made then. The motion defines, in respect of questions to Ministers, what is in order and what is out of order; with one exception, what one can and cannot ask is relatively clear. If a matter

"has been devolved by legislation to the Scottish Parliament or the National Assembly for Wales",

it is out of order here, whereas if the question

"seeks information which the UK Government is empowered to require",

it is in order. If the question relates to areas in which

"UK Ministers . . . retain administrative powers",

it is in order; likewise, if it relates to

"legislative proposals introduced or to be introduced in the UK Parliament",

or to "a concordat", it is in order.

The grey area can be found in paragraph (b)(iii) which states that a question is in order if it relates to matters where

"UK Government Ministers have taken an official interest".

On Thursday, I asked whether that posed the threat of the whole issue becoming clouded. I gave an example of a UK Government Minister, the Minister of Agriculture,

[Sir George Young]

Fisheries and Food, taking an official interest in whether the beef-on-the-bone ban was lifted in Scotland. The moment he took an official interest, hon. Members could table questions on a devolved matter. It would be helpful if, at some point, someone defined exactly what "an official interest" is. Is it any interest declared by a Minister, or can a Minister declare an official interest only if he has responsibility for the matter under the devolution legislation?

I posed that question on Thursday, but, sadly, the Secretary of State for Scotland did not get around to answering it when he wound up the debate. If the Parliamentary Secretary, Privy Council Office, can shed any light on the definition of "an official interest", it would help to avoid any confusion at Question Time about whether a question was in or out of order.

7.15 pm

Mr. Gareth Thomas (Clwyd, West): Mr. Deputy Speaker, I was unable to catch your eye during last Thursday's debate on the procedural consequences of devolution, so I am grateful to have the opportunity to address the House this evening.

The point is that there are procedural consequences arising out of devolution. To a large extent, the motion before the House reflects those consequences, but I question whether it is sufficiently robust to provide the degree of clarity that Members of Parliament require to do their job. The procedural consequences of devolution are such that we are entering uncharted waters. Although a pragmatic and evolutionary approach might be more in tune with the general approach and predisposition of this House, I submit that clear guidelines are needed.

Such guidelines are needed, first, to eliminate confusion and, secondly, to assist hon. Members in assessing what is or is not in order when tabling questions—we have had already the unhappy experience of considerable confusion occurring during Welsh questions before the summer recess. Thirdly, there is a need to respect both the spirit and the letter of the devolution settlements for both Wales and Scotland. It seems to me that the motion goes a long way toward implementing that principle, which was enunciated in the Procedure Committee's report.

Because the experience in Wales is so often conflated with and subsumed in that of Scotland, I sometimes wonder whether the penny has dropped that the Welsh model of devolution is significantly different from the Scottish. It differs in two ways: first, primary legislative power in respect of Wales remains in Westminster, even in those areas of responsibility where some measure of power has been devolved to Cardiff; and, secondly, the Welsh method of devolution as set out in the Government of Wales Act 1998 could be characterised as "horizontal" in that, even in devolved matters, some secondary legislative and executive powers remain with the Secretary of State for Wales or other Secretaries of State, or are exercised concurrently.

My view, which is shared by many in the Welsh political scene, is that the role of the Secretary of State for Wales will remain crucial if devolution is to be successful in Wales. However, his remaining responsibilities post-devolution are not clear cut. I agree with the Procedure Committee that the Secretary of State's responsibilities will be open to "varying interpretation", although that is perhaps an understatement.

The Procedure Committee recommended and the Government accepted that rules on the orderliness of questions ought also to govern the question of appropriate subjects for Adjournment debates, so the motion is far from being of solely academic interest to Back Benchers representing Welsh constituencies. I note that there are no rules at all with regard to oral supplementaries. Perhaps it would be rather difficult to prescribe rules in that regard.

The preamble to the motion declares the basic principle that no questions should be tabled on matters for which responsibility has been devolved by legislation to the Scottish Parliament, the Northern Ireland Assembly or the Welsh Assembly. That is fine and it is to be expected. It is in accordance with the spirit and the letter of devolution, but the motion refers to certain important exceptions, some of which were mentioned by the right hon. Member for North–West Hampshire (Sir G. Young).

The first exception is questions that seek information on subjects on which the UK Government are empowered to require information from the devolved body. That is a rather wide exception; I shall give an illustrative example. Section 123 of the Government of Wales Act 1998 includes a catch-all provision that states:

> "Where it appears to the Treasury that any information in the possession or under the control of the Assembly is required for the exercise of any function by the Treasury, the Treasury may require the Assembly to provide the information to the Treasury in such form as the Treasury may reasonably specify."

In my view, and it may occur to other hon. Members, that raises the question whether, in the light of section 123, Welsh Members of Parliament are entitled to ask questions about how the Welsh block, as it used to be called, or the departmental expenditure limit, as it is now called, is spent. Are we entitled to ask specific questions about how the Assembly determines the Budget, bearing in mind that presumably, those are questions that, under section 123, the UK Treasury is empowered to ask?

I shall deal briefly with the other exceptions. The exception under paragraph (b)(i) relates to matters that

> "are included in legislative proposals introduced or to be introduced in the UK Parliament".

That is wide in its ambit and somewhat vague, to say the least. I wonder whether it provides the guidance and clarity that hon. Members seek in order to do their job.

Sub-paragraph (ii) deals with matters that are subject to

> "a concordat or other instrument of liaison between the UK Government and the devolved executive".

I endorse the view expressed by others that it would be entirely right and proper for the House to debate the concordat and the memorandum of understanding. That, too, is extremely wide.

Paragraph 23 of the memorandum of understanding refers to the Joint Ministerial Committee that is to be established. The terms of reference of that Committee are described, inter alia, as follows:

> "To consider non-devolved matters which impinge on devolved responsibilities, and devolved matters which impinge on non-devolved responsibilities".

The question is obvious. Given that the exception refers to

> "the operation of a concordat"—

I note that the wording on the Order Paper differs somewhat from the Procedure Committee's recommendation—this exception again is rather wide and vague.

I endorse the comments of the right hon. Member for North-West Hampshire with regard to sub-paragraph (iii). What is "an official interest"? We ought to know, and guidance should be provided to the Table Office.

Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours (Workington): May I press my hon. Friend on a minor point? I understand that Welsh and Scottish Members want to maximise their right to ask questions in the House about matters relating to Wales and Scotland. If that is their intention, why does my hon. Friend seek to tie Ministers down and make it more difficult for hon. Members, including himself, to ask questions? I do not understand the process through which he is taking us.

Mr. Thomas: I am seeking clarity and a degree of certainty, to allow us to do our job and adjust our practices appropriately. That is what is important. I speak as someone who for many years has been a strong campaigner for devolution.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: My hon. Friend seeks clarity. If we define the circumstances precisely, my hon. Friend, who is a lawyer, will know that, by the definitions that will have to be laid down, we will effectively be limiting the right of hon. Members to ask questions, as he wishes. I am sorry to press him—

Mr. Thomas: Ultimately, devolution raises some thorny procedural issues. The hon. Member for Macclesfield (Mr. Winterton) is to be congratulated on wrestling with some of those issues. I do not pretend that the Government can give definitive answers, and I expect that the Government will wish to follow the strong recommendation of the Procedure Committee that there should be a thorough review of the issues, in the light of experience. That is my concluding point.

Mr. Nicholas Winterton (Macclesfield): The hon. Gentleman was generous enough to be complimentary about the Committee that I chair, and we are grateful for that. Do we not need to limit the questions that can be asked, so that we avoid antagonising the devolved Assembly in Wales and the devolved Parliament in Scotland? We cannot be seen in this House to be dealing with matters that this House has rightly devolved to Edinburgh and Cardiff.

Mr. Thomas: Precisely. We must be true to the spirit and the letter of devolution. I return to the unhappy experience that we had recently with Welsh oral questions. I am anxious to maintain the good name of the House and avoid such confusion. I simply seek a little more guidance and clarity, realising that it may be unrealistic to expect it. We shall have to revisit the subject in the light of experience. I do not necessarily expect definitive answers to the points that I have raised from my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Secretary when he responds for the Government. Clearly, the matter will need to be reviewed.

7.28 pm

Mr. Andrew Stunell (Hazel Grove): I speak as a member of the Procedure Committee, but I do not want it to be assumed that everything that I say is strictly in accordance with the views expressed in the Committee's report. We should acknowledge straight away that we need to make the changes set out in the motion and that, broadly speaking, they cover the right territory in the right way. I hope that the House will approve the changes.

I shall spend a minute or two on the implications of the remarks of the hon. Member for Clwyd, West (Mr. Thomas). He was trying to balance the interests of Members in this House and their legitimate desire to hold the Government of the United Kingdom to account, and in the case of Welsh Members, to defend the interests of their constituents, with the legitimate concern to ensure that the Assembly in Wales and the Parliament in Scotland are allowed to hold their Governments to account in their own way. It is fair and proper for the House to have regard to their sensitivities and needs, as well as to its own needs. The motion does that, to a reasonable extent.

I am not persuaded by what the hon. Member for Clwyd, West said about the need for a more precisely regulated framework for questions. I have a number of points to make about that.

Precision may be achieved when cases are made, but trying to achieve it at this stage would constrain Members from asking certain questions. It would be better to have one or two test cases, and to search for ultimate tidiness at stage 1 would be a mistake. Members of the House are persistent and ingenious—one has only to consider the way in which Prime Minister's Question Time has evolved, if that is the right word. Some might say that it has degenerated, but it has a certain formulaic approach that is designed to bypass any of the rules that the House might otherwise have in place so one asks the Prime Minister about his engagements.

I have a feeling that, before long, certain formulas will be devised by which any Member of the House will ask any question he chooses about anything happening in Scotland or Wales. However undesirable that may be thought to be in theory, Members will find a way of achieving it. Trying to devise at this stage a set of rules or a formula that would prevent that from happening would be to search for the holy grail—or possibly the unholy grail, depending on one's particular point of view.

The hon. Member for Clwyd, West made a further suggestion. He said, with some regret, that he thinks it is probably not possible to devise rules covering oral supplementaries. I should think not, and the possibility of having such rules in place is somewhat dubious to say the least. I also think that the Table Office does rather a good job in the House, although I cannot be the only Member who regards submitting a question to it without at least one word of what I have suggested being changed as a major success. It will be able to interpret the rules in the spirit in which they are being put before the House and, again, undue prescription will not be terribly helpful.

What we have done is about the best job available in the circumstances. It has given us a set of words with which we can defend the House from any charge of interference from our Scottish and Welsh parliamentary colleagues, by saying, "We have rules that prevent our Members in the United Kingdom Parliament from interfering." We have the book of rules to show as our defence and, at the same time, the rules are sufficiently flexible for Members of the House, in practice, to do exactly what they like. To me, that seems to be a good balance.

7.33 pm

Dr. Norman A. Godman (Greenock and Inverclyde): I agree with my hon. Friend the Minister and the hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Mr. Stunell) that we cannot at this moment expect to have hard and fast rules concerning the responsibilities of the Assemblies, the Scottish Parliament and this Parliament or the representatives in those legislatures.

I say to the hon. Member for Macclesfield (Mr. Winterton) that, like my hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd, West (Mr. Thomas), I fell off the edge of the list of speakers last Thursday. The hon. Gentleman's report is very fine. For example, I agree with paragraph 37, which argues for informal contacts between Members of the different Assemblies and Parliaments, and since 1 July I have argued that case to the Convenor of the Local Government Committee in the Edinburgh Parliament. We need "official interest" to be defined because there are responsibilities that, to my mind, are not mutually exclusive—for example, to the Scottish Parliament or this Parliament. By and large, I shall confine my remarks to Northern Ireland and Scotland.

A clearer groove is provided by paragraph (c) of the motion, which refers to a question that

"presses for action by UK ministers in areas in which they retain administrative powers."

The example I gave earlier was prompted by a challenge I made to my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary during the passage of the Immigration and Asylum Bill. I suggested that it is not up to this Parliament to amend exclusively Scottish Acts of Parliament through that legislation. We are in a grey area here, and I say to my hon. Friend the Minister that, this week, a Member of the Scottish Parliament has tabled two questions concerning the Home Secretary's decision to amend section 12 of the Social Work (Scotland) Act 1968 and sections in other Scottish Acts. Am I right to think that, although my right hon. Friend has administrative powers here, the Scottish Parliament has the power to amend the Immigration and Asylum Bill again, when it becomes an Act, in respect of three Scottish Acts?

When the First Minister addressed the Scottish Parliament on 1 July, he said that it had the right to amend some legislation enacted by this Parliament. My hon. Friend the Minister may not be familiar with section 12 of the 1968 Act, but may I use it to give a brief illustration of the Home Secretary's administrative powers? It allows social work directors to assist financially people in desperate need who face a real domestic emergency, and I have used it several times to help poverty-stricken constituents. I have approached my local social work department to argue that moneys should be given to such people.

We in this Parliament are changing that Scottish Act, but this is a grey area. The Immigration and Asylum Bill is obviously a responsibility of the Home Secretary, but I would have thought that those three Scottish Acts could be re-amended, despite what happens to the asylum legislation in this place. There will be conflicts and stresses between this Parliament, the Scottish Parliament and the two Assemblies, whenever the Northern Ireland Assembly gets off the mark.

The motion refers to questioning Ministers

"in areas in which they retain administrative powers."

I have the right to question the Home Secretary on those matters, but do I have the right to question the Secretary of State for Scotland on the implementation of those clauses in the Immigration and Asylum Bill that are exclusively concerned with Scottish matters? To whom do I go?

I have tabled a question to the Home Secretary for answer next week on that very issue. Four or five months ago, I said to him that I thought he was acting ultra vires in respect of those Scottish Acts. Of course, they were passed by the House. The 1968 Act was put through by the late Willie Ross; it is a brilliant piece of legislation, but it has nothing whatever to do with the rest of the United Kingdom. It is a Scottish Act.

I agree that we have to maintain compatibility and mutuality between those Acts of Parliament, but who am I to question about those elements of the Immigration and Asylum Bill—the Secretary of State for Scotland or the Home Secretary? I think that the Home Secretary is out of order in amending those Acts. If he is not, I sincerely hope that the Scottish Parliament will be able to amend the asylum legislation. This is an important issue, particularly as regards people in need. Whether we are discussing the Mental Health (Scotland) Act 1984 or the Social Work (Scotland) Act 1968, there are many grey areas. Ultimately, when legal challenges are made, those questions will have to be determined not by the judicial committee of the Privy Council, but by a constitutional court.

Mr. Dafydd Wigley (Caernarfon): The case that the hon. Gentleman makes in relation to Scotland is a lesser case with regard to Wales, because we are dealing with secondary rather than primary legislation. However, in interpreting ambiguous areas of primary or secondary education, the courts have reference to what has been said in this place, the Welsh Assembly or the Scottish Parliament. To that extent, if a conflict is possible, it is extremely important to know where authority lies.

Dr. Godman: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. Before we have a constitutional court, perhaps we need a constitutional committee to deal with those problems, which I believe arise with the Bill that is now in the other place. In addition to the informal contacts, which the hon. Member for Macclesfield mentions in paragraph 37 of his report, contact needs to be made between the Parliaments and Assemblies at a level below ministerial. Back Benchers should be able to discuss those matters with our colleagues in other Assemblies. If things go well in Northern Ireland—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. We cannot discuss Northern Ireland in the context of this motion. Moreover, the hon. Gentleman is going a little wide when he talks about liaison. I have listened carefully, because I know that he is trying to make a case in relation to the last part of the motion, but he should not stray wider than that.

Dr. Godman: I am sincerely grateful for your advice, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I apologise for referring to Northern Ireland. I was simply going to say that we shall soon debate a similar motion if Senator Mitchell and those obdurate negotiators come to some agreement this week.

Mr. Alasdair Morgan (Galloway and Upper Nithsdale): Does the hon. Gentleman accept that the

problems of interpretation, which he has rightly brought up, arise only if this House insists on legislating on matters that are devolved to Scotland and on using its powers under clause 28(7) of the Scotland Act 1998 to do so? The way to avoid interpretation problems is for this House to leave it up to the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly to take on any consequential changes—or not, as they wish.

Dr. Godman: I could not agree more. As regards assisting people in need, we should be willing to trust the representatives in Edinburgh and Cardiff if they choose to implement legislation differently. We should accept that there will be differences.

Let me return to the question of concordats and the memorandum of understanding. I have an abiding interest in the fishing industry, which is where conflicts will arise. The hon. Member for Argyll and Bute (Mrs. Michie) and I have the honour of being honorary presidents of the Clyde Fishermen's Association. No one can challenge the fact that the Scottish fishing industry is far more important to Scotland than the English fishing industry is to England. Paragraph B3.12 on page 20 of the memorandum of understanding says:

"Ministers and officials of the devolved administrations should have a role to play in relevant Council meetings, and other negotiations with EU partners."

I take it that we shall have a concordat on the fishing industry and other devolved matters, which will entail, among many other things, attendance at Fishery Council meetings in Brussels. However, I do not want to see a junior Minister there from the Edinburgh Parliament. Although my hon. Friend the Member for East Lothian (Mr. Home Robertson) knows a thing or two about fishing, he will not be Minister for a lifetime. It is therefore important that clear guidelines are given.

The Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food is the lead Department. What I seek, in terms of concordats, is the right to question Ministers in this House on the implementation of decisions taken in Brussels by Fisheries Ministers. Many people, especially north of the border, wrongly believe that MAFF is an English Department and that Scotland now has a fisheries department that is equal to that English Department. However, that is not the case because Ministers in MAFF negotiate on behalf of our fishermen. That is an administrative power. As regards the operation of what I might call a fisheries concordat, discussions need to take place between Ministers here and in the Edinburgh Parliament, but Back Benchers should also be involved in such discussions on behalf of our fishermen constituents.

Everyone in the fishing industry knows that a concordat on safety is not needed because, traditionally and historically, the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions is responsible for the occupational safety of our fishermen. It always has been, and I agree that that is where it should stay—until we get an independent Scotland, which is many years away. However, on quotas and total allowable catches, this House is responsible for questioning the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food. I just wonder where the Secretary of State for Scotland comes into this.

Mr. Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield): I have listened to the hon. Gentleman with fascination. That question has been put to the Secretary of State for Scotland on repeated occasions, including last Thursday night, but he appears unable to clarify what his role will be.

Dr. Godman: I do not accept that for one moment, and the hon. Gentleman would not expect me to do so. He is being provocative in a parliamentary way.

I am raising a serious issue: will Scottish Members question the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food or the Secretary of State for Scotland on these matters? If the Ministry is the lead Department, I want to be treated as an equal when I get to my feet to voice the concerns of my fishermen.

There should be a memorandum of understanding on the relevant constituency roles of Members of this place and Members of the Scottish Parliament. Responsibilities have changed. In response to the question put to my hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd, West, I say that responsibilities have changed dramatically—for instance in health and education, which are now the responsibility of MSPs. However, even in health, a Minister might have an official interest in a health matter where the lead is taken by the Department of Health in Westminster. For example, if a decision is taken to abolish the use of electroconvulsive therapy in the treatment of depression, the Scottish Health Minister may take the lead, and we would have something to say in this place.

I welcome the motion. I agree with the Minister and the hon. Member for Hazel Grove that we cannot have hard and fast rules, but it is important that Ministers respect our interest in matters that fall between reserved and devolved powers.

7.50 pm

Mr. Alasdair Morgan (Galloway and Upper Nithsdale): I want briefly to raise just one matter of interpretation—not nearly as many as the hon. Member for Greenock and Inverclyde (Dr. Godman). My hon. Friend the Member for North Tayside (Mr. Swinney) raised this issue in the debate last Thursday, and it has been partially alluded to by the hon. Member for Clwyd, West (Mr. Thomas). The first exception to the rules on questions is that a question can be tabled if it seeks information that the UK Government are empowered to require of the devolved Executive. I accept that that is reasonable in a devolved system—which is not one that I would choose. It is reasonable that if the UK Government are empowered to ask for such information, Members of the House should equally be empowered to ask questions about it.

However, we must consider that rule in conjunction with clause 96 of the Scotland Act 1998. The hon. Member for Clwyd, West referred to the equivalent clause in the Government of Wales Act 1998, which deals with questions that the Treasury can ask of the devolved legislatures. He said that the clause in the Government of Wales Act was fairly broadly drawn, but it is narrowly drawn compared with the clause in the Scotland Act.

The clause in the Government of Wales Act refers to the Treasury asking for information for the purposes of the operation of the Treasury, or some such phrase. Clause 96 in the Scotland Act makes no such stipulation; it simply says:

"The Treasury may require the Scottish Ministers to provide, within such period as the Treasury may reasonably specify, such information, in such form and prepared in such manner, as the Treasury may reasonably specify."

[Mr. Alasdair Morgan]

Those qualifications are to do with the period or the form in which the information must be provided. There are no qualifications on the subject matter of the information for which the Treasury can ask.

All hon. Members realise, I am sure, that the Treasury is a reasonable Department and would not possibly ask Scottish Ministers to provide information that was not germane to the running of the Treasury. I suspect that that clause enables the Treasury to ask the Scottish Parliament to provide any information that it wants. That drives a coach and horses through these amendments to Standing Orders. If the Treasury can ask the Scottish Parliament to provide any information, Members of the House should be able to ask questions about any information for which the Treasury might ask—not information for which it has asked, but for which theoretically it might ask in the future.

We need clarification of this issue. Will the Minister reassure me? I do not see how he can, because the problem is not with the amendments to Standing Orders, but with clause 96 of the Scotland Act and the equivalent clause in the Government of Wales Act 1998.

The hon. Member for Hazel Grove argued that hon. Members will always find a way round the prescriptions that we are trying to put into Standing Orders. What on earth are we doing here if we know that, whatever we say, a way will be found to get round the amendments? I would rather waste my time doing something else than debating an issue of purely academic interest. I would welcome the Minister's reassurances on this matter.

7.54 pm

The Parliamentary Secretary, Privy Council Office (Mr. Paddy Tipping): I am pleased that colleagues who sat through the long debate on Thursday and did not get an opportunity to speak have recycled their speeches tonight, albeit on narrower points. In a sense, the narrower the point becomes, the more difficult it is to answer. There has been a curious tension in this short debate between those who want greater clarity and certainty and those from the grey camp who appreciate the benefit of this field being wide open so that discussions continue and practice develops. I would be foolish to try to resolve all the issues that have been raised.

We should listen to the voices of those who want greater opportunities rather than those who want greater prescriptiveness. There will clearly need to be a balance, and the Procedure Committee considered that balance carefully. The Committee, in its report, made important strides forward. It acknowledged the need to keep this matter under review. That may be the only point of clarity that we can achieve tonight, but it is an important first stake in the ground.

A second important stake in the ground is the recognition that this is a two-way process. Devolution is still in its infancy, and we must develop appropriate relationships with colleagues, whether at ministerial or Assembly level. As my hon. Friend the Member for Greenock and Inverclyde (Dr. Godman) said, we also need to go below that and talk to Members of the Assemblies.

It is incumbent on all of us to set a pattern of good behaviour. It is also important to consider any responses we receive. A good relationship is like a good marriage: we may have flaming rows, but we stay together and keep discussing matters. The question of who does what and what belongs to each other is in that area. We should allow the process to develop, discuss the issues, and be honest with each other.

A specific question was asked about the effect of the proposed motion on questions to Ministers. All that can be said at this stage is that it provides the basis for the Chair to decide whether a question is in order. It reflects the current rules of the House, modified to take account of devolution. There will always be grey areas. Our whole proceedings contain grey areas, and we are always trying to define responsibility and to find the right answers.

The Chair uses discretion in these matters. It is important that we protect the integrity of the Chair and preserve that discretion. However, ultimately a pattern will develop over a period that will set precedents in the House.

Mr. Grieve: I may be pre-empting the Minister's comments, but, with particular reference to the issue raised by the hon. Member for Greenock and Inverclyde (Dr. Godman), I noted from the Order Paper that an answer was supposed to be published today—I do not know whether it has been—to a question about the executive functions of the Secretary of State for Scotland. Will the Minister refer to that when he seeks to answer the questions that have been raised?

Mr. Tipping: I can make no reference to that, because I have not seen the answer to the question, but I will make inquiries.

A number of Members asked why the terms of paragraph (b)(ii) of the motion differ slightly from the wording in the Procedure Committee's report. The straight answer is that time overtook us: the report was agreed before the memorandum of understanding and the concordat were published. All matters, whether devolved or not, are in theory covered by the concordat. The original wording would therefore have enabled questions to be asked about all devolved matters, but the revised wording makes it clear that questions can be asked about the mechanics of liaison with the devolved Administrations. As I said to my hon. Friend the Member for Greenock and Inverclyde earlier, the process rather than the outcome is under examination.

My hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd, West (Mr. Thomas) and the hon. Member for Galloway and Upper Nithsdale (Mr. Morgan) raised a number of issues relating to innocent financial matters. Would the House still be able to debate expenditure in Scotland and Wales? Again, I feel that this involves a grey area, which will require testing. The hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Mr. Stunell) said that the House contained imaginative characters who would find new devices, but I think that it has been acknowledged, essentially, that the block grant will remain the responsibility of the two Secretaries of State. That means that the Estimates will be approved by the House, and that there will be ample opportunities for Members to discuss them. The real debate—the real area of potential disagreement—will, I think, focus on how the money is subsequently distributed, on a different basis. I should like to be able to give a clear answer now, but I think we shall have to work on this.

My hon. Friend also made an important point, which accorded with what he said about having good working relationships with colleagues in different bodies

representing the same area. One point of conflict is likely to be the way in which constituency correspondence is handled. Some hon. Members are smiling. I am aware that this has already given rise to one or two flashpoints, and it is another matter on which we shall need to work, but guidance has already been issued to Departments.

The general expectation is that constituency correspondence on non-devolved matters should be routed through a Westminster Member of Parliament, and that letters about devolved matters should be dealt with through a Member of the devolved legislature. If a Member of the devolved legislature writes to a United Kingdom Minister about a non-devolved matter, a substantive reply will, I think, be sent. I do not think that there is any belief that a substantive reply will have to be sent, but the advice in the letter from Ministers suggests that in future the constituent who has raised an issue relating to a reserved matter ought to raise it through a Westminster Member of Parliament. That will require a good deal of give and take. There will be difficulties, but if we are determined to make the process work it is incumbent on us all to do our best.

Mr. Wigley: It is clearly incumbent on us to do our best, but I think it unfair to expect constituents to know exactly where the demarcation lies. That applies particularly in Wales, where the legislative function may lie in Westminster while the Executive and secondary legislative function may lie in Cardiff. That must be a matter of give and take between members.

Mr. Tipping: That is a strong point. It must be recognised that, while we struggle with the issues here, constituents may have greater problems in resolving them. I have always believed that we are not the fount of all wisdom: occasionally we get things wrong, and a good deal of common sense exists among the electorate. I agree that we shall have to work at it, and that there will have to be a good deal of give and take.

Mr. Nicholas Winterton (Macclesfield): If a United Kingdom Department received a letter from, say, a Member of the Scottish Parliament about a reserved matter, would there be any objection to a substantive reply being sent to the MSP, but a copy being sent automatically to the Member of the United Kingdom Parliament representing the area in which the MSP had his or her constituency?

Mr. Tipping: There might be a good deal of sense in that, but I feel that we must respect confidentiality. Although in principle I would like to support that idea, I think that it involves clear issues of confidentiality and respect. I hope that, as we all become more accustomed to the procedures, we shall make further progress.

Dr. Godman: I do not think that we have publicised sufficiently the responsibilities of MSPs and MPs in Scotland. Constituents, especially elderly constituents, may be confused. I am currently dealing with a health case involving a constituent, who has told me that she has no desire to consult the local MSP. There are four MSPs in my area, so it is a complicated matter, and I think that better publicity would help constituents to knock on the right door.

Mr. Tipping: One answer might be to consult the guidance note that will shortly be placed in the Library. It will set out as clearly as possible the division between reserved and devolved matters under devolution legislation. I know that many of my colleagues use the Library research papers as a way of informing members of the general public. I accept, however, that much work remains to be done.

The right hon. Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir G. Young) asked for a definition of official duties and official interests, and I should like to be able to give him a clear example. Let me attempt to explain how I think the system will work.

It seems to me that if Ministers of the Crown are taking an interest in various items and are going around the country making statements and speeches and, in a sense, trying to influence policy-making, Back Benchers will notice that. I feel that such Ministers would be showing an "official interest". Again, this is a grey area, but technically they should not be going beyond their ministerial responsibilities. If they are unwise enough to speak out of turn and take an official interest in matters that are not technically their preserve in terms of a reserved-devolved list, I do not think that it would be unreasonable for Back-Bench Members to use their wits, and the resources of the Table Office, to question them. As I have said, however, it is a grey area, and one to which I am sure we shall return.

That brings me back to where I started, and to where the Procedure Committee left off. These are difficult issues. As I said at the outset, this is not the first occasion on which we have discussed devolution, and I am sure that it will not be the last. Many Members on both sides of the House have anxieties. They appreciate and can identify the conflicts. We need to be honest with each other and to admit that there are difficulties and conflicts. However, we have decided on the current route and we should all use our best endeavours to make the system work.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That, subject always to the discretion of the Chair, and in addition to the established rules of order on the form and content of questions, questions may not be tabled on matters for which responsibility has been devolved by legislation to the Scottish Parliament or the National Assembly for Wales unless the question:

(a) seeks information which the UK Government is empowered to require of the devolved executive, or

(b) relates to matters which:

(i) are included in legislative proposals introduced or to be introduced in the UK Parliament,

(ii) are concerned with the operation of a concordat or other instrument of liaison between the UK Government and the devolved executive, or

(iii) UK Government ministers have taken an official interest in, or

(c) presses for action by UK ministers in areas in which they retain administrative powers.

Select Committees (Devolution)

Motion made, and Question proposed,

That Standing Order No. 151 (Statutory Instruments (Joint Committee)) be amended as follows:

In line 22, to leave out the words "and not required to be laid before or to be subject to proceedings in this House only" and insert the words "and not within paragraph (10) of this order"

In line 23, at the end, to insert the words "any statutory instrument made by a member of the Scottish Executive or by the National Assembly for Wales unless it is required to be laid before Parliament or either House of Parliament and not including"—[*Mr. Tipping.*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): With this it will be convenient to consider the following:

That Standing Order No. 152 (Select committees related to government departments) be amended as follows:

In item 12 of the table, to leave out the words in column 2 and insert the words "Scotland Office (including (i) relations with the Scottish Parliament and (ii) administration and expenditure of the offices of the Advocate General for Scotland (but excluding individual cases and advice given within government by the Advocate General))"; and

In item 16 of the table, in column 2, after "Welsh Office" add the words "(Office of the Secretary of State for Wales (including relations with the National Assembly for Wales))"

8.10 pm

Mr. Nicholas Winterton (Macclesfield): I agree with the motion as far as it goes. I put down one marker: the Procedure Committee felt that the role of the Scottish, Welsh and, I hope, in due course, Northern Ireland territorial Select Committees should go further than the current Standing Order, or even the amendment to the Standing Order. It appears to the Procedure Committee that the work of the territorial Committees for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland will be unnecessarily limited if they cannot go further in inquiring into matters that will have a major UK impact on Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

The Secretary of State for Scotland, who I am delighted to see in his place, at one stage had responsibility for transport. One can imagine matters relating to transport having a major impact on Scotland. Therefore, the Select Committee on Scottish Affairs might want to take evidence from the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions. It was the Procedure Committee's view that, if we were to have excellent co-operation between the devolved areas of the UK and the UK Parliament, the territorial Select Committees, which we recommended should remain, should no longer fall under the current Standing Order, but be able to take a broader perspective.

The hon. Member for Greenock and Inverclyde (Dr. Godman)—I am glad that I have got the constituency right; it is an important constituency in Scotland—raised a matter relating to agriculture. Clearly, in that instance, it would be important for the Scottish Affairs Committee to be able to take evidence from the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food. I have already referred to transport.

I put that down as a marker. Last week, both the Secretary of State for Scotland and the Leader of the House talked about flexibility and leaving doors open for future discussion and amendment. I hope that the Government and the House will change the Standing Orders to enable the territorial Select Committees on Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland to adopt a broader perspective to ensure that the interests of all parts of the UK are properly taken into account.

8.14 pm

Dr. Norman A. Godman (Greenock and Inverclyde): Some months ago, during the passage of the Scotland Bill through this place, I questioned the advisability of retaining the Select Committees on Northern Ireland, Wales and Scotland and, indeed, the Grand Committees, once the two Assemblies and the Scottish Parliament were up and running and had developed institutions and procedures of their own, but I acknowledge the good sense of what the hon. Member for Macclesfield (Mr. Winterton) has said. If the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food comes back to the House from the annual negotiations in Brussels concerning total allowable catches and quotas, it might be useful for him or her to be questioned on behalf of Scottish fishing communities by the Select Committee.

I am doing a headstand, but I believe that, in the long run, the Committees should go. We should devise other means of cross-examining Ministers and of carrying out our work on behalf of our constituents—I am talking about Scotland, of course.

The recommendation in paragraph 21 of the Procedure Committee report has been honourably adopted by the Government. The recommendation is that

"such Committees liaise with colleagues in the Scottish Parliament or the Welsh Assembly".

The motion says:

"In item 12 of the table, to leave out the words in column 2 and insert the words 'Scotland Office'"—

I am pleased that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Scotland is here—

"'(including (i) relations with the Scottish Parliament'".

Let us look at what is being deleted in terms of the examination of the Scottish Office, the administration of and expenditure by the Advocate General's Department and the policy functions that are discharged by the Advocate General.

Perhaps in the short run the policy makes sense, especially in light of what I said earlier about the need for Scots Members of the UK Parliament to liaise and to develop relations with Members of the Scottish Parliament. It appears that the Select Committee on Scottish Affairs will act as some kind of liaison committee with Committees in the Scottish Parliament. I wonder—the Minister will have to write to me, of course—whether discussions have taken place with the Executive in the Scottish Parliament concerning a similar Committee being set up in that Parliament to negotiate with the Scottish Affairs Committee in its role as a liaison committee.

I remind the Minister that several Committees in the Scottish Parliament are concerned with the functions that are the responsibility of the First Minister and his Executive. Therefore, I should like to know whether there is a likelihood of a liaison committee being set up in the Assemblies, particularly the Scottish Parliament, so that the relevant two Committees can get together to deal with matters that appear to be reserved, yet are devolved in some respects.

I am sorry to come back to the fishing industry, but it is an important matter. In relation to Brussels, it will be dealt with by a concordat, presumably. I am glad to accept that, but it seems that issues may be raised within both the Scottish Parliament and UK Parliament, involving the Secretary of State for Scotland in the latter case, of course, where we need to liaise closely with our colleagues in Edinburgh.

I should like to know what discussions have taken place with the body in Edinburgh concerning the important matter of maintaining good relations with the Scottish Parliament. It is not a bad idea for the Scottish Affairs Committee to perform that function in the short and medium term. That important aspect of the Select Committee's modus operandi might be overtaken in time with the setting up of a council of the isles, where matters of mutual interest will be debated by representatives of all the Assemblies and Parliaments. Until that comes along, despite my view of the Scottish Affairs Committee and Scottish Grand Committee, we will, as the Minister rightly said, inevitably have to review such matters, perhaps annually. Perhaps the Standing Order will have to be amended again in a year, when our Scottish Parliament will be a year older and, I suspect, our colleagues in that Parliament will—vis-à-vis the United Kingdom Parliament—be even more jealous of their powers.

I should like the Select Committees and the Grand Committees to go eventually, but think that, in these very early days of what can only be described as a form of asymmetrical devolution, the Procedure Committee and the Government have acted very sensibly in their proposals. There are bound to be difficulties, conflicts and tensions, and to say otherwise would only be to act the daft laddie. I know from my discussions with the convener of the Edinburgh Parliament's Local Government Committee that there are differences of view on those issues. However, I believe that the Scottish Affairs Committee, playing the type of role that I have described, could enable both Parliaments to avoid, reduce or eliminate some of the tensions and conflicts that are inevitable in the early days of devolution.

Some months ago, I said in the House that there will be not only intended, but unintended consequences of such remarkable constitutional change. In the short run, the Scottish Affairs Committee will have an important role to play in dealing with Members of the Scottish Parliament.

8.22 pm

Mr. Martyn Jones (Clwyd, South): I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Greenock and Inverclyde (Dr. Godman) in his statement that the Select Committees should continue in the short and medium terms. However, in the long term, I should like there to be a change in the Select Committees, as we should have members of the National Assembly for Wales and of the Scottish Parliament on a Joint Committee. I think that that would probably be a better way forward.

Last week, we debated in full the Procedure Committee's report. I agree absolutely with the hon. Member for Macclesfield (Mr. Winterton) that that report was an extremely good one. He has also said, and I agree with him, that the motion that we are now debating is good in so far as it goes. However, I think that there are some problems with the motion, which I shall illustrate with an example—although not the one that I used in last week's debate, as that was perhaps not good enough.

Currently, the Select Committee on Welsh Affairs, which I am delighted to chair, is considering the matter of structural funds. Although the matter of structural funds in Wales is dealt with by the Assembly, public expenditure cover and match funding will have to come either from the Welsh block or from central Government funding. I shall not go any further into that example, as I am sure that I would be ruled out of order if I did.

The problem with the Standing Order is that it will not compel the Secretary of State—or, in the case of structural funds, the Chancellor of the Exchequer—to appear before the Select Committee, although it is necessary for the Committee to be able to interrogate various Departments on specific policy matters. Conversely, the Secretary of State for Wales—whom the Committee will be able to continue to call before us—does not have any role in policy making, in either devolved or non-devolved matters.

The Select Committee will be examining cross-border issues, such as structural funds. If we cannot invite a Secretary of State to appear before us—and have a reasonable expectation that he or she will do so—to discuss policy on non-devolved issues, we shall be operating at a disadvantage. I do not think that the Government want Select Committees to work at such a disadvantage, because I believe that Ministers want Select Committees to work and to make devolved government work in Wales and Scotland.

I accept that the Standing Order amendments will almost certainly be passed today. I do not object to the amendments, but think that they are good so far as they go. However, I should like a statement from the Minister, if he would be so kind, that Ministers and departmental representatives will be expected to appear before the Welsh Select Committee and—provided that the Committee makes a case—to give their views on policy issues concerning legislation on England and Wales that exclusively affects Wales. I shall be grateful if the Minister will deal with that matter.

8.25 pm

The Parliamentary Secretary, Privy Council Office (Mr. Paddy Tipping): Hon. Members have made supportive remarks on the roles and responsibilities of Select Committees and, to a lesser extent, of Grand Committees. Hon. Members seem to recognise that—in the short and middle term, although one or two hon. Members think not in the long term—there will be a continuing role for those bodies. The Government clearly believe that, at this stage, the Committees provide flexibility and serve as vehicles enabling us to deal with a changing situation.

My hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd, South (Mr. Jones), who is Chairman of the Select Committee on Welsh Affairs, spoke about an issue that his Committee is currently considering—a review of structural funds—and a desire to have the Chancellor of the Exchequer give evidence. I should say that this is not a new debate. The hon. Member for Macclesfield (Mr. Winterton) and some other hon. Members will know that there has long been a real dialogue between Departments and Select Committees seeking to get Ministers before them, to answer questions and to be grilled on their ministerial responsibilities. Clearly, with both the Select Committee on Scottish Affairs and the Select Committee on Welsh

[Mr. Paddy Tipping]

Affairs, the relevant Secretary of State will be the key point of contact, and the strong voice of Scotland and of Wales in both the Cabinet and the Westminster Parliament. It will be important for Ministers to give evidence to those Committees.

Over the years, however, there has never been a compulsory mechanism, forcing Ministers to appear before Select Committees. Over the years, various schemes have been intended to ensure that Ministers do give evidence. My expectation, however, is that things will not change overly. Nevertheless, as my hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd, South said, if a real and a strong case can be made, quite properly, there will be an expectation that Ministers should respond and give evidence.

My hon. Friend is right to say that the order does not introduce that. All that I am at pains to say to him is that there is nothing new in his argument. We have talked about this being a two-way process that needs good will and adult politics. Ministers would be well advised to heed requests for their attendance. My hon. Friend need have no doubt that the report of this debate will be on the desk of my right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary. I hope that it helps his case in the short term.

The hon. Member for Macclesfield also talked about the need for a wider discussion. It is important that the relevant Secretary of State should be the touchstone and key point of contact with the Select Committees, but Select Committees and Grand Committees will also want to see other Ministers. The hon. Gentleman mentioned transport. I come from a rural area. I should like an opportunity to press Treasury Ministers on the fuel escalator, as would some of my constituents. Those in the rural parts of Scotland might want the Select Committee to press a case with a Treasury Minister on transport policy and the fuel escalator. A similar case could be made on excise duty on Scottish whisky. The Secretary of State is an important point of contact, but the matter is the responsibility of the Treasury and a strong case could be made. There would be an anticipation that Ministers should respond.

Mr. Nicholas Winterton: I am grateful to the Minister for the guidance that he is giving to members of the Government in all Departments, albeit the touchstones will be the Secretaries of State for Wales and for Scotland. I hope that they will use their good offices to ensure that if the territorial Select Committees want to tackle Ministers from other Departments of the United Kingdom Parliament, the process will be facilitated and encouraged.

Mr. Tipping: Despite what occasionally appears quite erroneously in the newspapers, my right hon. Friends the Secretaries of State for Scotland and for Wales want the process to work. They know that they cannot achieve that by themselves. They will use their considerable power and influence to ensure that other ministerial colleagues take part in the process.

In a sense, that is what my hon. Friend the Member for Greenock and Inverclyde (Dr. Godman) was asking. He has undergone a conversion on Select Committees and Grand Committees. He now believes that they can be helpful in the short term. He has also been helpful in saying that the Scottish Affairs Committee could be a liaison device with the new Parliament. He asked me what discussions had taken place with the new Executive and the new Parliament about formalising that role. I will have to write to him about that. The new Parliament in Scotland is still in its infancy and coming to terms with its roles. It will be some time before we can achieve that. My hon. Friend asked for flexibility and a good working relationship. The model that he is putting forward is worth further exploration.

Dr. Godman: It is not so much a question of conversion as one of pragmatism. I said that the Select Committee had an important role to play in the short run. I want the development of the Council of the Isles, which will tackle matters of mutual concern and interest. That body might take on some of the duties and responsibilities of the Select Committees.

Mr. Tipping: The Council of the Isles is a new body in its infancy. If my hon. Friend wants me to look in my crystal ball and tell him the weather forecast, I think that the council will grow in influence and importance. We have to gauge the pace of change and work towards a goal.

My hon. Friend asked whether it would be possible to amend the orders in the future. The spirit of the debate has been to accept that these are new and difficult areas. We shall not be renewing the orders annually, but, as night follows day, it will be necessary at times to change the Standing Orders. If it is in the interests of making progress and making the process work, there will be no hesitation, and efforts will be made to find the time to ensure that that happens.

With that, I hope that the House will approve the order.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Standing Order No. 151 (Statutory Instruments (Joint Committee)) be amended as follows:

In line 22, to leave out the words "and not required to be laid before or to be subject to proceedings in this House only" and insert the words "and not within paragraph (10) of this order"

In line 23, at the end, to insert the words "any statutory instrument made by a member of the Scottish Executive or by the National Assembly for Wales unless it is required to be laid before Parliament or either House of Parliament and not including".

Ordered,

That Standing Order No. 152 (Select committees related to government departments) be amended as follows:

In item 12 of the table, to leave out the words in column 2 and insert the words "Scotland Office (including (i) relations with the Scottish Parliament and (ii) administration and expenditure of the offices of the Advocate General for Scotland (but excluding individual cases and advice given within government by the Advocate General))"; and

In item 16 of the table, in column 2, after "Welsh Office" add the words "(Office of the Secretary of State for Wales (including relations with the National Assembly for Wales))".—*[Mr. Tipping.]*

ADVOCATE GENERAL FOR SCOTLAND

Ordered,

That Standing Order No. 87 (Attendance of law officers and ministers in standing committees) be amended as follows:

In line 1, to leave out the words "the Lord Advocate, Mr. Solicitor General and Mr. Solicitor General for Scotland" and insert "the Advocate General and Mr. Solicitor General".

Ordered,

That Standing Order No. 149 (Committee on Standards and Privileges) be amended as follows:

In line 58, to leave out the words "the Lord Advocate, Mr. Solicitor General and Mr. Solicitor General for Scotland" and insert "the Advocate General and Mr. Solicitor General".—*[Mr. Tipping.]*

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

Ordered,

That, at the sitting on Tuesday 26th October, paragraph (2) of Standing Order No. 31 (Questions on amendments) shall apply to proceedings on the Motion in the name of Mr. William Hague as if that day were one of the Opposition Days allotted under paragraph (2) of Standing Order No. 14 (Arrangement of public business).—*[Mr. Kevin Hughes.]*

Armed Forces (Children's Education)

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Kevin Hughes.]*

8.35 pm

Mr. Bob Russell (Colchester): I welcome the Under-Secretary of State for Education and Employment, the hon. Member for Redditch (Jacqui Smith) to her first appearance at the Dispatch Box since her appointment in the summer. I am delighted that her debut is in a debate on the subject of state education for children of armed forces personnel—an issue which, while it is of considerable importance, is not party politically contentious.

This country owes a great deal to those who serve in our armed forces. Sadly, as a nation, we are short-changing the children of our soldiers, sailors and airmen and airwomen who attend schools with a large number of the offspring of service personnel. There are around 85,000 of school age.

Although this debate—quite rightly—will receive a response from an Education Minister, I must stress that the matters that I raise have an important bearing also on the interests of those serving in our armed forces. Therefore, I hope that what is said tonight will be drawn to the attention of Defence Ministers.

Representing a garrison town, I see the consequences of a numerically under-strength Army having to deal with an increasing number of commitments. The overstretch, including back-to-back tours of duty in various parts of the world—keeping the peace in Bosnia and Kosovo are the two obvious ones at present, but there are others, both past and on-going—that this causes, coupled with the need for regular training and other duties, means that many of our soldiers are absent from their families for months on end.

In many respects, their children are brought up for long periods as if they were from one-parent families. At such times, virtually every pupil in a school can come from a home with only one parent living there—a proportion considerably greater than would be found in just about every other school around the country.

Retention of skilled and professional military personnel is an increasing worry for our armed forces. Large numbers of people are leaving the services because of family unhappiness caused by the overstretch commitments. Education concerns about their children can be a contributory factor for a service man or woman in deciding to leave the armed forces. If joined-up government is a concept that operates in practice, the Department for Education and Employment—wearing both its hats—must consider defence matters when it comes to the education and well-being of service personnel.

The situation is not, of course, a new one, although it has taken on greater significance in recent years. However, perhaps it is only now that it has come to national prominence. I am delighted to announce that, next month, the National Association of State Schools for Service Children—formed earlier this year at a meeting in Colchester which I had the privilege to attend—will be holding a conference in London.

I am advised that Education Ministers have declined to attend the conference. I regret that, and I hope that, after tonight's debate, that decision will be reconsidered.

[Mr. Bob Russell]

The importance of the conference—entitled "A Fairer Deal for Forces Families"—warrants official ministerial recognition. The venue is within walking distance of this House. I am assured that it is on a safe route.

In welcoming the formation of the NASSSC, I wish to pay tribute to the pioneers—those schools in Colchester with a strong Army involvement who, in 1992, formed the Colchester Association of State Schools for Service Children. The schools involved are Kingsford infant and junior; St. Teresa's primary; St Michael's primary; Alderman Blaxill secondary; the splendidly named Montgomery infant and junior; and, from elsewhere in East Anglia, Wimbish and Debden primary schools.

The numbers of children from service families attending those schools range from almost one in five pupils at St. Teresa's Catholic school to 95 per cent. at St. Michael's.

Mr. Keith Simpson (Mid-Norfolk): I concur with everything that the hon. Gentleman has said. In my constituency, Coltishall Airfield first school, which was built as a middle school, has 100 per cent. service children, and we are campaigning on their behalf to turn it back into a middle school, because many service personnel and their children are being disadvantaged.

Mr. Russell: That story is repeated in locations throughout the United Kingdom where there is a major military presence. St. Michael's school was on 99 per cent., but two non-military families moved in and knocked the figure down to 95 per cent.

Word of the Colchester association gradually spread to schools in other parts of the United Kingdom catering for children of service personnel and, in March, nearly 40 heads came to Colchester to form a national association and to discuss "issues of turbulence", which I am advised is the official description of the special problems with which such schools have to contend.

Essex local education authority acknowledges the unique requirements of schools with large numbers of children from Army families and does what it can to make additional provision from its tight budget. It has always been supportive of the particular needs of schools with service children and has provided the local association with a link officer; but not all LEAs follow that good example.

I invite the Minister to regard special additional funding for the turbulence factor in such schools as a national issue, not to be determined at the whim of individual LEAs. In fairness, they are already under considerable pressure when allocating resources for all the competing demands that are made on them.

The cost of defending the realm is met centrally. I suggest that the same principle should apply to the special education funding needed at schools that admit as pupils children of military personnel, simply because the geographic locations of military establishments that serve the whole nation are not governed by LEA boundaries.

Head teachers from the national association are deeply concerned about the extreme turbulence experienced by the schools and their pupils, as well as about target setting and benchmarking. A further concern is the time of year when regiments and other units move to new bases in the United Kingdom or go overseas; and there is also the question of those returning to the UK. We are talking not about one family moving because a parent gets a new job, as happens from time to time in all schools, but about perhaps half the school population leaving in mid-term, to be replaced the next week by an equally large number of new pupils. That presents human and logistical problems with which no other kind of school has to contend.

At Colchester garrison, infantry regiments traditionally move after a posting of between two and four years. Next year, as a result of the recent formation of 16 Air Assault Brigade, two battalions of the Parachute Regiment will move from Aldershot to Colchester to replace the Royal Gloucestershire, Berkshire and Wiltshire Regiment and 1st Battalion, Royal Scots. The massive pupil movements associated with the departure and arrival of the soldiers are set to take place in and around the period when the youngsters face their standard assessment tests and GCSEs.

One of the Colchester heads, Mr. Graham Eskell of Montgomery junior school, in a letter to the Secretary of State for Education and Employment on 23 September, said:

"This kind of disruption to children's education is dreadfully disruptive for schools and makes a complete mockery of the investment of time, energy and money that has been expended in the previous months. The impact upon the children themselves promises to be potentially traumatic. While you are making every effort to prevent parents taking their children out of school during the SATs weeks the kind of disruption outlined above bears at least equal scrutiny.

I would wish to stress that we have had tremendous support from our Army colleagues locally, and while local Military personnel are very well aware of the impact of movement at such an important time on children and families there would appear to be a significant lack of awareness at the very highest levels where strategic planning is taking place. The most sensible option as far as we are concerned would be that large strategic movements should only take place during the summer months once all the Key school examinations have been completed."

May I invite the Department for Education and Employment to pursue that suggestion with the Ministry of Defence?

I am sure that the Minister will concede that target setting is almost impossible for schools with large numbers of children from the armed forces. I am sure also that she will agree that heads of schools with a large turnover of pupils—where incoming pupils will replace pupils two or three times before a class of four-year-olds comes of secondary school age elsewhere in the UK or overseas—cannot produce viable targets as there are no national benchmark figures to enable them to make comparisons.

That was confirmed earlier this year when *The Times Educational Supplement* quoted a senior official of the Department for Education and Employment as saying:

"It's difficult where you have got very high turbulence. How can you use benchmark data when you have service children who don't have free school meals? And how can you use teacher forecasts when two years' ahead it's going to be almost a different class? We accept it is almost impossible."

Assuming that the Minister agrees with those observations, will she also accept the findings of a survey conducted by the NASSSC, which stated that turbulence figures that show the percentage turnover of pupils each year should be used for benchmarking schools rather than free school meals? No allowance is made for pupil mobility when compiling these statistics. Why not?

An Oxfordshire primary school, for example, noted how its low level of free school meals put it in the upper reaches of the benchmarking tables. However, 60 per cent. of the pupils taking key stage 2 tests had not been there for key stage 1. There can be no argument that children's progress often slows after changing schools, and children of service personnel experience several changes.

A report in March to councillors in the royal borough of Windsor and Maidenhead stated that the children of soldiers were suffering through having their education disrupted by the uncertainty of Army life. It was said that some children were displaying problems caused by the frequent moves as their fathers were given new postings. The high turnover of pupils at one school meant that there were only four children in year 4 who had been there since the reception class. The report stated:

"Some of the children display emotional and behavioural problems caused by changing school and home so often."

Head teacher Mrs. Valerie Clark of St. Michael's primary school, Colchester, where there are only nine pupils out of about 200 youngsters whose mother or father is not serving in the Army, tells me:

"Our teachers work very hard and we do not want them to feel demoralised by inappropriate benchmarking or the setting of targets which may be unattainable if a cohort changes dramatically.

The Association totally supports the Government's initiatives to raise standards and to improve the quality of education for our pupils, but the present system does not fully recognise the special characteristics of schools which can have very mobile populations in them."

Target setting for a cohort is problematic when a significant percentage of each year group changes annually. With records from other schools often being variable, to put it mildly, making teacher assessments and predictions is difficult at best and useless at worst. The Government's White Paper, entitled "Excellence in Schools", makes no mention of pupil mobility, yet many of the policies pose particular problems for the high-mobility schools which children of service personnel attend.

Dr. Janet Dobson of the migration research unit at the department of geography, University college London, is undertaking a research project on pupil mobility which is funded by the Nuffield Foundation and the Department of Education and Employment. The Department therefore knows the situation, but what is being done urgently to address the need to give a fairer deal for forces' families?

Writing in *The Times Educational Supplement* in February this year about the response from heads to her call for information on how pupil mobility affects performance, Dr. Dobson said:

"Schools close to Armed Forces' bases were described as having distinctive mobility characteristics in that large numbers of children could join or leave together at a particular time at the behest of a single employer and did so recurrently. In addition, individual families came and went for promotion or other reasons."

Dr. Dobson also observed:

"Schools with large numbers of children from forces' families expressed a particular concern about benchmarking as it currently operates. Not only did they have to cope with high levels of mobility and other aspects of family disruption associated with service life but their low level of free school meals meant that their performance was compared with schools that they perceived as being more stable and affluent than their own."

Analysis by Dr. Dobson of the responses from head teachers revealed that comparative performances of mobile and non-mobile pupils at different key stages showed that, in virtually all cases, the average performance of mobile pupils—the description given to children of service personnel—was below that of the non-mobile, often substantially so. Dr. Dobson went on to say:

"Data from individual schools showed clearly how good performance by children who had been taught in the same school from the beginning could be hidden in aggregate school achievement figures which included many recent arrivals."

The Minister will be aware that, with few exceptions, pupils who move from school to school do less well than their more settled classmates. During their years of education, children of service personnel generally attend several schools. That factor needs to be recognised and acted upon by the Government, with additional national resources being made available to help the children of those who defend our country's interests at home and abroad.

I repeat my earlier question: what are the Government doing to help to improve the education of the children of our service personnel? It is almost a year since a previous Minister with responsibility for schools told the House that insufficient priority had been given to the effects on schools of high pupil mobility and that Dr. Dobson's research project would provide the basis of any policy changes needed to take account of pupil turnover. What has happened to implement the spirit of what was promised? Issuing policy guidelines is insufficient. Schools that educate the children of our service personnel need additional help now.

The children of our soldiers, sailors, airmen and women deserve the best. At the moment, they are not being treated fairly. The nature of military life means that provision of education for children of service personnel will always have challenges and problems that are markedly different from those faced by children from settled backgrounds. The Government have a duty to do what they can to make life fairer and better for children from service families. Words are not enough: action is needed, and without delay.

8.52 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education and Employment (Jacqui Smith): I thank the hon. Member for Colchester (Mr. Russell) for his kind words on my first appearance at the Dispatch Box. I also congratulate him on obtaining this important debate, and assure him that my Department is working closely with the Ministry of Defence on the issue.

The sons and daughters of service personnel are educated in three different settings: overseas, in UK independent schools and in UK state schools. I shall start with the first of those settings because it is important in the context of the education of service children.

Many children of service personnel are educated abroad at schools run by Service Children's Education, or the SCE, an executive agency of the Ministry of Defence. It is run largely along the lines of an English local education authority and operates in accordance with sound UK practice, including the delivery of the same national curriculum that applies in England and Wales. Its schools are supported by child guidance and careers guidance services. There are some 50 SCE schools in areas of the world where the British forces have significant numbers of personnel, such as Germany, Cyprus, Belize and the Falkland Islands.

[Jacqui Smith]

It is a measure of the success of SCE schools that their examination and assessment results would place them among the leading education authorities in the UK. Reports by the Office for Standards in Education, which provides an independent inspection service for the schools, have been consistently good over a number of years. The work of the schools is backed by SCE's own inspection advisory service, which provides extensive and varied training facilities to ensure that staff in schools are conversant with developments in the United Kingdom. It is worth noting that the SCE is also matching the Government's ambitious plans for the expansion of nursery education in the UK.

There will be occasions when service personnel are posted to locations where there are no SCE schools. In those situations, children can attend the UK boarding schools—either maintained or independent—that are on the Ministry of Defence's admissible schools list.

I understand that the hon. Member for Colchester is largely concerned with those children of service personnel based in the UK who are usually educated near where their mothers or fathers are based. As the hon. Gentleman pointed out, because of the nature of their parents' jobs these children may often have to change schools, sometimes at short notice. Our aim, and that of the Ministry of Defence, is to ensure that those children suffer as little disruption to their education as possible.

I deal now with the particular concerns that the hon. Gentleman expressed. I am very much aware of the effects that the movement of Army personnel into and out of his constituency will have on service children and on state schools. Clearly, that problem also affects other hon. Members' constituents.

There are about 185,000 service children in UK state schools. The movement of armed forces families can therefore have an impact on certain parts of the school system. The Government, together with those local education authorities with high concentrations of service children, have taken steps to minimise that impact.

I take this opportunity to welcome the establishment of the National Association of State Schools for Service Children. Although Ministers will not attend the association's conference, officials from my Department will be there and will listen carefully to the concerns expressed and recommendations made. In addition, I can assure the House that Ministers are adopting a joined-up approach to the range of issues affecting service families, including education. We are doing so through the joint ministerial services families task force, of which I am a member. I have already attended a meeting of that task force, and understand that one of its early concerns in connection with education had to do with admissions. The Government recognise the particular needs of service children in that regard, and we have made significant progress.

In March, my Department published its code of practice on school admissions. The paragraph entitled "Children of UK Service Personnel and other Crown Servants" states:

"These families are subject to frequent movement within the UK and from abroad, often at relatively short notice. LEAs and School Admission Authorities in those areas with a significant standing presence of Service Personnel should ensure that the needs of Service children are taken into account, by considering inviting the Service Children's Education authority to the Admissions Forum."

Similarly, the section headed "Admission Appeals" states:

"Any parent (except, temporarily, the parent of a child who has been permanently excluded from two schools and where at least one of the exclusions took place since 1 September 1997) who is refused a school place for which they have applied, has the right to appeal to an independent appeal panel. This right applies equally to parents returning from working abroad or subject to frequent movements within the UK, such as Service personnel and other Crown Servants."

The chief executive of the SCE wrote to the 12 local education authorities with the largest concentrations of service personnel in August this year to determine their progress in setting up admissions forums and in including the SCE's representatives as members.

Mr. Russell: The Department has recognised that 12 local education authorities have a particular interest in the education of children of service personnel. Does that mean that it will provide additional national resources for those 12 LEAs, as they have problems over and above those of other authorities?

Jacqui Smith: I was about to say that the chief executive has written in similar terms to a further eight LEAs, so it is not right to say that we can easily identify the LEAs. My Department's priority has been to encourage partnership between the SCE and the LEAs concerned. I shall touch on local funding later in my speech.

It may be helpful if I outline the background to current troop movements. Army personnel move in one of two ways—within formed units or as individuals. More than two thirds of moves are by individuals. Moves can take place at any time of year and must, of course, be subject to operational needs which, for a fighting force, must take priority. Having said that, the Army has in recent years attempted to concentrate such movements in school holidays, specifically the summer holidays. Service families want their children to complete whole years of schooling, and the Army is doing its best to meet that aspiration as far as is possible.

Certain units in the Army—the front-line units—move as formed units because that is how they fight. Those units, and their families, are based in a range of locations in the United Kingdom and abroad. Some of those locations are arduous, and units can be posted to them for only limited periods. The Army calls the process of rotating front-line units through locations the arms plot. Two factors drive the arms plot: the maximum amount of time that units can remain in an arduous environment, and the times of the year when they can be replaced. Most arms plot moves, like individual moves, take place in the summer holidays, again because the Army wants to reduce the impact of these moves on service children.

Two parachute battalions are being relocated from their long-established base at Aldershot to Colchester—the hon. Gentleman's constituency—as part of the strategic defence review. The Parachute Regiment will leave its home in Aldershot, where it has been since the second world war. Once in Colchester, it will form part of 16 Air Assault Brigade. However, space must be created to allow it to move to Colchester, which is why the Royal Gloucestershire, Berkshire and Wiltshire Regiment will move out in April 2000, followed shortly next summer by the First Battalion, the Royal Scots.

I hope that the hon. Gentleman can appreciate that important operational reasons have dictated the timing of moves out of his constituency, which is why they are

taking place during the period of children's standard assessment tests. I assure him that we recognise the concern that that has caused, and that such moves are exceptional. Furthermore, where a parent is moved at that time, his or her spouse and children can remain in the accommodation for up to three months to enable SATs to be completed. For exams such as GCSE and A-levels, the period can be even longer. That displays the importance that the Ministry of Defence places on service children's education.

My Department and LEAs recognise the turbulence that such changes can create, which is why LEAs—I am pleased to say that Essex is included—provide extra resources for the schools affected. That may partly explain why, according to research about to be published by Janet Dobson on the effects of pupil mobility, which is partly funded by my Department, the levels of achievement of children in schools with large numbers of service children seem to compare favourably with children in other schools where there is unusually high mobility.

The research looked at only a sample of service children's schools, but it found that a high proportion of such children do better than other children with high mobility. That is testimony to the hard work of schools, and the involvement of service parents, in overcoming the difficulties of high mobility in order to help to achieve our aim of raising standards in all schools. I assure the hon. Member for Colchester that we intend to use the results of the research on mobility to help to guide future policies.

In relation to target setting, I want to mention briefly our proposals for raising school performance. The Government strongly believe that setting specific, measurable targets at least once a year for pupil performance is a powerful lever for raising standards in our schools. That view was supported in the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority consultation on target setting. Target setting should support school improvement and should not become a burdensome administrative procedure. Targets have to be set each autumn term. They must relate to those pupils who will take the national curriculum tests, GCSE examinations or equivalent towards the end of the following school year—that is, five terms later. Schools may want to augment those targets with others of their own choosing, to reflect their particular priorities. That may be especially important for state schools with high numbers of service children.

In addition, schools should discuss indicative targets for future years as part of their dialogue with LEAs within the education development plan process. We expect LEAs to take account of circumstances such as the mobility of children of service personnel when setting those targets. The introduction of performance targets in schools is sufficiently flexible to take account of individual circumstances.

To return to the hon. Gentleman's concerns about benchmarking, the effect of pupil mobility is also considered by Ofsted. In January 2000, we shall for the first time be collecting detailed information on pupils that will enable us to track the progress and the schools of individual pupils. We expect that that information about pupil mobility will thereafter be available to inspectors and will be included in the PANDA, or performance and assessment information, and PICSI, the pre-inspection context and school indicator, reports that are issued to schools by Ofsted.

I assure the hon. Gentleman that Ofsted's revised framework for inspection, to be published later this year, will require inspectors to collect data on pupil mobility when considering their inspections, and to comment on that where appropriate.

In conclusion, schools, LEAs and Ofsted can all take into account the needs and difficulties that may face service children in state schools. We accept the commitment mentioned by the hon. Gentleman on the importance of ensuring that, as with all our children, education for the children of those people in our services is of as high a quality as possible. I am sure that he shares our commitment to the standards agenda—to raise standards for all children, including those from service families.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at nine minutes past Nine o'clock.

House of Commons

Tuesday 26 October 1999

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

PRIVATE BUSINESS

CITY OF LONDON (WARD ELECTIONS) BILL *(By Order)*

Order for further consideration, as amended, read.

To be considered on Tuesday 2 November.

Oral Answers to Questions

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

The Secretary of State was asked—

Urban Road Congestion

1. **Helen Jackson** (Sheffield, Hillsborough): What plans he has to tackle road congestion in urban areas. [94209]

The Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. John Prescott): The integrated transport White Paper, "A New Deal for Transport", set out a new approach to meeting local transport needs. In that document, we promised, and will deliver, extra money and new powers for local authorities to tackle congestion in their areas.

Helen Jackson: I thank my right hon. Friend for that reply. Does he agree that the key factor in reducing urban congestion is giving priority to good quality public transport? Is he prepared to take tough action where necessary if councils go wishy-washy on their commitment to public transport when faced with the tough decisions that are necessary to put that priority into action?

Mr. Prescott: The House will recall that Sheffield provided an excellent example of an integrated public transport system, but it was broken up by the previous Administration's commitment to privatisation and deregulation. Our local transport plans—we have now received 80 from local authorities and will be making decisions by December—are very much geared to reducing congestion in our cities and improving public transport. That will have to be agreed with the local authorities for them to receive the £700 million that we have put aside for those plans.

The House will be aware also that the supertram in Sheffield, which ran into difficulties under privatisation and deregulation, was rescued by renegotiation by this Administration and placed in an integrated policy. Use of the supertram has increased by 3 million passengers in two years, and that is a good example of integration in a transport system.

Mr. Don Foster (Bath): Given the importance that the Secretary of State places on public transport to reduce traffic congestion, does he accept that improving public transport requires increased investment? Is he aware that the Library has only today prepared for me new figures showing that, after five years of a Labour Government, to the end of the comprehensive spending review period, total spending on local and public transport is set to fall by 7.5 per cent. in real terms? How will that help to improve public transport?

Mr. Prescott: The hon. Gentleman makes the mistake of not taking into account the private investment that we are negotiating. Investment, whether public or private, will improve the underground or the channel tunnel rail link. He asked about investment: £7 billion is going into our underground in the public-private partnership and £6 billion is going into the channel tunnel link. That has to be added in to get the total figure, and he should revisit his figures.

Mr. Hilary Benn (Leeds, Central): Given that Leeds is one of the two cities that will be trialling road-pricing technology, can my right hon. Friend give my constituents an assurance that there will be significant investment in public transport in the city, in particular in the proposed Leeds supertram, before a decision is taken about the introduction of road pricing?

Mr. Prescott: My hon. Friend is aware that we consider Leeds to be setting a good example in integrating transport. We have given some extra resources and are considering the extra demands in the local transport plans, but those decisions cannot be made until December.

Mrs. Virginia Bottomley (South-West Surrey): The only way to tackle the increasingly serious urban congestion in my constituency is to authorise the A3 Hindhead improvement. Can the right hon. Gentleman help me? Although there are so many Transport Ministers, why have we been unable, in 30 months, to secure a visit from a single one of them to see that spot? It is the only single carriageway stretch between the home of Transport Ministers in Scotland and the very popular port of Portsmouth. Does he have a policy prohibiting visits to Conservative constituencies or can he help us to find a date on which a Minister will come to see that stretch of road?

Mr. Prescott: The important question is why the previous Administration did not meet the right hon. Lady's demands for the road programme. We have stated our road programme and invested in the core route network, and the regional road structure is being determined with the local and regional authorities.

Mr. Geraint Davies (Croydon, Central): Does my right hon. Friend agree that proposals to reduce the cost of car travel, increase speed limits, get rid of traffic calming and allow continuous left-hand turning at traffic lights in cities would not reduce congestion, but cause chaos on the roads and death?

Mr. Prescott: Yes. The House has debated the Opposition's proposals on those matters. We believe that we have a much more sensible proposal—the integrated policy identified in the transport White Paper.

Mr. John Redwood (Wokingham): I welcome and congratulate the new Ministers, and it is a great privilege to have the Minister for Housing and Planning with us—so recently returned from his serious campaign for the London mayoralty and sparing time from the lost cause of helping the right hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras (Mr. Dobson).

Does the Secretary of State realise that he has created standstill Britain? Does he recognise that it was a great Labour lie to say that public transport would be better under Labour? Will he now take up our ideas for a commonsense revolution in transport—something that people outside this House desperately want—so that main roads can be unclogged to reduce danger to children and others prone to accidents? Will he substitute for his disintegrating transport policy our practical proposals for better train and bus services, a Londoners' tube and getting Britain on the move again?

Mr. Prescott: It is a bit much for the right hon. Gentleman to suggest that we somehow moved from a perfect situation to a standstill. We inherited massive costs and congestion in all our transport systems. The previous Government invested £70 billion in the roads programme while undermining public transport, and that simply increased the number of cars per mile from 70 to 100 after 18 years of Tory Government. On any assessment, there needs to be a change in policy. Rural transport investment has now increased, with 1,800 new services. The number of passengers has increased by between 30 and 50 per cent., with more people travelling on the trains and other forms of public transport. That is the first indication in the past two years that we have a better system and that people are beginning to use their cars less and public transport more.

Ms Rosie Winterton (Doncaster, Central): I am sure that, in drawing up measures to tackle road congestion, my right hon. Friend will also look at a strategy to tackle parking problems in urban areas. In doing so, will he take into account the concern that has been expressed about the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency supplying private wheel clamping companies with the names and addresses of drivers from photographs of registration numbers? Will he assure me that until those companies, some of which adopt dubious tactics, are properly regulated, the DVLA will not continue with such practices?

Mr. Prescott: I am concerned about that; I shall have it investigated immediately and write to my hon. Friend about it.

Railtrack (Oxford)

2. **Dr. Evan Harris** (Oxford, West and Abingdon): What representations he has received about permitted development rights for Railtrack in Oxford; and if he will make a statement. [94210]

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Mr. Nick Raynsford): We have received representations from more than 300 people concerning Railtrack's permitted development rights in Oxford. The Secretary of State has considered all the representations carefully and informed the parties of his decision not to approve the direction to remove Railtrack's permitted development rights at Hinksey sidings in Oxford.

Dr. Harris: Does the Minister understand how shocked my constituents in South Hinksey and residents of south Oxford are that he should give the go-ahead for Railtrack to continue with that virtual quarry in green-belt land outside Oxford? In the week after health and safety responsibilities were removed from Railtrack—belatedly but rightly—how can he justify giving Railtrack a blank cheque to use permitted development rights to despoil green-belt areas? Is it not time that permitted development rights inherited from British Rail in the public sector were removed from privatised industries, which are making vast profits at the expense of spending on environmental schemes?

Mr. Raynsford: I am surprised that the hon. Gentleman expresses surprise about the decision, because he knows that we consulted at considerable length. We gave several opportunities for further representations and explored the many legal complexities. He knows that Oxfordshire county council's case that this was a "virtual quarry" did not have legal force. It is because the article 4 direction could not be effective—we had clear legal guidance on that—that we did not approve it. There is no point in approving something that would be ineffective—only Liberal Democrats suggest that.

Coastal Towns (Regeneration)

3. **Mr. Bob Blizzard** (Waveney): What support he plans to give to the regeneration of coastal towns. [94211]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Ms Beverley Hughes): We are working with the relevant national, regional and local bodies to identify and address the problems faced by coastal towns. Today, I placed in the Libraries of the House a list of the areas that include coastal towns that received funding under the fifth round of the single regeneration budget, and a list of coastal towns that are included on the proposed European structural funds map. As my hon. Friend knows, it was this Government who included coastal towns for the first time as a specific priority in SRB round 5.

Mr. Blizzard: I thank my hon. Friend for that reply and congratulate her on her appointment to the Front Bench.

People in my constituency are delighted that, this summer, the Government awarded the coastal town of Lowestoft assisted area status and European objective 2

designation. We are already in receipt of single regeneration budget money, and this new status will give a huge boost to the regeneration projects. Has my hon. Friend noticed that almost all the 20 travel-to-work areas with the highest unemployment in England are coastal towns? In view of that, would she consider including in the forthcoming urban White Paper a special section on coastal towns, so that the problems faced by those communities can be addressed by an overarching Government policy?

Ms Hughes: I thank my hon. Friend for his remarks. I pay tribute to him for what he has done to raise awareness of the needs of coastal towns. The urban and rural White Papers will mark an important step in our commitment to dealing with issues that affect competitiveness and quality of life in towns, cities and rural areas. In developing both those White Papers, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State wants to ensure that different areas have a place in those wider strategies. We recognise that coastal towns have specific needs, which will be addressed in the White Papers.

Mr. Nigel Waterson (Eastbourne): I join the hon. Member for Waveney (Mr. Blizzard) in welcoming the Minister to her new position. Does she appreciate that, in many coastal towns, considerable investment in coastal defences is required to enable realistic regeneration? Will she join me in expressing sympathy for the victims of the flooding in the past few days, especially in Sussex? Will she give a clear commitment to providing the funding needed by the Environment Agency and others to upgrade and update coastal defences along our coasts?

Ms Hughes: I am pleased to acknowledge the important work of local authorities in response to the flooding, and I am sure that they will make every effort to meet the needs of their local communities. The hon. Gentleman will know that an element in the standard spending assessment takes care of coastal defences. However, I am well aware of the problems that those communities are facing, and they may want to talk to us about larger measures needed in response.

In their strategies, regional development agencies and regional bodies will consider the overall need to strengthen defences. It is worth noting that the Tories have set their face against that important regional mechanism for identifying priorities.

Local Authority Housing

4. **Mr. Colin Burgon** (Elmet): What plans he has for increasing the involvement of tenants in the management of local authority housing. [94213]

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Mr. Nick Raynsford): We are increasing the opportunities for local authority tenants to be involved in the management of their homes by introducing tenant participation compacts in all councils from April next year. We are also broadening our programme of grants to promote and develop greater participation.

Mr. Burgon: I thank the Minister for that reply. He will be aware that the Government are considering Leeds city council's bid for a public-private partnership housing pathfinder scheme, which covers Swarcliffe in my constituency. The involvement of tenants and residents in the drawing up of the community plan has been central, and Whinmoor councillors and I remain committed to further extending local people's involvement as that is crucial to the regeneration of the area. Will the Minister take my remarks as discreet lobbying on this matter on behalf of my Swarcliffe constituents?

Mr. Raynsford: I am well aware of my hon. Friend's involvement in the preparation of the proposed Leeds private finance initiative pathfinder scheme. He has been diligent in talking to his constituents and ensuring that there is effective communication between them and the city council, so that there will be full participation in the development of the proposals. He must accept, however, that we have to give further consideration to these and other proposals.

Mr. Tony Baldry (Banbury): A legitimate concern for tenants in housing management is the length of the housing waiting list and how long it takes tenants and others to be rehoused. Given the Government's complete failure to control economic migrants, it now seems that such migrants will be dispersed around the country. According to an answer given to me yesterday by the Home Office, such dispersal may be compulsory. Will those economic migrants be described as statutorily homeless under the homelessness legislation? What will their status be in relation to those on the housing waiting list and local authority tenants?

Mr. Raynsford: I think that the hon. Gentleman is referring to asylum seekers. He will know that the Government have taken steps to try to define proper procedures for dealing humanely and properly with asylum applications, rather than continuing with the chaos that we inherited. He will also know that we inherited a situation in which housing provision had been slashed during the last years of the Conservative Government, leading to a substantial shortfall in the number of homes available for letting. He will know that such a position takes time to put right. We are increasing investment and implementing a range of measures to improve housing prospects, but the damage caused by 18 years of Tory Government is very serious.

Mr. David Lepper (Brighton, Pavilion): Will my hon. Friend acknowledge the importance of the potential role of housing co-operatives in the management of current local authority housing stock, and in the provision of good, well-managed social housing generally? What discussions is he having with the Housing Corporation on the possible easing of both the administrative and the financial regulations to allow better development of housing co-operatives?

Mr. Raynsford: I entirely endorse my hon. Friend's views on the importance of tenant participation measures, including housing co-operatives. During the past fortnight, I have engaged in discussions with representatives of both the National Housing Federation and the Housing Corporation about how we can extend opportunities for such participation. I visited a particularly impressive tenant co-operative scheme in Birmingham, which was delivering very high standards of housing management and great

tenant satisfaction. There is no doubt that allowing tenants more opportunities to exercise effective control over their homes is one of the keys to better housing management, and we are keen to promote it.

New London Road, Chelmsford

5. **Mr. Simon Burns** (West Chelmsford): How much money his Department is making available to install a bus lane on the New London road in Chelmsford as part of the integrated transport policy. [R] [94215]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. Keith Hill): The Chelmsford transport package was accepted for the first time, and by this Government, in 1999–2000, with an allocation of £575,000. It is for Essex county council to decide which scheme to carry out, but positive measures to improve bus services are at the core of the package.

Mr. Burns: I congratulate the Minister on his appointment. The people of Old Moulsham in Chelmsford, however, will not thank him for his Government's largesse in introducing a scheme such as that proposed by the local authority.

Is the Minister aware that there has, in effect, been a referendum on the matter? In a by-election last month, the Conservatives captured that part of Chelmsford, fighting the by-election on the basis of opposition to the scheme. Given that the opposition is not to encouraging more people to use public transport, but is based on a belief that, in that part of Chelmsford, the scheme will not bring a single person into the public transport system, would it not be common sense for the Government to look again at value for money, and consider whether it is worth spending hundreds of thousands of pounds on a scheme that will not in any way enhance use of public transport?

Mr. Hill: I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman's congratulations, and I hear what he says about the proposed New London road bus scheme. It is clear, however, that both his own town of Chelmsford and Essex county council have identified improved bus services as the best solution to the problem of the town's rapid growth. My Department is simply responding to local judgment. If he still has problems with the proposal, it is for him to exercise his well-known powers of persuasion with the local transport authorities.

Regional Bodies

6. **Mr. Andrew Robathan** (Blaby): What estimate he has made of the annual costs of *(a)* the regional development agencies and *(b)* English regional assemblies. [94216]

The Minister for Local Government and the Regions (Ms Hilary Armstrong): Regional development agencies have more than £800 million to spend each year, which includes £62 million for administration. The costs of the voluntary regional chambers—some of which call themselves regional assemblies—are a matter for their members, but we would expect the costs of their role in relation to the RDAs to be modest.

Mr. Robathan: During the past seven and a half years, not one constituent has expressed any support for the idea of RDAs or regional assemblies. I should be interested to hear whether people flock to the Minister's door to tell her what a good idea they are.

Will the Minister confirm that 85 per cent. of the budgets to which she referred had already been allocated to projects before the agencies came into being? Will she also confirm that more than £1 million is spent on paying unelected politicians to do a job on those bodies taking up two days a month, and that a great deal of the remaining 15 per cent. of the money is spent on trying to create artificial and manufactured support for bodies for which there is no genuine support?

Ms Armstrong: This morning, the RDAs presented their regional strategies. Those strategies have been consulted on very widely. Indeed, I am confident that residents in the hon. Gentleman's constituency have been involved in the consultations. Business people have been, too. It may have missed his notice that the chairs of the RDAs are all from the business world and will resent being called amateur politicians by him. He says that there is no support for RDAs. I remind him that they were in our manifesto and that we got rather a lot of support for that manifesto.

Mrs. Anne Campbell (Cambridge): Will my right hon. Friend look at the funding that is available to the East of England development agency? Will she at the same time try to ensure a fairer allocation of funding than that bequeathed to the east of England by the previous Government?

Ms Armstrong: As I said, today we received regional strategies from the RDAs. They will identify the way forward in each region to achieve economic prosperity. That will mean that they are able both to increase the opportunities of people in the region and to contribute to the nation's prosperity.

I know that the eastern region has spent much time and effort consulting widely and that it will be responsible, with other RDAs, for administering SRB 5; we are consulting with them on the future of SRB 6. I hear what my hon. Friend says about funding for her region. All hon. Members consistently press the case for their regions, but it seems that that has gone by those on the Opposition Front Bench.

Trunk Road Network

7. **Mr. Nicholas Winterton** (Macclesfield): If he will make a statement on progress made in improving the trunk road network. [94217]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. Keith Hill): The Government inherited a trunk road system that was in the worst condition of maintenance since records

first began. That is why we have made maintenance our first priority and provided the Highways Agency with the resources that are necessary to maintain its roads properly.

We have increased the funding that is available for measures to make better use of existing roads. In place of the unachievable wish list of road schemes that we inherited from the previous Government, we have established a clear timetable for taking forward the targeted programme of improvements, so that all 37 schemes will start within the next seven years. The net result will be a safer trunk road network.

Mr. Winterton: The Minister will know that his Government have slimmed down the road programme from 140 to 37, but that is not the point that I want to register with him. Does he accept that the opening in the relatively near future of the second runway at Manchester international airport and the holding of the Commonwealth games in Manchester in 2002 will generate a massive increase in traffic from all areas, particularly the south and east of Greater Manchester?

Does the Minister therefore accept that the Poynton bypass and Manchester airport link roads are essential to the infrastructure of that important part of the north-west and of Cheshire, and that he must ensure that, when the current study is undertaken, the views that will, I believe, be expressed in support of the roads will be supported and money will be made available? Public transport is not going to be the answer. The Manchester airport link roads will make available—

Madam Speaker: Order.

Mr. Winterton: A line for the Metrolink—

Madam Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman is Chairman of the Procedure Committee. He should come to order when I ask him to do so.

Mr. Hill: The hon. Gentleman has again demonstrated his passionate advocacy on behalf of his constituency, and I certainly understand his concern in the matter. However, when the Government considered as part of the roads review the A555 eastern link road and the A523 Poynton bypass—to which he alluded—we found that the schemes were not sufficiently advanced to be included in the targeted improvements programme. Nevertheless, both schemes will form part of the south-east Manchester multi-modal study, and I hope that he will be somewhat reassured to learn that invitations to tender for the study have now been sent out. It is envisaged that consultants will be appointed shortly, and the study will be completed in spring 2001, at which point we shall give it full consideration.

Mr. Christopher Leslie (Shipley): I do not know why Opposition Members are wittering on about the roads programme, because my constituents are delighted that, after 30 years of failure, the A650 Bingley relief road has, at last, been given the go ahead. Will the Minister consider some advanced work schemes, so that we might complete and open the Bingley relief road as soon as possible?

Mr. Hill: My hon. Friend, too, is always a passionate advocate of his constituency; it has already enjoyed considerable success on that matter, on which I congratulate him. The Government shall, of course, consider a raft of road improvements—that is part of the local transport planning process—and we shall certainly eventually examine the Bingley proposals.

Mr. John M. Taylor (Solihull): What about the Birmingham northern relief road?

Madam Speaker: That was a very good question.

Mr. Hill: It is on its way.

Madam Speaker: And that was a very good answer.

Air Traffic Control

8. **Mr. Gordon Prentice** (Pendle): What steps he is taking to ensure that air traffic control can cope with the forecast increase in flights into and from the United Kingdom. [94218]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. Chris Mullin): The Government are committed to providing the United Kingdom with a safe, modern and efficient air traffic control system for the future. Through our innovative public-private partnership proposals, the Government will introduce a strategic partner to National Air Traffic Services to secure essential core capital investment, which will be about £1 billion in the next 10 years and will be used to maintain existing safety and efficiency levels against predicted traffic increases.

Mr. Prentice: I warmly welcome my hon. Friend to the Dispatch Box; he is an inspired choice. However, he will know that in 1997, the Department forecast that, between now and 2015, aeroplane traffic in and out of the United Kingdom will grow by 4.5 per cent. annually. Given such a momentous increase in air traffic, is it not dicing with death to privatise air traffic control? Have not air traffic controllers repudiated privatisation, as has the airline industry? So far as I can gather, Labour party members also have repudiated privatisation—or did we get it wrong in 1996, when we told the Conservatives that our air was not for sale?

Mr. Mullin: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his kind remarks. I only hope that I continue to justify his confidence. He was quite right to say that there will be a large increase in air traffic, making it all the more essential that we raise the £1 billion necessary to invest in state of the art technology. His fears about safety are completely unfounded. We are not proposing to put safety in the private sector: safety will remain with the public sector. The one thing that we shall do—it will enhance safety, rather than undermine it—is to separate regulation from operations, as that is not the case now.

Miss Anne McIntosh (Vale of York): May I add my congratulations to the Minister on his new position? I also congratulate the Government on their plans to proceed with the public-private partnership for NATS. Following his holding reply to my question last week, when might the Minister be minded to reply to the Select Committee on the Environment, Transport and Regional

Affairs report on aviation safety? Does the Minister agree that the air safety framework that he has described to the House provides a model that could be followed by the railway sector?

Mr. Mullin: The reply to the Select Committee will be coming shortly.

Mr. George Stevenson (Stoke-on-Trent, South): May I too welcome my hon. Friend to his position? I recognise entirely the need for investment—there is no question about that—but will he recall the Select Committee's recommendations, which showed concern about the Government's proposals for NATS? The report suggested alternatives which would not only produce the required investment, but would follow proven track records from other parts of the world.

Mr. Mullin: We take what the Select Committee says extremely seriously, and that is why we adopted its proposals on separating safety regulation from operations. We have looked at the other models available, and we are satisfied that the public-private partnership as proposed is the best one. It will give access to the capital that we need, and access to some badly needed private sector project management skills. That is not a small consideration. Finally, it will generate some proceeds which can be invested in other transport projects.

Mr. Shaun Woodward (Witney): We too welcome the hon. Gentleman to his position, and we are delighted to be reminded by the hon. Member for Pendle (Mr. Prentice) that, before the election, the right hon. Member for Oxford, East (Mr. Smith) proudly declared that our air was not for sale. Although Labour told the country one thing before the election, once in power it does another thing, announcing in July this year that our air will indeed be for sale.

Now that the right hon. Member for Oxford, East is Chief Secretary to the Treasury, will the Government confirm today that it is still their intention to privatise National Air Traffic Services? Is it still the intention of the Labour Government that foreign interests and foreign Governments will be able to buy powerful stakes in Britain's airways, with the purchase of a minority of shares?

Mr. Mullin: No consideration has yet been given to the likely bidders, which will be considered carefully when the bids come in. We are not proposing privatisation of the sort that we saw under the Conservative Government, in which the main public assets were simply looted. We are proposing a genuine partnership that will give us the best of what the private and public sectors have to offer.

Mr. Michael Connarty (Falkirk, East): May I welcome my hon. Friend to the Front Bench? But those who have watched the world cup will realise when someone has been given a suicide pass, as seems to have been given to my hon. Friend with the air traffic control remit. He spoke earlier about private sector project management. Does he share the concern of some who have quizzed those in the private sector who are involved in designing the new system, as there seem to be problems in specifications from the private sector? Is there not concern that the second-line safety—that is, the Prestwick second control centre—now seems to be up for grabs, and may be written out of the system? Can we have an assurance that there will still be a two-centre control system for air traffic control, including Prestwick in Scotland?

Mr. Mullin: Yes, I can give my hon. Friend that assurance. There will be two centres, one of which will be at Prestwick.

London Underground

9. **Mr. John Wilkinson** (Ruislip-Northwood): When he expects Transport for London to assume responsibility for the underground. [94219]

The Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. John Prescott): Transport for London will be established in July 2000 under the control of the mayor. It will assume responsibility for the underground following implementation of the public-private partnership.

Mr. Wilkinson: Is not Labour keener on having a crony as its candidate for mayor than on implementing its manifesto promise to have Transport for London operational, including the London underground operating under a public-private partnership? The Government should admit that they have failed Londoners, who had an appalling summer of chaos. The taxpayer is having to pick up the tab to the tune of £500 million of unanticipated Treasury expenditure as a result of that catastrophic failure.

Mr. Prescott: I understand the hon. Gentleman's comments, as he failed in his bid to be the Tory candidate for mayor. The London transport system will be improved by our £7 billion investment, not in a public-private partnership in the sense that he refers to, but in a publicly owned, publicly accountable facility. The assets will be developed and improved by private capital, but they will all be returned to the public sector. For the first time, London's transport system will have desperately needed sustained planning and resource investment.

Mr. Mike Gapes (Ilford, South): Is my right hon. Friend aware that last week I was on a Central line train that was held up because somebody was taken ill on the train behind us? It was decided to hold up the trains in front to pace the rate at which they went through stations. Is it not absurd that people are held up in hot, sweltering, overcrowded conditions because of such incidents? Is it not time that we had democratic accountability for London transport and the underground system; and is it not good news that the Labour Government are bringing about such accountability by establishing a mayor and elected authority for London?

Mr. Prescott: I agree with my hon. Friend. The Government are returning London transport and accountability to Londoners after consultation and a referendum, even though the Tories took accountability off Londoners with no consultation.

Mr. John Randall (Uxbridge): Will the Deputy Prime Minister join me in pressing for the Central line to be

extended as far as Uxbridge? That could be done at relatively little cost and would be a great benefit to many in west London—not to mention the hon. Member for Ilford, South (Mr. Gapes).

Mr. Prescott: I well understand the hon. Gentleman's point, but it is a lot easier said than done. That was one of the first projects that I looked at when I came to office. I was advised against investing in it and concentrated instead on the main project of finding £7 billion to re-equip our London underground system.

Mr. John Cryer (Hornchurch): Does my right hon. Friend still intend to hand over responsibility for the sub-surface tube lines to Railtrack? If so, why?

Mr. Prescott: We have made it clear that Railtrack can make a bid for the sub-surface lines so that we can achieve the integration that we want. We have to wait until the spring to see whether we can reach an agreement, but the intention is to integrate the national rail service with the underground. That integration is part of the manifesto that my hon. Friend and I fought on. We intend to implement that policy.

Drivers (Drug Tests)

11. **Mrs. Ann Winterton** (Congleton): If he will make a statement on drug-testing for drivers. [94221]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. Chris Mullin): It is already an offence to drive while unfit through medicinal or illicit drugs, but the problem for the police is to recognise that a driver is drug-impaired. We are working with the police and the Home Office on the development of techniques and screening devices so that the law can be enforced effectively.

Mrs. Winterton: The Minister will be aware of the growing number of fatal accidents blamed on drivers who have taken a cocktail of hard drugs. Does he believe that the police should be given the same powers to tackle drug driving as they have to deal with drink driving? Does he further believe that it is a matter of urgency that a drugsalyser test should be developed to act as a deterrent for those who might be tempted to drive while under the influence of drugs?

Mr. Mullin: The hon. Lady makes an important point. There has been a large increase in the number of fatalities caused by people who have taken illicit—or in some cases medicinal—drugs. The problem is that we have to develop the technology to enable the misuse of drugs to be detected. The technology thus far is not sufficiently reliable. Work is under way and we are hopeful that the technology will be better in the fairly near future. We shall not shrink from legislating at that point, but we must develop the technology first.

Dr. Brian Iddon (Bolton, South-East): This is a difficult area, is it not? For example, will we prosecute drivers taking prescription drugs that affect the central nervous system? Bearing in mind the fact that cannabis can be detected in the body for up to 30 days after someone has smoked a spliff, will the charge against a person who has smoked only one spliff be possession, or driving under the influence?

Mr. Mullin: My hon. Friend is more conversant with the terminology than I am, but he is right, in that there are one or two other serious difficulties as well as the problems with the technology. The offence will have to be driving while impaired through drugs, and we shall have to be able to demonstrate that before a court of law. There are a couple of complex issues; one is the technology, and my hon. Friend has mentioned the other—but we are on the case.

Rail Freight

12. **Dr. Doug Naysmith** (Bristol, North-West): What recent discussions he has had with Railtrack on the movement of freight by rail. [94222]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. Keith Hill): Following the tragic accident at Ladbroke Grove, my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister and my noble Friend the Minister for Transport have had several discussions with Railtrack, and in this context have also met the freight operators EWS and Freightliner. Previously, on 14 September, the Minister for Transport had a meeting with the chief executive of Railtrack, at which rail freight was briefly discussed.

Dr. Naysmith: I, too, welcome my hon. Friend to the Front Bench—a much merited promotion—and thank him for the information that he has given. Does he agree that, given the increase in rail traffic, especially rail freight, railway land should be retained for railway development? What are the Government doing to promote that idea?

Mr. Hill: I am overwhelmed by the accolade bestowed on me by my hon. Friend, and I entirely agree with the thrust of his remarks. That is why our new draft PPG13, published on 18 October, draws particular attention to the need to protect sites and routes that could be critical in developing infrastructure, so as to widen choices both for passengers and those who dispatch freight. It is also why we have required the shadow Strategic Rail Authority, in managing the British Rail property portfolio, to give priority to transport users.

Mr. Nick Hawkins (Surrey Heath): I add my congratulations to the Minister on his well deserved elevation to the Front Bench. Will he carefully consider the security aspects of the misuse of freight facilities elsewhere in Europe? He may be aware that when the all-party rail freight group, led by Lord Berkeley, visited freight facilities in northern Italy, members of the group from all parties were shocked at the lack of security. He will certainly know that there is grave concern about the misuse of—welcome—freight facilities for the purpose of illegal immigration. Will he carefully consider the report produced by his noble Friend on the rail freight group visit?

Mr. Hill: The hon. Gentleman has raised an important issue, and I undertake not only to make my own inquiries into the matter, but to write to him with full details of our arrangements in connection with it.

Gillian Merron (Lincoln): May I advise the Minister that plans to increase the amount of rail freight travelling through Lincoln's already busy high street is causing considerable concern about how that can best be managed under existing arrangements, because new arrangements need to be made? Can he assist my constituents by looking into a practical solution, so that a useful way forward can be found?

Mr. Hill: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising an issue extremely pertinent to her constituency, but heretofore unfamiliar to me. The question she asks is important in the light of the Government's clear commitment to, and outstanding record of, developing rail freight facilities. Opposition Members have been very friendly to me so far, so I do not want to create too much hurt and pain on the Opposition Benches, but I must point out that in 1995-96, under the previous Administration, the total spend on rail freight facilities and rail freight grants was £4 million. In the past two years, under the Labour Government, it has been £29 million and we expect it to increase. Indeed, in recent weeks, the two largest ever rail freight facility grants have been given out by this Government.

Mr. Alasdair Morgan (Galloway and Upper Nithsdale): Would the Minister agree that in some areas it is lack of track capacity that is the single biggest factor inhibiting the growth of rail freight, such as on the Nith valley line which takes coal from the Ayrshire coalfield to the English power stations? What pressure will he apply to Railtrack to invest in such facilities?

Mr. Hill: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising that point and he is right. That is why we have made the development of a rail freight strategy a major priority for the Strategic Rail Authority.

Dr. Alan Whitehead (Southampton, Test): Would my hon. Friend agree that the success of the Government's proposals for freight and for increased passenger use of the railways may lead to a problem in the medium term in allocating freight slots, especially near my constituency between Southampton north and south, and on the east and west lines from London to the west country? Can he give me an assurance that he is actively encouraging Railtrack to develop new rail facilities for freight, including track and new junctions?

Mr. Hill: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising that issue and drawing our attention specifically to the situation in his locality. He is right. In the past two years, we have seen a 14 per cent. growth in freight tonne/kilometres on our railways, which is a terrific success. However, success does bring its problems and it will be a major responsibility of the Strategic Rail Authority to examine the issues of track capacity and rail freight facilities for the future.

Mr. Bernard Jenkin (North Essex): I join those who have welcomed the Minister to the Front Bench. Does he agree that the problem of increasing freight and passengers on the railways is one of capacity and the need to manage safety? I welcome the decision that the Government made in the summer approving the installation as quickly as possible of the train protection warning system, and the outcome of yesterday's safety summit. However, given that collisions such as the one at Southall would not be prevented by the TPWS, what did the Government do when they were first notified about the 25 per cent. increase in serious signals-passed-at-danger incidents in August, which was a dramatic deterioration in safety on the railway by any standards?

Mr. Hill: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his congratulations. He raises an important issue, but the answer is that the Government had instituted an inquiry into the increase in signals passed at danger—or SPADs—12 months before the Ladbroke Grove disaster. It is on the basis of the findings of that report that the Government are now engaged in urgent action to address the issue of rail safety.

Private Rentals

13. **Mr. Graham Stringer** (Manchester, Blackley): What plans he has to improve the workings of the private rental sector of the housing market. [94223]

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Mr. Nick Raynsford): We have a number of initiatives already in hand. We are committed to mandatory licensing of houses in multiple occupation. We are reviewing fitness standards and piloting a voluntary rent deposit dispute resolution scheme. In addition, we support the national approved letting scheme for letting agents. We will set out our full conclusions on the future of the private rented sector in our forthcoming housing Green Paper.

Mr. Stringer: I thank my hon. Friend for that answer, but is he aware that in my constituency and many other northern cities the market in houses on terraced streets built before the first world war is in disarray? Disreputable private landlords are bringing in anti-social, sometimes criminal, tenants on the back of housing benefit and driving decent people out. That has led to whole rows of terraced houses standing empty. Does he agree that one of the answers to that problem is to regulate private landlords?

Mr. Raynsford: I agree that there is a problem in several cities with abandonment of properties; it has been possible for certain elements to buy cheaply properties that are then unscrupulously exploited, as are the tenants who occupy them. That is why the Government commissioned a specific report from policy action team 7 to look into the social exclusion agenda and problems of unpopular housing. That report, which we warmly welcomed a few weeks ago, set out a number of interesting conclusions about action that can be taken.

I do not believe that a registration scheme for all private sector housing would necessarily achieve my hon. Friend's objectives. Manchester, which is his council, tried to introduce an accreditation scheme for rented housing, but it did not prove entirely successful. There are serious problems in securing the adherence of landlords to letting and, indeed, in identifying all the landlords in existence,

which make it difficult for bureaucratic schemes of that nature to achieve their purpose. It is right to focus on properties with the highest risk, and we see HMOs as being in that category, which is why we are proceeding with our licensing scheme for multi-occupied houses.

Sir Sydney Chapman (Chipping Barnet): Would the Minister confirm that in the past 10 years the number of households renting from private landlords has increased by perhaps 25 per cent.—an increase from roughly 1.75 million to well over 2 million? Does he agree that that has come about by relaxing regulations that control private landlords where that could be done sensibly? The one thing that would reverse that trend would be the imposition of excessive and unnecessary regulation now.

Mr. Raynsford: I agree that we do not want unnecessary and excessive regulation. There should be controls to deal with properties that are in the worst condition, where people's lives are put at risk by unscrupulous landlords. That is why we are licensing multi-occupied houses. We also want to encourage reputable landlords to come into the market—we have said so repeatedly and we will continue to do so. The overall pattern is one in which the private rented sector has stabilised. The number of lettings in the sector is not increasing and is below the 1979 level. We are however keen to see an improvement in the responsible side of the market, while we bear down on the more disreputable parts of it.

Ms Margaret Moran (Luton, South): As my hon. Friend will be aware, the housing benefit going to private sector landlords has tripled since 1989–90 while lettings have increased by only 11 per cent. in the same period. Given the amount of public sector investment going to private landlords, does he agree that it is essential that we get value for money by tackling the enormous amounts of disrepair in the sector, so that private tenants can enjoy decent quality accommodation in return for the housing benefit investment that the Government are giving private landlords?

Mr. Raynsford: I agree with my hon. Friend that tackling the problems of disrepair is important. That is why we are reviewing fitness standards, as I said. I also agree that we need to ensure value for money. That will be a fundamental issue to be tackled in our forthcoming housing Green Paper.

New Forest

14. **Mr. Desmond Swayne** (New Forest, West): If he will make a statement regarding his plans for national park status for the New Forest. [94224]

The Minister for the Environment (Mr. Michael Meacher): My right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister announced on 29 September that he has asked the Countryside Agency to consider designating the New Forest as a national park. The agency will work closely with my Department, local authorities, the members of the New Forest committee and a whole range of local and national interests in reviewing the options.

Mr. Swayne: The Minister will be aware that the Secretary of State's announcement was greeted with disappointment and dismay by the New Forest committee, the verderers, the commoners, the district council and the county councillors. Why did the Minister reject the clearly expressed preference of what was then the Countryside Commission, now the agency?

Mr. Meacher: My right hon. Friend's announcement has been widely welcomed, including by local interests. The former Countryside Commission recommended tailor-made legislation, that is true. There is a serious drawback, however, which is the lack of parliamentary time. Primary legislation would be required and there is a lack of early parliamentary time. The previous Government repeatedly promised to introduce legislation, but they never did; we are doing so and we believe that there is scope for a national park authority to do an excellent job for the New Forest, just as the park authorities are doing for many other parts of the country.

Mr. Damian Green (Ashford): It is clear, from the Minister's reply, that his assurance yesterday to the Countryside Alliance that he was in listening mode did not apply to people living near the New Forest. Will he confirm that he will need to repeal three Acts of Parliament before a national park can have full management powers? Will he say when those Acts will be repealed? Without that commitment, the House will think, rightly, that the announcement is merely another press release with no substance—another great Labour lie.

Mr. Meacher: There has been enormous discussion of this matter. It was discussed for many years under the previous Government, but the problem was that that they did not act. We are very conscious of the desire of the great majority of local interests for action on this issue. The powers of the Forestry Commission and the verderers will not be affected by the creation of a national park, and the primary New Forest legislation already in place will not be affected. However, because we are listening to what is being said, we have asked the Countryside Agency to examine how the views of the Forestry Commission, English Nature and the verderers can be reflected in national park structures, especially in terms of membership structures and the creation of committees.

We are listening and we shall continue to do so. There will not be a national park until this matter has been considered by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State. If objections are raised, it is for him to decide whether to call a public inquiry.

Points of Order

Mr. Tony Benn (Chesterfield): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. I rise to raise a point that I put to you privately. It concerns an article that appears in *The Guardian* today under the name of Michael White, from which I shall quote two extracts. It begins:

"MPs are canvassing for a new speaker of the Commons to succeed Betty Boothroyd amid frustration among ministers at her determination to resist what she sees as the government's encroachment on the rights of Parliament."

It goes on to state that

"it is widely understood that many ministers will be glad to see the back of their assertive . . . colleague, hoping to replace her with a more emollient opposition MP."

I am not concerned with the source of the leak. It is an assumption of Governments that all Ministers and their press officers speak with the authority of the Prime Minister. Nor am I concerned with your position, Madam Speaker, because you were elected unanimously by the House, and I know of no Speaker who has enjoyed so much support. However, I am concerned with the implication that the ability to appoint the Speaker of the House of Commons lies within the patronage of the Prime Minister, when in reality that power belongs to the House.

A sort of parallel might be drawn with the events of 4 January 1642, when Charles I tried to arrest the five Members. Today, the spin doctors in the Press Gallery are trying to remove the Speaker, but the same principle is at stake. It is very important that hon. Members should defend the House, because the legislature is not a quango of the Executive.

I very much hope, Madam Speaker, that you will use your discretion to find an opportunity to allow the role of the Executive vis-à-vis the House of Commons to be properly debated. I do not ask for a considered judgment now, but I feel very strongly that, unless it asserts itself, the House will virtually disappear as a factor in our political society.

Madam Speaker: I understand the right hon. Gentleman's concern for the House. However, he will know—probably rather better than I—that, when the time comes, the House asserts its independence in electing its Speaker. I have great faith that it will do that.

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): Further to that point of order, Madam Speaker. I recall the circumstances surrounding the election of your predecessor, Lord Weatherill. Is there not something to be said for the House of Commons having a Speaker whom the Prime Minister of the day does not want?

Madam Speaker: As Eric Morecambe used to say, "There's no answer to that."

Mr. Nicholas Winterton (Macclesfield): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. During Question Time, you rightly rebuked me mildly for not resuming my seat. May I apologise unreservedly, but also offer the explanation that my eyes were firmly focused on the Government Front Bench and the Minister and that my hearing was impaired by the noise from the Labour Benches? I am sorry that I did not resume my seat more quickly.

Madam Speaker: Questions are sometimes rather longer than I want them to be.

BILL PRESENTED

Organic Food and Farming Targets

Joan Ruddock, supported by Mr. Norman Baker, Mr. Colin Breed, Mr. Cynog Dafis, Mr. David Drew, Ms Julia Drown, Jane Griffiths, Mr. Martyn Jones, Mrs. Diana Organ, Mr. John Randall, Mr. Andrew Robathan and Mrs. Betty Williams, presented a Bill to make provision regarding the setting and achievement of targets for organic farming and food consumption; and for connected purposes: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time on 5 November 1999, and to be printed [Bill 153].

Civil Registration (Access to Records)

3.35 pm

Mr. Keith Darvill (Upminster): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to amend the law relating to access to registers of births, marriages and deaths; and for connected purposes.

The main purpose of the Bill is to provide improved public access to records of civil registration—those of births, marriages and deaths. The Bill will give clarity to sections of the Marriage Act 1949 and the Births and Deaths Registration Act 1953, which prevent information from being obtained unless certificates are purchased. The proposals, which have widespread support both in and outside the House, attempt to address defects in the arrangements as well as clarifying the law.

The 1949 and 1953 Acts do not prohibit access to records. They authorise the issue of certified copies of birth, marriage and death certificates. However, those seeking information may look only at the index of records. To receive the information that they require, they must pay the unnecessary and exorbitant sum of £6.50 for a certificate, which, in many cases, the researcher does not need. Many of those researching information about ancestors in order to prepare a family tree or family history find the fee for certificates and the inability to browse erect unnecessary and expensive barriers.

The Registrar-General of Births, Deaths and Marriages has long recognised that the present arrangements are unnecessarily restrictive. Demands by members of the public to remedy the difficulties are growing. Many hon. Members will have received representations from constituents who read *Family Tree Magazine*, or who are members of the Society of Genealogists or one of the many family history societies around the country.

My Bill will provide a right to browse records, reducing the frustration of genealogists and other researchers who can obtain information only through certified copies of entries, and must purchase them without knowing what information they contain. Nor can copies be returned for a refund if they are of no use. The main aim of the Bill is to eliminate the need for researchers to conduct a search through the speculative purchase of certificates and to replace it with a right to examine records so that they may select information of interest to them.

The proposal relates to older records. The Bill will contain a provision opening historic records—those of 75 years or older—to public view. The 1990 White Paper "Registration: Proposal for Change" specified that period, considering it to be a reasonable compromise. That period also gained the greatest measure of support—almost half—among those who responded to the consultation paper to the Green Paper that preceded that document.

For recent records, the existing system will remain. Members of the public may still obtain information through the purchase of copies of specified items. This important distinction between recent and historic records will be drawn because of concern that the right to look up events—especially births—in public indexes, and to purchase copies of the records, offers scope for certificates to be used too readily for the creation of false identities for purposes of personation and fraud.

Those who have campaigned for a change in the law recognise that a balance must be struck between facilitating worthwhile research into family histories—an interest that grows every year—and the need to reduce the possibility of abuse. With that balance in mind, it is right to provide access to information but alternative arrangements for the purchase of certificates of recent events, which provides an approach for the prevention of personation and fraud.

I recognise that the previous Government intended to remedy the defects in the system, but they never found the parliamentary time to fulfil their good intentions. I am also heartened that this Government intend to make change and modernise the arrangements. "Supporting Families", the consultation document published last year, proposed that there should be a review of the civil registration system in England and Wales. The then Economic Secretary acknowledged that the Victorian legislation on which the civil registration service is based places too many restrictions on the type and extent of service and hinders the use of modern technology to meet the needs of a changing society.

I understand that the aim of the review was to consider the existing operational framework of civil registration and to set out options for its future development, including access to registration records. The final phase of the review has been completed, with the publication on 8 September of a public consultation document "Registration: Modernising a Vital Service".

Chapter 4 of the consultation paper is devoted to improving service delivery through better access to records. It acknowledges that the present paper-based system cannot be sustained and suggests that technology holds the key to solving problems of storage, retention and retrieval of future records. I welcome the recognition that technology will play an important role in access, and that is why my Bill will provide for computer-based records to be retained and allow access to records by way of information communication technology.

I am pleased to have the opportunity today to move this motion under Standing Order 23 and I trust that the House is persuaded of the need for change in this area of the law, a change that will benefit a large number of people throughout England and Wales and many who live in other parts of the world whose ancestors were born and lived in this country.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill ordered to be brought in by Mr. Keith Darvill, Mrs. Eileen Gordon, Mr. David Drew, Mr. Clive Efford, Mr. Gareth R. Thomas, Mr. David Lidington and Mr. Bob Russell.

CIVIL REGISTRATION (ACCESS TO RECORDS)

Mr. Keith Darvill accordingly presented a Bill to amend the law relating to access to registers of births, marriages and deaths; and for connected purposes: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time on Friday 5 November, and to be printed [Bill 154].

Opposition Day

Home Office Issues

Madam Speaker: I have had to impose a 10-minute limit on speeches for Back Benchers throughout debates on the next two motions.

I have selected the amendment in the name of the Prime Minister.

3.42 pm

Miss Ann Widdecombe (Maidstone and The Weald): I beg to move,

That this House notes the Government's incompetent handling and mismanagement of Home Office issues in general; further notes that the number of police officers in England and Wales has fallen by more than 1,000 since the General Election; further notes that the Home Secretary's recent announcement on police recruits will mean another fall in the number of police officers in England and Wales; further notes the chaos caused by the Government in the Immigration and Nationality Directorate and the record numbers of asylum-seekers, many of them bogus, now arriving in the United Kingdom; further notes the recent revelations arising from the Mitrokhin Archive; and calls on the Government to increase police numbers, to improve the working of the Immigration and Nationality Directorate, to reduce the numbers of bogus asylum-seekers arriving in the United Kingdom and to ensure that those who betray the United Kingdom to foreign powers are pursued with the utmost vigour.

The motion in the name of the Opposition calls to the attention of the House and that of a wider audience the long series of mismanagements, incompetence, inaccurate statistics and general mess over which the Home Secretary has presided since he took office in 1997. I have been extremely kind to the right hon. Gentleman in selecting only a few of the things that have gone wrong on which to make comment. There may be more on a later day, but today I simply wish to address four issues. The first is police numbers.

The Home Secretary made a very interesting statement in his Labour party conference speech, which has since defended on the ground of technical accuracy. There is, of course, an enormous difference between technical accuracy and a picture that would be recognised by the outside world. When he had finished telling us that he was going to supply the money for "more" recruits, or an "additional" or an "extra"—whichever version one wants to take—5,000 police recruits, there was an assumption not only on the part of the press, media and public, but even the Police Federation, which after all understands these things, that that meant that he was pledging an extra 5,000 police officers.

I am sure that if those same bodies had decided that he was pledging 5,000 fewer police officers, the Home Secretary would have rushed to put them right. He would have rushed to say that they had got it all wrong, and that what he really meant was that there would be only 5,000 extra recruits. However, because they put a rather optimistic interpretation on what he said, he kept strangely silent—until today, when he gave an extremely fascinating explanation to the Select Committee on Home Affairs. It was not only fascinating to listen to, but to watch, because the Home Secretary set out to rival Houdini.

The right hon. Gentleman said that, after all, he had got it completely wrong, and that, when he talked about 11,000 police recruits, he really meant that police forces were planning to recruit not 11,000, but 15,000. Oddly enough, his representations to his own Treasury Ministers referred to 11,000—I do not know whether they will now ask for the money back, on the ground that they were misled. The Home Secretary and all independent bodies have said consistently that the recruiting plans actually meant 11,000 officers. Today, he said that that was all a mistake, and he blamed his officials for giving him the wrong information.

In the House, we cannot identify officials—but I am inclined to ask who they were. Were they, perhaps, the same officials who clean forgot to renew the provisions of the Prevention of Terrorism Acts? Were they the same officials who wrongly briefed the Home Secretary on his own Home Office figures when he gave a press conference on asylum? Were they the same officials who caused him, quite mistakenly, to give the Welsh Assembly powers over Welsh criminals? Were they the same officials who caused him to publish the names and addresses of witnesses in the Macpherson report? We do not know, but what we do know is that every time something goes wrong, this Home Secretary, who in his first speech to the House made a virtue of the fact that he would take responsibility for everything that happened in the Home Office, has, since then, quite consistently blamed his officials for every error that he has come up with.

However, for the sake of argument, let us accept that the figure of 15,000 is right. Will the Home Secretary now set out simply and clearly, and in terms that admit of no misinterpretation, whether his revised figures, given to the Select Committee today mean a net addition to the police force, in the lifetime of the Labour Government, of 5,000 officers? Do they, or do they not? Do they mean a net addition of 5,000 officers, even before 2003? I am being kind to him. Do they, or do they not? Do they even mean that, when the Government leave office, there will be more police officers than there are at present, or will there be extra or additional officers to those who are there at present? Alternatively, will the numbers be the same, or will they be fewer? Can the Home Secretary confirm that, according to the statement that he submitted to the Select Committee, the statisticians say that the new recruiting figures—on which he now relies to extricate himself from the hole that he dug for himself—

"can only be based on fairly crude projections"

and that they do not represent "sophisticated modelling".

The right hon. Gentleman looks puzzled, so I will help him. Will he confirm that that was part of the statement on figures that he submitted today? In case he wants to come up with some technical argument about whether that formed the statement or the appendix, will he just tell us whether those words are true—are they crude projections? If there are to be more police officers by the time the Government leave office, how many more will there be? Will he take May 1997 as his baseline of comparison?

A generous observer of today's Select Committee hearing would have concluded that the Home Secretary was mired in muddle, but a more cynical observer would have noted that he was becoming enmeshed in a web of deceit. We might also ask the Prime Minister whether he wishes to come to the House and correct his statement that the right hon. Gentleman had painted an accurate picture in referring to 5,000 extra officers. I think that it is time for a retraction and probably an apology.

Before I leave the issue of police numbers, I must raise an associated question that will impact on recruiting. The 22 October issue of "Public Finance" reveals the cost of the new radio system that the police are obliged to implement; they have no choice in the matter. In case the Home Secretary is suffering from any confusion, it is called the public safety radiocommunications project. The publication cites the total cost of that project as £1.5 billion. Is that figure accurate? If it is, how far does the Home Secretary think that the mere £50 million that he announced in his conference speech will go towards funding that project?

If the police have to implement the radiocommunications project and must find the funding shortfall between £1.5 billion and £50 million, can the Home Secretary seriously tell the House that recruitment will not suffer? Does he accept the comments made to me by a chief constable and an assistant chief constable that, in light of the requirement to implement the new system, recruitment must suffer?

Mr. Christopher Leslie (Shipley): On the subject of police expenditure, I am curious to know whether the right hon. Lady agrees with the shadow Chancellor, the right hon. Member for Horsham (Mr. Maude), who criticised the Government's spending plans for policing—and everything else—as "reckless". Does the right hon. Lady agree with that assessment?

Miss Widdecombe: We have said consistently—as has my right hon. Friend the Member for Horsham (Mr. Maude), the shadow Chancellor—that it is somewhat surprising that the Government should trumpet a 3 per cent. increase in police funding while demanding efficiency savings of 2 per cent., which means that some police forces are managing on a funding increase of less than 0.5 per cent.

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Jack Straw): We cannot have evasion on an issue that is absolutely central to the Opposition's credibility. Will the right hon. Lady now answer the question? The shadow Chancellor has criticised the Government's spending increases, including our £1.24 billion increase, as "reckless". Does the right hon. Lady share that view?

Miss Widdecombe: I will answer that question directly. However, I observe in passing that for the Home Secretary to accuse anyone on either side of the House of evasion is somewhat rich—[HON. MEMBERS: "Answer."] I shall come to the point that the Home Secretary raised. He asked about the shadow Chancellor's attitude to police spending. My right hon. Friend has promised me that, when we return to Government, we will reverse the decline in police numbers. We will do that without smoke and mirrors, without blaming officials and without hiding behind chief constables. We will reverse the decline—that pledge from the future Chancellor of the Exchequer is absolutely specific. *[Interruption.]* I understand the agitation that is apparent on the Government Benches: it stems from embarrassment. They are the Government who came to office promising to be tough on crime and tough on the causes of crime. They have delivered that promise by reducing police numbers by more than 1,000 since 1997. The Home Secretary is not tough on crime; he is tough on the fighters of crime.

Mr. Simon Hughes (Southwark, North and Bermondsey): The right hon. Lady has made what may or may not be an important statement. Can she give a clear answer to this question: if she has authority to say that the Tories would reverse the decline in police numbers were they returned to office, what number of police are they committed to and what figure has the shadow Chancellor committed to pay for them?

Miss Widdecombe: The hon. Gentleman says that my statement might or might not be important—how typical of the Liberals. Let us assume that it is important and I shall answer him directly: the commitment is that whatever overall number of police—no recruits, no this and that—remain to us when the Government leave office, we will make that up to the number that there were when we left office. That could hardly be clearer.

Returning to the radio project, I was asking the Home Secretary for his estimate of the cost. He tried to distract me from that point, but I will not be distracted. Is the project compulsory? How much will he give police forces? *[Interruption.]* We are back on the radio project; the right hon. Gentleman did not hear. Will he give police forces the sum of the cost? If not, does he accept that making up the shortfall must have an impact on recruitment? When I asked him the other day why he had not answered some of my questions, he said that I asked them too quickly. I do not intend to weary the House by repeating them, but I shall give them to him in writing during the succeeding debate so that he may be in no doubt at all about what I have asked him and so that we might get proper answers.

Before dealing with the other issues that we want to discuss, I have to comment on an aspect of policing that has caused widespread concern throughout the country and across the political spectrum: the scenes that we witnessed of policing during the visit of the President of China. The last time we witnessed such scenes was 1978, when Ceausescu visited this country. I have not seen such scenes since and, according to my research, there have not been any.

Were any suggestions—I shall not even call them instructions—made, either by the Home Office or the Foreign Office, in respect of keeping the Tibetan flag out of the sight of the Chinese President, or any other matters relating to the policing of demonstrations during the President's visit? As we have joined-up government, I am sure that the Home Secretary can answer. My hon. Friend the Member for Aylesbury (Mr. Lidington) tabled such questions for answer yesterday. He received a denial from the right hon. Gentleman that his Department was involved in contacts with the police, but when I walked into the Chamber we had yet to receive any answer from the Foreign Secretary.

Mr. Gerald Howarth (Aldershot): Perhaps I can help my right hon. Friend. This morning, the Home Secretary told the Home Affairs Committee that he could not say whether his Department's officials had been involved, but he was kind enough to tell us that it was his view that there had been contacts between Foreign Office officials, Chinese embassy staff and the Metropolitan police. Is not

[Mr. Gerald Howarth]

it rather curious that the Department for which he is responsible should not have had any involvement, although the Foreign Office did?

Miss Widdecombe: "Curious" is just too kind a word.

What we need from the right hon. Gentleman is a clear, unequivocal statement on whether the Government were involved in suggesting the nature of the policing which shocked the nation during the Chinese President's visit. I attach no blame whatever to the police, who have told me that many of their officers felt resentment at being required to police a demonstration in that way. Ordinary police officers are decent people, who want to uphold democracy and spend their time fighting crime, not suppressing peaceful demonstrations.

Mr. Patrick Nicholls (Teignbridge): The Home Secretary may be able to help us even more than we have just been given to understand. Does my right hon. Friend recall a statement in *The Sunday Times*, in which a senior member of the Metropolitan police was quoted as saying:

"If the minutes of meetings between police and Foreign Office officials are made public, the Government is going to have egg on its face."

Can my right hon. Friend see any reason why the Home Secretary should not put this matter to rest now by publishing the minutes of those meetings?

Miss Widdecombe: I am happy to second the call for the Home Secretary to do so.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Miss Widdecombe: No, I should like to make some progress. I understand that Madam Speaker wants Back Benchers to have due time to speak in this debate.

I now come to the asylum issue. In this area, probably more than in any other, the Home Secretary is directly responsible for the shambles that has resulted. When he is challenged, he makes two excuses: first, that he inherited a deepening problem from us; and secondly, that it is all to do with international upheavals. On inheriting the problem from us, let us ask the right hon. Gentleman whether he agrees with the Government's figures—that in 1995 there were 43,965 asylum applications, and in 1996 there were 29,640. That fall was due to our asylum and immigration legislation and the fact that we were willing to take tough measures, on which he accused us of playing the race card—a shameful accusation. Does he now agree that, according to his own figures, he inherited a falling number of asylum applications?

What did the Home Secretary do then? I pay tribute to him for being consistent. Before he took office, he said that when Labour came to power it would abolish the list of safe countries of origin, and it did. That list enabled us to fast track unfounded asylum applications. He said that he would not implement our measures against illegal working, and he kept that up for two years before admitting, very quietly, that he was wrong.

Mr. Straw: The white list has not yet been replaced, but it will be replaced by a more effective procedure under the Asylum and Immigration Bill. Meanwhile, the list has remained in place. If the right hon. Lady now objects to our replacing it, why was it that, in Standing Committee and on the Floor of the House on proceedings of the Asylum and Immigration Bill, no Opposition Member spoke against our proposal to remove the white list—still less moved an amendment or voted against it?

Miss Widdecombe: More smoke and more mirrors. The position is straightforward. We introduced and put into statute what the Home Secretary misnames "the white list"—we never called it that. It was a list of safe countries of origin. He said that he would not implement it, and he made that statement not only in opposition but as soon as he came to office, thereby sending out a clear signal that he would not operate the list of safe countries of origin. That sent a signal to people coming from those countries that their applications would not be fast tracked and that they could once again play the system. It is as simple as that. If the right hon. Gentleman cannot understand that, it perhaps explains why the asylum system has been in such an unholy mess.

At the same time as the Home Secretary announced that he would not implement measures against illegal working and the list of safe countries of origin, he reversed several high profile deportation decisions that we had taken, proclaimed an amnesty for 20,000 applicants and removed the primary purpose rule elsewhere in the immigration system. The sum of those actions was to send out a clear message to the rest of the world that Britain was once again a soft touch on asylum. The right hon. Gentleman then turned round and tried to blame the record rises that he inflicted on this country on an Administration that had actually brought about a fall. Why cannot he admit responsibility, or will he now tell us that officials were to blame?

Mr. Straw: If the right hon. Lady wants to refer to soft touches, will she explain why she authorised members of the other place to vote in favour of amendment No. 118 to the Immigration and Asylum Bill, which would have the explicit effect of restoring social security cash benefits to those from whom she withdrew them in 1996, the cost of which in a full year would be £500 million?

Miss Widdecombe: Amendment No. 118 was moved by the Bishop of Southwark—on this occasion I pay tribute to him, although I do not always do so—and was supported by us, by the Liberal Democrats and by some of the Home Secretary's colleagues in the upper House. We were trying to assist the right hon. Gentleman, because he said that he would not implement the voucher system until he had the asylum system under control, and that he would turn round applications within six months. We decided to hold him to that promise. We are still in favour of the voucher system, but only when he has established the underlying systems that will make it work. It is as simple as that.

Mr. Geraint Davies (Croydon, Central): Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Miss Widdecombe: I did not get any enlightenment from the hon. Gentleman the last time I gave way to him, so he can sit down now.

Does the Home Secretary admit that the backlog on asylum applications is now 90,000, which is almost double the figure we left him? That is due to his policies.

Does he acknowledge that even without counting the people who come from the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, asylum applications are now running at 70,000 a year at least, whereas we left him with a figure of less than 40,000 a year? Does he admit that that is due to his policies? He alone decided not to implement the safe list and procedures against illegal working. He alone decided to grant an amnesty to 20,000 asylum seekers. He alone decided that—not his officials, not the Opposition, not the international community—so let him have the guts to acknowledge it. *[Interruption.]*

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Madam Speaker: Is the right hon. Lady giving way?

Miss Widdecombe: No, I am not.

Madam Speaker: The right hon. Lady has made it clear that she is not giving way, so hon. Members should not try to intervene.

Miss Widdecombe: I shall now come to the second last issue on our list of fiascos: the immigration situation. Over the summer, a great deal of attention was paid to the right hon. Gentleman's mismanagement of the passport system.

Mr. Mike Gapes (Ilford, South): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. I seek your advice. One of my constituents waited eight and a half years for a decision on his asylum status—

Madam Speaker: Order. I ask the hon. Gentleman to resume his seat. He is trying to make a political argument through the Chair. It is not a point of order.

Miss Widdecombe: If the hon. Gentleman has a constituent in difficulty, he should approach his own Government. I do not know why he feels that he has to approach you, Madam Speaker.

As I was saying, over the summer there was considerable concern about the mismanagement of the UK Passport Agency. Huge queues formed, and people trying to get passports were in considerable distress. Will the Home Secretary take this opportunity to assure the House that he will not pass on the costs of that fiasco to British passport holders in increased fees for passports?

Of course, much of the muddle resulted from the fact that the right hon. Gentleman combined a change in the computer system with a change in the rules governing child passports. One would have thought that he would learn from that, and say, "If new computer systems are being installed, I really should not add anything else." But what did he do? In Croydon, where the Immigration and Nationality Directorate tries manfully to tackle long queues, he added to a new computer system a relocation.

Mr. Geraint Davies: Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Miss Widdecombe: It was no good last time, so I do not want to listen to the hon. Gentleman this time either.

Is the Home Secretary aware of the effect of what he did? Applications for visas and applications in respect of immigration have remained unopened since July. Is the right hon. Gentleman aware of that? Is he aware that in one month—

Ms Rosie Winterton (Doncaster, Central): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. I cannot find any reference to this matter in the motion.

Madam Speaker: The motion refers to Home Office affairs in general.

Miss Widdecombe: The Home Secretary added to a new computer system in Croydon a complete relocation. As I have said, although the right hon. Gentleman has tried to cover it up, that resulted in—*[Interruption.]* The right hon. Gentleman will have to hear this, whether he wants to or not. That resulted in mail remaining unopened since July. In one month, only 1,800 out of 52,000 calls were answered by the office in Croydon. Many foreign investors are complaining because they are unable to obtain visas, and many other people have been put through immense distress.

I have been down to Croydon. I saw what looked like human cattle pens: people crammed in, pressed together, desperately trying to obtain answers to their immigration applications. I talked to some of the people coming out, who told me that this was their third, fourth or fifth visit. That, too, was the Home Secretary's decision. He authorised the relocation, at a time when he knew that a new computer system was being installed.

Mr. Geraint Davies: Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Miss Widdecombe: Yes, if the intervention is about Croydon.

Mr. Davies: As the right hon. Lady has pointed out, the number of asylum seekers has risen from 30,000 to nearly 80,000. Does she accept that, when the brief for the new computer system in Croydon was given to Siemens, it assumed a maximum of about 50,000? That could not satisfactorily embrace the needs of people—*[Interruption.]*

Madam Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman must be heard.

Mr. Davies: The system did not take account of the crisis in Yugoslavia. *[Interruption.]* It is all very well for the right hon. Lady to laugh at the plight of asylum seekers, but it was her Government's fault.

Miss Widdecombe: The hon. Gentleman has just made out a case against the Government and their handling of the problem. Having increased the number of applications, they imposed a relocation on top of that. I do not think that the hon. Gentleman had thought through what he said—although I had given him a good deal of time to consider it, because I did not immediately allow him to intervene.

[Miss Widdecombe]

Finally, let me deal with the issue of the Mitrokhin archive. *[Interruption.]* I am sorry that Ministers are weary of the Mitrokhin archive. I am sorry that they find the issue of cold war spies so trivial and laughable. Those who suffered from their treachery will not.

Will the Home Secretary answer two questions that I put to him last week and which he did not answer? As he knew about Melita Norwood in December 1998, and knew that information was coming out and that details would be published, why did he do nothing to inform either Parliament or the Prime Minister? The Home Secretary knows that, when I asked him for a comprehensive list, I meant a list not of every spy going back to the 15th century, but of those likely to be exposed as a result of the Mitrokhin archive. We were getting a-spy-a-day revelations in the press. It would have been more appropriate for the Home Secretary to give the revelations to Parliament. That was the question that I asked. I should like to know what on earth the Home Secretary was doing between December 1998 and September this year in respect of the Mitrokhin archive. Perhaps a few officials kept him in the dark. I do not know; perhaps he will blame them again.

Can the Home Secretary answer the question that I ended with last week and which I expected him to answer with vehement indignation? Instead, he did not answer it either publicly at the time, or privately since. Will he assure the House that, given the links between the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament and the Stasi and between Labour Ministers and CND, there is no link whatever between any currently serving Minister and anyone who is named in the Mitrokhin archive? It seems such a simple question, yet, apparently, it cannot be answered.

Before they came to power, the Government promised that they were going to be tough on crime and on the causes of crime. They have reduced police numbers by more than 1,000; encouraged bogus asylum seekers through a long series of measures to soften up the system; failed to handle the issue of asylum seekers who were crowding into Kent, despite continual pleas from Kent, until the issue had flared up in Dover—only then did the Home Secretary act; have added changes in the law to one agency and changes in location to another when they were already hard pressed and could not cope with what they had; and have not keep the House informed of something that would drip through our press over the summer and that concerned issues as serious as treachery.

I could list a host of other things, as you said, Madam Speaker, that the debate was about Home Office affairs in general. I will resist the temptation, but on future occasions we will return to those matters. On the four issues that we have identified, the Home Secretary should take responsibility and apologise properly.

4.17 pm

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Jack Straw): I beg to move, To leave out from "House" to the end of the Question, and to add instead thereof:

"applauds the Government for its achievements on Home Office issues; notes that the previous government left the youth justice system in disarray, left chaos in the immigration and asylum system, in particular as a result of provisions in the Asylum and Immigration Act 1996, and that police numbers fell by 1,500 between 1992–93 and 1997–98; further notes the action that the Government has taken in asking the Intelligence and Security Committee to review the handling of the Mitrokhin Archive, including key decisions taken before 1997; and welcomes the Government's initiatives to provide new money to fund the recruitment of 5,000 police officers over and above the number that would otherwise have been recruited, comprehensively to tackle crime and disorder and to develop a fairer, faster and firmer immigration and asylum system, through the Immigration and Asylum Bill, which will better serve genuine refugees and help reduce the number of abusive claims in the United Kingdom."

The kindest thing that can be said about the speech of the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) is that it was not up to her usual standard. It was a confused diatribe from a party that failed in government and has done no better in opposition, that talked tough on law and order, but presided over a doubling of crime, that promised to increase police numbers, but allowed numbers to fall by 1,500 over five years—

Miss Widdecombe: Will the Home Secretary give way?

Mr. Straw: Later—sit down. Not even I intervened in the first two sentences of the right hon. Lady's speech, but I will give way later.

The Conservative party said that it would get a grip on the asylum system, but it left only chaos and confusion. It shouts about immigration control, but ordered a secret amnesty for asylum seekers. Its record in opposition as well as in government is as incredible as it is incoherent.

Let me deal with each of the points that are raised in the motion. I understand that it is a general omnibus Home Office debate and look forward to any questions that my right hon. and hon. Friends may have about the attitude of the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald to fox hunting. I deal first—*[Interruption.]*

Madam Speaker: Order. The right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) must contain herself. I am sure that she will be allowed to intervene eventually.

Mr. Straw: I will deal first with the issue of police numbers.

Miss Widdecombe *rose—*

Mr. Straw: I give way.

Miss Widdecombe: I am very grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for giving way. Does he agree that it is a fact that he inherited 16,000 more police officers than the previous Government were left by Labour? Will he just acknowledge that? Does he agree that, in our last five years in government, we increased the number of police constables by more than 2,000; that he has reduced that number by 922; and that he has presided over an overall decrease in the number of police officers of more than 1,000? Those are the facts, and he cannot deny them. Will he now cease the rhetoric and start apologising?

Mr. Straw: The right hon. Lady had 30 minutes in which to make her speech, but evidently felt that she had not made her points properly. [HON. MEMBERS: "Answer."] I am addressing the issue of police numbers.

If the right hon. Lady wants to go back, the fastest rate of increase in police numbers occurred between 1974 and 1979, when they increased by 2,000 annually. *[Interruption.]* I am happy to give the House the facts. Between 1979 and 1991, the numbers increased by 1,000 annually.

From 1992 to 1997—the period in which the right hon. Lady was an adornment to the previous Government—the previous Administration promised that police numbers would rise by 5,000. That pledge was given by the right hon. Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major), and repeated by the right hon. Lady in January 1997. They promised that police numbers would rise, whereas police numbers declined by 1,500 between April 1993 and March 1998, under budgets decided by Conservative Home Secretaries.

Mr. James Paice (South-East Cambridgeshire): In 1998.

Mr. Straw: In January 1997, the right hon. Lady announced in the House the police budgets and capping for financial years 1997 and 1998, which began before the general election. The previous Administration decided those budgets.

I shall tell the hon. Member for South-East Cambridgeshire (Mr. Paice) something else: police numbers did indeed fall by 718 in 1998–99. The only difference between the money that we have spent on police numbers and the money that the previous Administration said that they would spend on police numbers is that, in our Budget, police spending rose by £20 million.

What is clear beyond peradventure is that, when the previous Prime Minister and the right hon. Lady promised 5,000 officers to the House and to the Conservative party conference, they had neither the money nor the mechanism to deliver on that promise. That is why numbers fell.

Mr. David Maclean (Penrith and The Border): How does the Home Secretary square that comment with the statement made this year by Fred Broughton, chairman of the Police Federation, who said:

"The hard fact is, despite Government reassurances that the fight against crime is still a top priority, the police service has witnessed the largest fall in actual police numbers since the crisis days of the mid-1970s"?

Mr. Straw: Fred Broughton was entirely right, but he was talking about the decline in police numbers that I have just described. Under Tory Budgets, numbers decreased by 1,500. Moreover, they would have decreased much further in 1998–99 had it not been for our additional money.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Straw: I shall give way to the hon. Gentleman after I have developed this point.

Against the background of falling police numbers, I spoke to my good and close friends in the Treasury—*[Interruption.]* It is a verity that all Home Secretaries have close and cordial relations with the Treasury. I secured £35 million extra, over and above that allocated in the comprehensive spending review for next year, to recruit 5,000 more police officers than planned. That is what I secured from the Treasury, and that is what we shall do. Next year, there will be £35 million in new money, with more to follow in the succeeding two years. There will be new money to recruit more officers, over and above those already planned. The new money was welcomed by the Association of Chief Police Officers, which called it "a significant step forward", and by the Police Superintendents Association, which described it and other announcements we made as a "huge injection of cash".

As I told the Select Committee this morning, revised estimates now indicate that the baseline for recruits over the next three years is not the 11,000 that I gave at the Labour party conference, but 15,000, with the 5,000 as additional new recruits. Together with the extra £34 million that we are investing in extending the DNA database and the extra £50 million going towards the transformation of police communications, our crime fighting fund represents a huge injection of cash.

Mr. Bercow: I am grateful to the Home Secretary for giving way, because his answer to my right hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border (Mr. Maclean) was singularly unpersuasive. Is it not a source of concern to the right hon. Gentleman that, so far in 1999, information from 23 of the 43 police authorities in England and Wales reveals that no fewer than 2,324 people have left the police force, and that there has been a reduction in the numbers in Lancashire, incorporating the right hon. Gentleman's own constituency? Does that fact not help to explain why, in the past seven days alone, the chairman of the Police Federation, the vice-chairman of the Police Federation and the Metropolitan Police Commissioner have united in condemnation of his inadequate record?

Mr. Straw: Given my experience with the 11,000 figure, I hesitate to offer a calculation off the top of my head. However, if there is a loss through retirement and resignation of about 2,400 in half the police forces, that is roughly equivalent to the total wastage and retirements—about 5,000 or 6,000—in previous years. The full and detailed projections were set out in the information that I gave to the Select Committee, which is also in the Library.

Mr. Simon Hughes: Given that the Government were elected on a manifesto promise to put more officers back on the beat, and given that the memorandum that the Home Secretary brought to the Select Committee this morning showed a figure at the date Labour took over of 127,158 officers in England and Wales, is it a commitment of the Government that, by the end of this Administration, there will be more officers in total and more constables in particular?

Mr. Straw: That point was raised also by the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald. The average wastage in the past three years has been about 17,000, excluding transfers between forces. Our estimate—it is only an estimate, but it has been independently verified—is that the police were planning to recruit 15,000 additional officers before taking any account of the additional new money that we are providing next year and

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for the two years thereafter. Adding the 5,000 to the 15,000 gives 20,000 recruits, if the original baseline estimate of 15,000 is correct over three years.

If wastage rates stay as they are—and, for the reasons I have explained, no one can be certain of that—there should be a higher number of police officers in post in total at the end of the period of three years than there are at the moment. That is not only my wish, but my hope and my expectation. That is what I want to achieve.

We said in our manifesto that we wanted an increase in the number of officers released for operational duties, and that is what we are achieving—not least by major efficiency improvements within the police, including the Narey changes which are transforming the way in which the courts operate and the efficiency and speed with which the police can get people into court.

The right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald has come to this House to criticise our spending on the police. My hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Mr. Leslie) asked how she squared that with statements made by the shadow Chancellor—and repeated by the Leader of the Opposition—on spending which, even before we announced the £34 million on DNA, the £50 million on the police radio and the £35 million on new recruits, they had damned as reckless.

We listened as the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald sought to evade the answer—not once, not twice, but three times. We were left with a pledge about what the Conservatives might spend if and when they finally came back to power. However, the question was not whether spending at some distant point in the future was reckless. The criticism made by the shadow Chancellor was of our spending now of £1.24 billion on the police.

Miss Widdecombe: We were talking about welfare spending.

Mr. Straw: I heard the shadow Chancellor at the time and he did not say that; he was talking about all our spending. The right hon. Lady is proposing substantial increases in spending. Where is she expecting to make cuts? Would she cut the 50 per cent. increase in funding for victim support? Would she cut the £150 million extra that we are spending on closed circuit television? Would she cut our £60 million on burglary prevention or the money that we are investing to help protect the most vulnerable pensioners? Is she intending to cut numbers in prisons? We know for certain that she is not intending to cut the asylum budget, because an amendment for which the Conservatives voted in another place would increase the asylum budget by £500 million in a year.

Miss Widdecombe: Is the fact that the right hon. Gentleman is asking me—he has not yet shed the habits of Opposition—how I would spend enough money to have the same number of police officers as we left him an admission that he intends to cut those numbers?

Mr. Straw: Time and again, we have put to the right hon. Lady the inconsistency between what she is saying and what the shadow Chancellor is saying and, time and again, she has refused to answer. I have already answered a question about my expectation on police numbers from the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes).

There is a reason why no one can predict with absolute certainty the overall number of police officers in three years: the Police and Magistrates' Courts Act 1994. That Act, which we voted against and the Conservatives voted for, was not a Conservative oversight. It was a key part of the programme of a Government of whom the right hon. Lady was a member. It removed the legal power of Ministers to set police force establishments. Bringing forward the measures, the then Home Secretary, the right hon. and learned Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard), said:

"In future, the number of constables in a force will be a matter for local decision . . . It is not a matter for me."—[*Official Report*, 26 April 1994; Vol. 242, c. 113.]

That ever wonderful source of embarrassing quotations that the Conservative party wishes to forget, the campaign guide—this one is for 1994—says that the Act would remove

"perverse incentives to recruit police officers instead of civilians".

It is partly for that reason—the right hon. Lady is looking round as though she had not spotted the Act—that police numbers fell when the previous Administration said that they were going to rise. There was no mechanism to deliver her promise. That is why her promises to restore levels to a certain figure are worth as much as her statements as a Minister.

Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (Cotswold): The House will note the extraordinarily complacent statement in the Government's amendment to today's motion, applauding the Government

"for its achievements on Home Office issues".

Will the Home Secretary tell the House and my constituents categorically—not expressing a hope, as he did when answering the question of the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes)—from his consultation with chief constables, when the number of police officers is going to rise, when the asylum situation is going to stabilise, when the backlog of immigration and Nationality Directorate cases in my constituency is going to be sorted out and when the shambles in the Passport Agency is going to be sorted out? When those problems have been solved, he may be applauded for his achievements.

Mr. Straw: If the hon. Gentleman bears with me he will hear the answers to two of his three questions. I have already answered his question about police numbers. We are putting in new money that the previous Government never provided. We are also setting up a mechanism for the delivery of those numbers. However, without a change to the 1994 Act, which the hon. Gentleman supported, we cannot guarantee police numbers in three years. I have given the House the full figures on our best estimates so far and I have also said that I hope and expect that after those three years, numbers will be above the level when we came to office.

Mr. Richard Allan (Sheffield, Hallam): In many previous debates on this subject, the Home Secretary has cited the Police and Magistrates' Court Act and said that he has no power to dictate numbers. That is a safer line

than the one that he took at the conference; perhaps he should have stuck to it. Will he now tell us whether he intends to amend that Act, and if not, whether he agrees that establishments should be set locally? Is he not concerned that as only three years' funding is given at a time, and police officers' careers are much longer than that, many chief constables will not recruit extra officers when they get the extra money?

Mr. Straw: We have introduced longer horizons for public spending than the previous Administration did—but with the greatest respect to the hon. Gentleman, I have to tell him that no Government could sign up to the proposition that they should give firm levels of funding for more than three years at a time. As for his other points, it is precisely because the 1994 Act removed the Home Secretary's power to set establishment levels that we have established separately, under the Appropriation Acts, a system for ring-fencing the additional money. What I said at the Labour party conference was exactly accurate: that money will be used for new police recruits. We shall also have detailed discussions with chief constables, and do a lot of work with them, to ensure that the additional money is used for additional new recruits whom they would not otherwise have employed.

Mr. Geraint Davies: How does my right hon. Friend think that the Opposition's pledge to increase numbers squares with their "commonsense revolution", which commits them to reducing taxation year after year, and must therefore mean privatisation or cuts?

Mr. Straw: The reason why the Conservative party, for all its bluster, remains mired in opposition with far less support than any Opposition since the war, is the incoherence of its position. The Conservatives do not only say one thing and do another; they say one thing, say another, and then say a third thing. People outside listen to what they say, and know that there is no coherence behind their approach.

Mr. Maclean *rose—*

Mr. Straw: I shall make some progress, and then I shall give way.

As she asserted a few minutes ago, the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald piloted the Asylum and Immigration Act through the House in 1996. Its effect, despite the words that she used at the time, was to cause chaos and confusion.

In case hon. Members have forgotten, or did not hear it, I remind the House of what David Mellor said on 29 August about the Conservatives' asylum record:

"The Conservatives have nothing to be proud of. This asylum crisis has been brewing a long time. When I was in the Cabinet it was raised. Two of us expressed concern, but the rest pooh-poohed it or were indifferent".

Looking back on the Tory years, it is difficult to select the most incompetent public policy decision, because there are so many to choose from. We saw "The Major Years" last night, and it offered a cornucopia of incompetence which defies belief, and sometimes memory. None the less, I ask my hon. Friends to try to choose the single most incompetent set of policies. There was the poll tax, the Child Support Agency and, sadly, the privatisation of the railways—*[Interruption.]* The Conservatives do not think that the privatisation of the railways, and the way in which it was done, have been a disaster. No wonder they lost office and will stay out of office; they do not understand.

Let me explain why the Asylum and Immigration Act 1996 is down among the worst of those policies, with the poll tax and the Child Support Agency. It had as its centrepiece the plan that those who claimed asylum in the United Kingdom—at Dover, Heathrow, or any of our other ports and airports—would continue to be entitled to claim social security cash benefits, whereas the other half of asylum seekers, who applied in-country, would receive nothing.

We asked at the time what would happen to those people and where they would go, who would be responsible for them, and who would pick up the tab. We kept asking those questions, but we never got a proper answer. The answer, as the constituents of the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald, and the people of Kent and many London boroughs know to their cost, was that the overwhelming burden of supporting those in-country applicants was transferred to the people and councils of London and Kent. They had not voted for it, nor had they asked for it. It was a present from the Conservative Government.

Like so much else under the previous Administration, the burden was not imposed as a consequence of any clearly thought-out policy but in the absence of one. The simple truth is that we were left, as David Mellor so generously admitted, with an asylum system in disarray. It is racked with delays, encourages abuse and evasion, and fails the taxpayer and the genuine refugee alike.

Mr. Jonathan Shaw (Chatham and Aylesford): Is my right hon. Friend aware that in 1996–97, as a direct consequence of the Conservative legislation, Kent county council incurred costs of £2 million? When it made representations to Kent Members of Parliament, it was told to clear off. They did not lift a finger to help, which is in complete contrast to the assistance that my right hon. Friend has given under the current Administration.

Mr. Straw: I am, of course, aware of the situation my hon. Friend has described and I pay tribute to the local authorities in Kent, of whatever political persuasion, and their staff for their bearing of that huge burden. However, the responsibility for that burden rests wholly and exclusively on the shoulders of the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald and her colleagues, who imposed that burden on local authorities.

Mr. Charles Wardle (Bexhill and Battle): The right hon. Gentleman knows that I have mixed feelings about the 1996 legislation, as I have said before in the House. However, should not he tell the House that in-country applicants for asylum are mostly people who have arrived here as visitors and overstayed? When they had their first conversation at the port of entry with the immigration officer, they made it clear that they had the funds to finance their visit. Therefore, they are in a different category.

Mr. Straw: I do not disagree with the hon. Gentleman's comment, but that is why I hope that he shares my astonishment that amendment No. 118 tabled

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in the other place by the Opposition—I recommend that he read the amendment because the effect it would have is plain—would restore cash benefits for asylum seekers to those from whom we propose to remove them from 1 April next year, the day on which the new system of support is due to come into force, and would also restore cash benefits to all the in-country applicants the hon. Gentleman mentioned. That is the most astonishing position for the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald and her right hon. and hon. Friends to take. She has even described amendment No. 118 as sensible.

The right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald has also said that amendment No. 118 was tabled to ensure that we honour a commitment not to implement the new system of asylum support until the limits of two months for initial applicants and four months for appeals had been brought into force. However, if she were to read our White Paper, she would see that it made it clear that there was no link whatever between those two proposals. The two plus four system will come into force from April 2001, and we made clear our determination to bring the new asylum support system into force in April 2000.

I have had many conversations with the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Mr. Wardle) about the asylum and immigration system, but I can tell him that the proposals in amendment No. 118 to restore cash benefits to asylum seekers for at least a year—which his Front-Bench colleagues support and apparently intend to whip every Conservative Member into the Lobby to support when the Bill returns to this Chamber—would cost £500 million and suck in thousands and thousands of opportunist economic migrants. I hope that the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald explains her position to her constituents and the other people of Kent.

The Conservatives have raised only two issues with any seriousness on the Immigration and Asylum Bill. I have just dealt with their proposals to restore the payment of £500 million to abusive in-country asylum seekers. What was the second? In all the hours and hours of debate on the Bill, what constructive proposals were made by Conservative Members? Did they say that they were going to reinstate the white list? No, they never discussed it. Did they say that they were going to overturn our removal of the primary purpose rule? No, and when they had the opportunity to vote against in June 1997, they did not take it—they allowed it through without a Division or discussion. Did they propose other ways in which they could tighten control? No.

What makes what the Conservatives are now saying totally hollow is that, of all the issues that they could have selected in Standing Committee, the only one that they chose was to try to undermine the civil penalties on rogue lorry drivers shipping in clandestine immigrants. If the right hon. Lady wants to intervene now, she had better explain why she so pathetically failed to make any proposals to improve immigration controls. The two proposals that she made would undermine those controls.

Miss Widdecombe: I did not do so because we had instituted a system that resulted in a 40 per cent. fall. Therefore, we had done what was necessary. The right hon. Gentleman was trying to unpick it and we were opposing that unpicking. Yes, we opposed the fining of lorry drivers who find clandestine entrants in their loads and report it to the police. They deserve to be commended, not fined.

Mr. Straw: If they are complicit in having clandestine entrants in the backs of their lorries, they deserve not to be commended, but to be fined. That is exactly what we are proposing. As for the numbers, the previous Administration had to make two attempts at improving immigration control in one Parliament, so the right hon. Lady knows that the numbers of asylum applications rise and fall for reasons that have nothing to do with circumstances in this country.

There are pull factors and I fully accept that—that is why we are going to overturn the restoration of social security cash benefits to in-country applicants. The right hon. Lady is claiming clairvoyance among her many attributes if she is saying that it was possible to foresee the conflict in the former Republic of Yugoslavia in the past two years.

Mr. John Townend (East Yorkshire): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Straw: No.

The third issue raised by the right hon. Lady is that of Mitrokhin and spies. It was dealt with in great detail in my statement to the House last Thursday. I also gave a full written statement on 13 September, following revelations in the media in the wake of the publication of the Mitrokhin archive. I do not intend to repeat all that I said this time last week, beyond answering the points raised by the right hon. Lady in her speech.

On the back of newspaper stories that were published in early September, the right hon. Lady appeared on the "Today" programme to issue her instant response to the revelations, saying:

"If there are more traitors like this one"—

referring to Mrs. Melita Norwood—

"living freely without being prosecuted then we should be told. Parliament should be told all of the names and the reasons why they were not brought to justice unless there are clear security reasons not to do so."

I ask my hon. Friends to weigh the right hon. Lady's words. The reason that she gave for not denouncing people without trial or conviction was not the rule of natural justice or the rule of law in this country, but simply whether there were "security reasons" for not doing so. Today, she asked why I did not inform Parliament when I was first told of the plans to publish the Mitrokhin archive. As I said, I was told that in December 1998.

The right hon. Lady's implication is that I should have informed Parliament of the plan to publish the book, which was not my responsibility—as she well knows, the decision to publish in that way was initiated by her former right hon. and learned Friend Sir Malcolm Rifkind, then the Foreign Secretary, and it was endorsed by the present Foreign Minister and the Prime Minister. Alternatively, I can only assume that she was asking me to publicise the fact that the Security Service was considering whether to recommend Mrs. Norwood for prosecution, as I was told in December last year.

I ask right hon. and hon. Members to consider the implications of what the right hon. Lady was inviting me to do. Before the Security Service had decided whether

someone should be prosecuted, still less before the Attorney-General and the prosecutors could decide, she was inviting me to announce that consideration of prosecution was in train. That would have amounted to the grossest interference by the Secretary of State in the prosecution process, and would have been wholly improper. I am astonished that the right hon. Lady, who dug herself a pit by proposing that we should support trial by denunciation, should keep on digging.

Miss Widdecombe: I thank the Home Secretary for giving way, as these are important issues. He now appears to be presenting a picture that is slightly different from the one presented in earlier statements. He may want to clarify what he has just said, but my understanding is that the decision not to prosecute was made in 1992. That is what he has told us hitherto—that that decision had been taken before he was told about the matter in 1998.

Again according to what the Home Secretary said, I understand that the decision to review whether there was a case for prosecution was taken after publicity had been given to the matter, and after a taped confession was broadcast in the press and media. That meant that we then had an admission by Mrs. Norwood that could be added to the former evidence, which did not include that admission. Is the Home Secretary saying that he knew in 1998 that there was such an admission by Mrs. Norwood?

Mr. Straw *indicated dissent.*

Miss Widdecombe: The picture is very confused. The Home Secretary shakes his head, but he has contradicted what he said before.

Mr. Andrew Mackinlay (Thurrock): She has lost it.

Miss Widdecombe: I think that it is the Home Secretary who has lost it.

Mr. Mackinlay: The right hon. Lady is talking about when Malcolm Rifkind was in charge. He ain't on my side.

Mr. Straw: What I am saying is exactly the same as what I said in the Home Office statement that I issued on 13 September. The right hon. Lady prides herself that she is properly briefed, so I suggest that she read that statement, as it makes matters clear. In that statement, I said that I had been told for the first time about the plans to publish the Mitrokhin archive in December 1998. I also stated that I was told at that time that the Security Service was considering whether Mrs. Norwood should be recommended for prosecution.

In that statement, I also said that I was told earlier this year that the matter had been referred to the Attorney-General. I said that I was told that the Attorney-General had decided that there was no decision on prosecution for him to take, as he considered that the last date on which it would have been possible to make a proper decision was in 1992-93—when the Security Service decided not to put the relevant papers to the Attorney-General so that he could consider prosecution.

I repeated all that five days ago. As the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald knows very well, I also made it clear five days ago that the papers are now back with the Law Officers, as a result of the admission apparently made by Mrs. Norwood in the BBC programme. The right hon. Lady has failed again today to justify her appalling statement in mid-September, just as she failed last week. In that statement, she asked that I should denounce people who had been the subject of neither trial nor conviction.

Vasili Mitrokhin worked for the KGB for more than 30 years, but he was disgusted by what he witnessed. He came to the United Kingdom because he thought that this country was different—that it was based on democracy and the rule of law. It would be a cruel irony indeed if this country were ever to slip into the sort of practices now proposed by the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald—practices that Mr. Mitrokhin worked so assiduously to expose.

I turn now to the matter of CND. I am appalled that the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald has resorted to simple, straightforward smears of that organisation. We became all too used to such smears when the Conservative party was in government. Conservative Members had an appalling record in previous years, but I thought that they had learned something at least about the need to raise the standards of debate in public life.

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East): Will the Home Secretary give way?

Mr. Straw: I will give way to the hon. Gentleman, but it will be for the last time.

Dr. Lewis: It has now been revealed beyond all doubt that the Stasi penetrated CND. Will the Home Secretary therefore take this opportunity to confirm that it is legitimate for a security service in a democracy to monitor penetration of so-called peace movements by communist, fascist or other agencies or movements that are allied to any dictatorship with which that service is confronted? Will he say once and for all whether MI5 was right or wrong to monitor communist infiltration of the so-called peace movement in the 1980s? Does he recognise that that penetration was exposed not by Mitrokhin, but in the files of the Stasi, with a quality of information that led to successful prosecutions in Germany and the United States of America? Why is nothing being done about the matter here?

Mr. Straw: The position regarding the Security Service and subversion is set out in "MI5: The Security Service", a perfectly public booklet. It is currently in its third edition, but I have no doubt that the hon. Gentleman has read the second and first editions as well as the third. It states:

> "It has often been alleged that in the past the Service systematically investigated trade unions and various pressure groups such as the National Union of Mineworkers and the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament."

It goes on to say that that allegation was not true. It adds:

> "To fulfil its function of protecting national security, the Service therefore investigated individual members of bona fide organisations when there were grounds to believe that their actions were intended to overthrow or undermine parliamentary democracy by political, industrial or violent means."

If the hon. Gentleman is asking whether I sign up to that proposition without knowing anything of what happened under the previous Administration, I do sign up to it. I hope that that helps him.

[Mr. Straw]

I was referring to the fact that the Conservative party is in Opposition now. I spent 18 years in Opposition, 17 of them on the Opposition Front Bench. I commend that period to the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald and her colleagues. I guess that I know more than most about what is required of a shadow Minister. To make a name in Opposition, one must be ever ready to give a comment or instant quotation. I commend the right hon. Lady for being the most accessible member of the shadow Cabinet. She is ever available to the press with a string of adjectives about the Government's latest iniquity, no matter what the issue may be. There is no question of her going ex-directory.

Just in case the right hon. Lady's phone is engaged when reporters call, however, they can visit her very own website. It is called—and this is absolutely true—the "Widdy Web". When I was told that, I thought that it was a spoof. I thought that Millbank was up to something that I would never have approved, or that some rogue member of the Security Service was doing some private enterprise. So I had the site checked out, and it is entirely authentic, accurate and authorised.

We have no screen on the Front Bench, so I can offer hon. Members only a preview of the site. On page 1, it offers photographs of Ann at conference, Ann at a fringe meeting, Ann after the fringe meeting, Ann during her speech, the conclusion of Ann's speech and Ann signing copies of her new book. It goes on. Indeed, it goes on and on and on.

In her eagerness to please the press, the right hon. Lady forgets the No. 1 rule of rapid response—think before you speak. I have three examples of where she has forgotten that rule. First, just two weeks ago, she described British plans to allow thousands of refugees across Europe to settle in the United Kingdom as "serious" and "perverse". It was indeed a dreadful idea. The only problem was that there are, there were, there never have been any such plans.

Then, she was at it again last Wednesday in *The Independent*, criticising what she thought were Government plans to allow remand prisoners the vote. Well, it was a terrible idea. The only problem with the proposal and with her criticism is that the proposal to allow remand prisoners the vote was backed fully by the Conservative party and its representatives on the all-party working party on electoral procedures. They signed up to the proposal.

Then—this is dear to my heart, Mr. Deputy Speaker—last Friday, she even popped up as the champion of freedom of information. She criticised me—the champion of freedom of information, as everyone knows—for flawed plans. Yet that is the same Conservative party of BSE and arms to Iraq; the Conservative party which at the last election said that there was

"no need for a Freedom of Information Act",

which it said was of interest only—I have warmed to this idea, by the way—to

"inquisitive, left-wing busy-bodies"—*[Interruption.]*

In opposition, one can only, sadly, be judged by what one says. In government, we are rightly judged both by what we say and by what we do. It is an eternal verity of government—but especially of life in the Home Office—that, to say the least, not everything works out as intended all the time. It has not under this Government and it did not under the previous one. I am always ready to take advice, but the last person from whom I intend to take advice—

Mr. Nicholls *rose—*

Mr. Straw: I am coming to the end of my remarks, so I will not give way. I take advice about taxis from the hon. Gentleman, but not about anything else.

The last person from whom I intend to take advice about the conduct of my office is the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald, whose record as a Home Office Minister was—I put this delicately—scarcely written up as distinguished. It is as if she and her colleagues at central office now want to airbrush out of history her record and that of the last Conservative Government. It is no wonder that a former Conservative Chancellor of the Exchequer said on television last night of the Conservative party:

"it is a party beyond hope".

By contrast with the Conservative party, this new Labour Government deliver on their promises. *[Laughter.]* Oh yes. We are on track to deliver our pledge to speed up youth justice. Recorded crime is down. There is new money for the police and we are giving increased powers to them. We are introducing overdue reforms to make our immigration system fairer, faster and firmer. That is the difference between new Labour and a very old, marginalised and divided Conservative party. While they shout, we deliver. I commend the amendment.

5.4 pm

Mr. Simon Hughes (Southwark, North and Bermondsey): We as a party and I personally welcome this debate on home affairs early after the summer recess. I welcome the opportunity that has been given us by the Conservative Opposition to take stock on the eve of the two-and-a-half year anniversary of Labour's taking over the Administration. My hon. Friends and I have tabled an amendment.

Whatever debates we may have, and we shall have many about police numbers, immigration and asylum, prisons and the rest, we have sought to flag up in our amendment the fact that the Home Secretary as custodian of these matters and the Government of whom he is a member have one overriding duty, which is to balance the obligation to sustain a society of good law and order with the defence and support at all stages of the liberties of the individual. Whether one is talking about prisoners or asylum seekers, the civil liberties of all people on these shores are important. My first point relates to this; it is not included specifically in the motion, but the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) alluded to it.

Last week, in the view of many hon. Members and many of our constituents, the way in which the perfectly proper law and order duty of the police was fulfilled in relation to the state visit of the President of China trespassed on the wrong side of the line of defending people's civil liberties—wherever the instructions came from, if there were any, and wherever the discussions took place, because we know that there were some. It is wholly understandable and acceptable that people should be prevented from scaling barriers, running in front of state

carriages and so on. However, it is not acceptable that people should not be allowed to stand, to shout and hold flags along the route of, and in sight of, a visiting Head of State.

It is not the job of the Home Office, nor of any police officer, to spare the Labour Government or other Governments embarrassment. It is their job to ensure that law and order are protected, but that people of all views can express their views. It was sad for many of us, who remember with vivid accuracy those horrible pictures of the events in Tiananmen square, that there are now on file pictures showing what looks like a repression of civil liberties in this country, which is meant to be the mother of democracies.

Whatever I do as the successor to my right hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mr. Beith) in the post of Liberal Democrat spokesman on home affairs, I shall, above all, try to ensure that the civil liberties of all our peoples are upheld, and shall hold the Government to account in that regard.

The Tory Government were not a model Administration in their tenure of the Home Office. Under the Tories, police numbers were not a great success. Asylum and immigration policy was not one of their golden successes. Accountability for the Prison Service was not a glorious moment in the career of the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald. The Tories did not flag up as one of their great triumphs their record of compliance with the European convention on human rights. Given the number of Tory failings, there is something unlikely in the attack being made today from their Benches.

The Minister of State, Home Office (Mr. Charles Clarke): That is a bit of an understatement.

Mr. Hughes: I am trying to be gentle at the beginning of my remarks.

One of the biggest failings related to the subject on which the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald chose to attack the Government first—police numbers. In 1992, it was neither the Liberal Democrats nor Labour who said that there would be 1,000 more police officers, yet, in the following year, there were fewer officers. In 1995, it was neither our party nor the Labour party, which pledged—in the words of the then Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major)—5,000 more police officers, yet by the end of the Tory Administration, there were fewer officers.

The truth is that, during the Tory Administration of 1992 to 1997, as the promises went up, police numbers went down. *[Interruption.]* The Conservatives deny that, but it is a fact—[HON. MEMBERS: "It is not."] Whatever figures one takes between 1992 and 1997, although there are disputes as to the figures—[HON. MEMBERS: "Ah!"] Happily, today, some figures were produced for the Select Committee, although they go back only three years. Under the most common figures, between 1992 and 1997, neither pledge—of 5,000 or of 1,000 more officers—was fulfilled. At most, there were about 100 more officers. That was not what the electorate were told; the Tory party did not deliver.

Miss Widdecombe: According to those figures, is it not true that we left 16,000 more police officers than we inherited, and, that during the last five years of our Government, the number of constables—actual policemen on the beat—rose by more than 2,000? Will the hon. Gentleman admit that?

Mr. Hughes: The right hon. Lady is right to say that, when the Tories left office in 1997, the number of police officers in England and Wales was considerably higher than when they took office in 1979; they had had 18 years in office, so we should hope that the numbers were up. It is also true that, at the end of that period, there was an increase in the number of constables, for which people had argued. I am trying to make the point that, if the right hon. Lady sets out to attack the Labour Government for failing to honour their promises—which I too am perfectly happy to do—she should remember that her Government also failed to honour their promises on police numbers.

I remember the 1997 debate in this place when the then Government spokesman, who is now First Minister of the Welsh Assembly, complained that, while capital investment and council tax had increased, police numbers had decreased. Within a week or two, the Labour party had promised in its manifesto to provide more officers on the beat. I recall that the theme music for the Labour election campaign was "Things can only get better". Yet we are having this debate today because, disappointingly, many things in the Home Office appear to have got worse.

The past two and a half years of Labour Government have not been an unmitigated success. The Home Secretary pleaded guilty to things not always going as he expected, but even he could not have predicted the catalogue of mistakes and/or disasters that that two and a half years have brought. Resources may have been won for the police, but there are no extra officers on the beat. I do not recall the Home Office's management of the evidence before the Lawrence inquiry as being a particularly golden moment, and it is a tragedy that the matter was not handled better.

According to Her Majesty's inspectorate of prisons, prison conditions are not improving generally and prison overcrowding is not lessening. Asylum and immigration applications—and I deal with as many as any other hon. Member—are being dealt with less and less effectively despite the good work of many civil servants. People seeking passport applications had a summer to remember and, as the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald pointed out, legislation on terrorism had to be amended, and the prosecution processes for spies are clearly not working.

I have one comment for the Home Secretary about the events of the past month. We could take issue with the words that he used to describe the number of new police recruits and with the misinformation—or misapprehension—in his conference speech that was not corrected. The Home Secretary said at the end of September that there would be a baseline figure of 11,000 recruits. He then revealed last Thursday in an answer to me that that 11,000 baseline figure was subject to revision and announced this morning that it will be 15,000. That suggests, if not malice or ill will, at least an inadequate degree of competence—which is not what the public expect of the Home Office.

I am the chairman of governors at a primary school in my constituency where five, six and seven-year-old pupils must attend numeracy hours. I think we should send the

[Mr. Hughes]

Secretary of State for Education and Employment down the road to the Home Office; perhaps Treasury officers should also attend in order to help add up the figures. The Government's record on statistics is not a proud one.

I have some specific questions for the Home Secretary about his speech and what he said this morning on police numbers and funding. I am grateful for the Home Secretary's answer to me about police numbers. I understand what happened under the 1994 legislation: it is not for him to determine the number of officers in each force. The right hon. Gentleman has said for the past five years—and certainly for the past two and a half years while in government—that it is not the Government's responsibility when police numbers decline. So his announcement at the Labour party conference of an increase in police numbers was a bit rich. The Home Secretary cannot have it both ways: either he can acquire more money, ring-fence it and provide more police recruits—or he cannot. I understand the difference. However, refusing to take responsibility when police numbers decline and then claiming the glory when they increase is not consistent politics.

The Home Secretary did not answer my specific question to which the public require an answer. I asked whether there will be more police officers at the end of this Administration than at its beginning. Is that the Government's objective and commitment? Is that their pledge? The Home Secretary said that, over the next three years, he expects and hopes that police numbers will not decrease. I repeat: will there be more or fewer police officers at the end of this Labour Administration? That is a simple question to which I hope we will receive a simple answer—the Minister may reply in his winding-up speech.

My second question is important. Even though I was not previously doing this job for our party, I listened to the debates, which often concerned not police officers in general, but constables. The public do not want to discuss senior or administrative officers, but they often ask, "Will there be more officers on the beat?" That was the Labour manifesto pledge, so will there be more constables at the end of this Administration's term of office than there were at the beginning?

My third question is about money. In his Bournemouth speech, the Home Secretary made the announcement, which I welcome, that there would be extra money—a crime reduction fund—and a kick-start cash injection for it of £35 million. How much will that fund receive in total over the next three years? If it costs £25,000 to recruit a police officer—it does, according to a parliamentary answer from the right hon. Gentleman to one of my colleagues last year—by our calculation £35 million for each of the three years will not buy 5,000 extra recruits. The figures do not add up.

If the Home Secretary says that that is correct, that will be helpful, but in that case the figures will not make sense to us, unless all the crime reduction fund is to be ring-fenced for recruits and will increase in future years in real terms to pay for the extra 5,000 recruits. Perhaps the Minister will give us the answer. If there are to be the 5,000 extra recruits for which forces around the country have asked, which is the plan of the Government, and if those forces are to be given £35 million in the first year, they will need considerably more in the following two years.

The crime reduction fund was not signalled as being entirely dedicated to extra recruits, and in his Bournemouth speech the Home Secretary specifically referred to the other claims to be made on it. One was the DNA database, price tag £34 million; the second was the new police radio station, price tag £50 million. Is it correct, therefore, that there is extra money—the crime-fighting fund—above the comprehensive spending review money and the £400 million made available through the crime reduction programme, not only for police recruitment over three years aiming at 5,000 recruits, but for DNA testing and the new police radio station? It would be helpful to have clarification of that.

Mr. Bercow: I am listening intently to the hon. Gentleman's questions to the Home Secretary, but I hope that he will not exclude consideration of the important category of special constable. Given that there was a fall in their numbers of almost 10 per cent. between March 1998 and March 1999, will he ask the Home Secretary his intentions in that matter? If we listen intently—with beads of sweat on our brow and bated breath—he may tell us the position of the Liberal Democrats.

Mr. Hughes: Let me deal with the latter part of the hon. Gentleman's intervention. I have always been a strong supporter of special constables and, as a London Member of Parliament, I have consistently lobbied both the Home Secretary, as the police authority for London, and successive Conservative Home Secretaries for more special constables. London has had a lower rate than almost any other force in the country, but I believe that special constables play an important role and it is our view that there ought to be more of them in each area of the country. I can simply pass on the hon. Gentleman's question to the Home Secretary, and I am happy to endorse it. We ask that an announcement be made on the level of support for special constables.

Before I move off police matters, I have a final question on funding: does it come with strings attached? Various publications have suggested that, for the police to get the money from a fund to which they bid, they may be required not only to meet efficiency criteria, but to use certain of the equipment that the Home Office prefers. I have not yet had a chance to go round the country discussing the matter, as I have been in this job for only seven days, but I understand that many police forces are not keen on the equipment and certainly do not want their expenditure to be tied to its use.

One other policing matter has exercised my colleagues and me over the years. As the Home Secretary knows, one of the biggest expenses for the police budget and the budgets of other emergency services is pensions. That is because, unlike most people in society, people in those services cannot be expected to retire at the age of 60 or 65. Will the Home Secretary at least consider consulting his ministerial colleagues in other Departments on whether the pensions commitments for the emergency services could be taken out of the normal budget allocation? I know that there are implications, but if this Administration could get that sorted it would be a great relief to the police and fire authorities around the country, because their increasing pensions burden has a severe effect on other resources.

I am conscious that asylum and other immigration matters will be discussed by the House in a few days when Lords amendments come back to this place, but I will say a word or two now. I hope that the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald does not believe that the number of people who come to this country as asylum seekers or immigrants is more determined by the policy of the Government of the day than by events abroad. The large number of people who have come to my constituency from Kosovo or the Horn of Africa have come not because they assessed which was the best place in the world to come, but because European Union countries are expected to be sympathetic to people from countries suffering from poverty and civil war, many of whom have been persecuted or raped and have lost family, friends and homes. That is more likely to determine the numbers.

Of course, there are bogus asylum seekers, but a significant minority of those who apply are accepted on their first application, and a significant number of those whose application is turned down win on appeal. If we ever lose people's right to put their case in an appeal, we shall be in trouble. When will we have the resources, the people and the commitment to catch up and process the cases that are stacking up day after day?

This very morning, my constituency office had a phone call from a solicitor representing a young Kosovan refugee. He was told that the young man must go from his bed and breakfast in south London to Birmingham to collect his papers, because if they were sent to Croydon they would be lost in the post for six months. The refugee then asked whether he would be paid, because he has no money to go to Birmingham, but there was no guarantee of that. The system makes no sense. Asylum seekers and immigrants, whether they are accepted or not, have civil liberties; and we have a duty to ensure that the people who work hard in our immigration and nationality department have a system that works and ensures that justice is done and is seen to be done.

May I say a word about spies? I share the Home Secretary's view on the subject of the specific debate. I do not believe that the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald, my right hon. and hon. Friends or I are in a position to decide, let alone pronounce, who should be prosecuted for spying against this country.

Dr. Julian Lewis: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Hughes: No.

We need a process in which Security Service officers do not decide either. They should advise, there should be independent adjudication that is free of them and of Ministers and, ultimately, the Home Secretary should decide.

This Government were elected to be tough on crime and on the causes of crime, a phrase that may come back to haunt them. Their policy is often as much about talking tough on crime and the causes of crime as about delivering.

I hope that the second half of this Administration will be caricatured as much by—characterised as much by—

Mr. Mackinlay: Both.

Mr. Hughes: Indeed, both. I hope that it will be characterised by being tough on incompetence and tough on the causes of incompetence. The Home Office has a greater reputation for incompetence than any other Department. As I said a couple of weeks ago when asked to comment on the famous Bournemouth speech, if we cannot trust the Home Secretary or his press releases to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, Home Office Ministers cannot expect the rest of the country to behave differently. If we cannot have confidence in the Home Office to ensure people's civil liberties and to provide the best public services on law and order, we cannot have confidence in the Government.

I do not think that people have confidence in the Home Office at the moment. Much in the administration of the Home Office is seriously rotten. Our job is co-operatively, constructively and, when necessary, aggressively to hold the Government to account, so that in their second two and a half years—or in as many months as they still have to go—things will get better, instead of promises of improvement followed by things actually getting worse.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. Before I call the next speaker, I remind the House that Madam Speaker has put a time limit of 10 minutes on speeches from Back Benchers. That applies from now on.

5.26 pm

Mr. Andrew Mackinlay (Thurrock): In view of what you have just said, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I shall not give way during my speech.

I am surprised that the Opposition have drawn the House's attention to the stewardship of cold war spies and the Mitrokhin archive, bearing in mind the fact that this matter relates mostly to their period in office. I regret that I was unable to be in the House last Thursday when the Home Secretary made a statement about the Mitrokhin archive. I was in Russia on parliamentary business, and watched his speech from my hotel bedroom. I was frustrated for two reasons. I have taken a great interest in this matter over the summer, and have corresponded with the Home Secretary.

First, my constituent, Michael John Smith, was imprisoned for 20 years for selling secrets to the Soviet Union. He claims that there was a miscarriage of justice and entrapment by the security services. He was convicted in part on the evidence of defectors. I have no way of knowing whether he was guilty or innocent, and I shall not detain the House on that: I shall try to probe some of the issues raised by his case in an Adjournment debate. However, it is interesting that if the existence of the Mitrokhin archive had been known to his defence counsel at his trial in 1993 and his appeal in 1995, it might have been relevant to the preparation of his case, especially as he is mentioned several times in Professor Christopher Andrew's book about the Mitrokhin archive. I want to flag up my concern about that.

My second interest in this matter is a parliamentary one. Parliament does not oversee the security services. The Intelligence and Security Committee is a fine body of hon. Members, but it is not a parliamentary committee. That is an important point: it is not a nuance or a minor detail.

This whole business has again raised the issue of the need for good freedom of information legislation. As much as I welcome the legislation to be introduced by the Government—it is 300 per cent. better than nothing—it is still inadequate. More importantly—this should interest

[Mr. Andrew Mackinlay]

every hon. Member—it is amazing that it is appropriate for Malcolm Rifkind to hand over papers to Professor Christopher Andrew, but not to make them available to Members of Parliament. How can that be justified? I certainly think that those papers should be in the wider public domain.

I probed the Home Secretary about this matter in correspondence. I asked him why Professor Christopher Andrew has those papers if they are secret. If they are not secret, why cannot we see them? I pressed him on the security classification of the papers. He said that there were of great sensitivity. I replied that I am not aware of the security classification of "great sensitivity." If there is such a classification, we should be told about it. If not, what is the security classification of those papers?

I have still not had a response to that question, so perhaps the Minister can give me one. We should not be glibly told that we cannot see those papers: some justification should be given. I understand that there are categories of security classification, but the Home Secretary has failed to tell us what category the papers are in.

The Home Secretary sent me a letter on 15 October, not answering that question but stating:

"Mr. Mitrokhin came to believe that the covert activities of the KGB should be made public. In 1992, he approached the UK for help in bringing out and publishing his notes."

That is something of an understatement. I have no way of assessing the courage of Mr. Mitrokhin or other defectors, and I do not want to go into that today. I am not qualified to judge. The Home Secretary has said that they were very courageous, and they probably were. In any case, we all have different views on defectors. However, it should not be suggested that Mr. Mitrokhin put up his hand and said, "I should like to publish my notes." Mr. Mitrokhin came here because he had to get out: things were getting a bit hot for him. That should also be borne in mind in relation to Oleg Gordievsky, who also published some papers.

Let me repeat that I am not judging those people's courage; nevertheless, they had a vested interest. They were making an appeal to the security services here, and there were rich possibilities. I think that there was a propensity to exaggerate, especially when there was the possibility of a financial return on the publication of their books. We must tread cautiously when examining the contents of the documents. We must consider what the motives for defection were, and what has been published by those people or on their behalf.

In his letter to me, the Home Secretary said, in effect, "Awfully sorry, Mackinlay, but the ownership of the archive is not with me, but with Mitrokhin." He also said that he had taken legal advice on ownership. I would like to be humble, but I do not accept that advice; and even if I am wrong, I believe that ownership should be with Her Majesty's Government. That takes us back to Malcolm Rifkind's stewardship of the matter. When a person is about to defect, a price is extracted. That person should be told, "What you bring with you in return for safe asylum"—and, no doubt, some remuneration for future life—"is our property." I find it ridiculous that it should now be suggested that the papers are Mitrokhin's property.

Both Malcolm Rifkind and, to some degree, the present Government are ducking and diving. They are saying, "It is all right for Professor Christopher Andrew to have the papers, but it is not all right for Members to have them." They will not tell us the secret classification of the archive. It is all wholly unsatisfactory, and to a large extent an affront to Parliament.

I am not sure whether the Minister is in a position to reply, but I tabled a parliamentary question asking whether comparable conditions had been placed on Gordievsky and Victor Oschenko when they defected, and in relation to the ownership of any material that they might have published. Was Malcolm Rifkind, or any other Conservative Home Secretary, so generous as to abdicate ownership of documents from those defectors on behalf of Her Majesty's Government? It is an important question.

We know that Malcolm Rifkind imposed some conditions, one of which was wholly unsatisfactory, and was not fulfilled. The Home Secretary referred to it in the House last week, when he told us that Malcolm Rifkind had said that any publication of the papers must not traduce anyone who did not agree to reference being made to them or anyone who had not been convicted. That, however, did not safeguard the reputation of people who are deceased, and have been traduced in the press, with no right of reply, since these matters came to light.

Malcolm Rifkind's stewardship of the matter was highly selective. It has damaged the reputation of men and women who cannot reply, and other names have been bandied about when there has been no satisfactory way of obtaining a remedy. Those who have been traduced, living or dead, have no access to the papers, just as we in the House have no access to them. It is time the facts were revealed, and time that a much fuller, comprehensive statement was made. I do not accept that this is a matter for the Intelligence and Security Committee, which is not part of the House of Commons.

Who the heck is Professor Christopher Andrew? I know that he is a distinguished academic who does not just read books—he writes them—but why should he have a superior position over hon. Members and everyone else in the land? It is wholly unsatisfactory.

Sir Malcolm Rifkind suggests that Professor Christopher Andrew was given the archives, so that he could make a proper historical analysis. That is bunkum. We will get a very partial and selective interpretation, so I hope that the Government will think about the matter again. I hope that they will consider the freedom of information point and generally reflect on the matter much further.

Since I have taken an interest in the matter, I must tell the House that, for the first time, the lock on my house in Tilbury has been tampered with—it has been damaged—and my dustbin has been pinched. I am sure that it is a coincidence—but if anyone is looking for documents, they will be on the shelf in the living room, between the Edward VIII coronation mug and the Neil Kinnock general election victory mug of 1992.

5.36 pm

Sir Brian Mawhinney (North-West Cambridgeshire): I hope that the hon. Member for Thurrock (Mr. Mackinlay) will forgive me if I do not follow him and discuss that aspect of the motion.

The background to the debate is clear. It started three years or so ago, when the Labour party, which was then in opposition, said that, if elected, it would be tough on

crime and on the causes of crime. That was never believable with old Labour and events are rapidly proving that it is not believable with new Labour either.

The outcome of the argy-bargy over numbers between those on the Front Benches was clear. During our time in government, there were, on average, an extra 900 police officers a year. During the present Government's term in office, there has been a decrease of 500 a year.

I was amazed by the Home Secretary. On 2 May 1997, he and many others were saying, "We are in government now. It is all going to be better. We are going to change and to modernise the country." The hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) was right—that was what they said. They have been in government for two years and the Home Secretary stands there today and says, "It has nothing to do with me, guv. I was not even here." The Prime Minister knows that he is Home Secretary. The House knows that he is Home Secretary. I wonder when he will wake up to the fact that he is Home Secretary with powers to make changes for the common and national good, if he deems them necessary.

Through the comprehensive spending review, we are experiencing the tightest squeeze on police spending in the past 10 years. The record thus far can be easily summed up. Police numbers are going down, while prisoners are being let out earlier than the courts said that they should be and without any court sanction.

The Home Secretary's much vaunted anti-social behaviour orders are nowhere. Throughout the country, the orders were to be the answer and they are not even off the starting blocks. Labour-controlled Peterborough council tells me that it is worried about the European Court of Human Rights implications of the orders, so it may not take any action until the court has pronounced. The issue is being pushed into the long grass of the Parliament after the Parliament after the next one. Furthermore, I read that the Home Office is being told that crime will rise again next year.

What is the Government's reaction to all that? Is it to do something? No, it is to talk. That was the background to the Home Secretary's highly disputed speech at his party conference. He promised an extra 5,000 police; he has rolled back from that today. I am not as gentle as my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe). I think that that speech was deliberately designed to mislead. We happen to know that the Chief Secretary to the Treasury warned the Home Secretary and the Prime Minister that they should not go down that road. What was their reaction? They spent hours with special advisers to find a form of words that was technically correct, but designed to mislead. I do not charge the Home Secretary with deliberately using words that were a distortion of the truth. I accuse him of knowing what he was saying, and of working to create an impression. I believe that partly because, as we have learned in the past two years, the essence of new Labour is to say one thing, but to do another.

Nevertheless, the police understood the situation. I could quote many police officers on it, but I shall quote only one. The chairman of the Metropolitan branch of the Police Federation said that the Home Secretary's speech was

"a complete betrayal of the people and the police officers of this country".

As the Home Secretary will know, he was not alone in creating that impression, because the Prime Minister shared his view. However, that was a double-edged endorsement. It was given by a man who says that he loves the pound, but is preparing for a single currency; who says that he will fight Britain's corner in Europe, but hands over ever more control to Brussels; who said that he would not increase taxation if elected, but has so far added £50 billion to the tax bill; and who says that national health service waiting lists are decreasing when they are increasing. The support of that calibre of character simply underlines that the Government are happy to say anything that they need to say to persuade people, rather than to do what the people want them to do.

The Home Secretary's policy is having predictable consequences. Rural crime, for example, has increased. As the Home Secretary said today, he spent 18 years in opposition. I had the good fortune of spending the first 18 years of my parliamentary career on the Government Benches. In the past two years, one of the things that I have learned about not being a Minister is that one is more likely to turn from the airy-fairy national discussion and concentrate on what is happening to those whom we represent: our constituents. I should therefore like to speak briefly about Cambridgeshire.

Cambridgeshire has one of the smaller constabularies, which, for operational reasons, is divided into three divisions. I shall tell the Minister about only one of them. It has such a huge funding gap that 15 posts have been frozen. By the end of the financial year, 20 posts in that one division may be frozen. Even if the Home Secretary were telling us the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, Cambridgeshire's share of new officers would not right the wrong of 60 or 70 frozen posts.

Cambridgeshire police, in my safe constituency and county, face a bill of £900,000 for policing the millennium. Who will pay that bill, Minister? Will you pay it, or will more police posts have to be frozen, so that police officers cannot patrol the Ortons, Fletton and Peterborough, or Yaxley, Ramsey, Bluntisham and Sawtry in my constituency? Do you realise, Minister, that Government policy is adding—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): Order. The right hon. Gentleman is a long-standing hon. Member, and really should use the correct parliamentary language.

Sir Brian Mawhinney: Does the Minister realise that the Government are adding to the police service's load? Last weekend, for example, 32 asylum seekers—most of whom dropped off the back of lorries—entered the one police division that I have been describing. In one case, two officers spent seven hours with seven asylum seekers. That represented a loss of 14 hours policing. Cambridgeshire has no idea how much of officers' time is being spent dealing with such matters.

If the asylum seekers have identity cards or means of identification and a name and address to go to, the police take the information and let them go, and that is the end of the immigration process. If they do not, the police spend hours with them, trying to identify them and where they are supposed to go to. They then give the asylum seekers a travel pass and a map of the way to Croydon. That is the asylum system that Ministers have defended to this House today.

[Sir Brian Mawhinney]

Martin Slade of the Immigration Service Union has said:

"The point of immigration control is to control immigration. We don't think they're controlling anything."

Nick Hardwick of the Refugee Council has said:

"The only crisis is in the Government's asylum system. They should concentrate on sorting out the shambles in the Immigration and Nationality Directorate."

I want the House to understand that my constituents are suffering because of the incompetence and ineptitude of this Government and of Ministers. It is time for them to stop saying one thing and doing another, and to start doing what they were elected to do. Otherwise, that phrase—which I suspect I coined three years ago—will return to haunt them.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The right hon. Gentleman's time is up.

5.46 pm

Mr. Jonathan Shaw (Chatham and Aylesford): I shall confine my remarks to the immigration and asylum part of the motion.

The events in Kent throughout this summer will be familiar to many hon. Members from newspapers and from television, and the difficulties arising from thousands of people seeking asylum have caused considerable distress throughout the county.

Kent and the ports play host to every conceivable nationality—indeed, they are welcomed. However, towns such as Dover and Ramsgate are not used to receiving such large influxes of people from foreign lands—whatever their reason for asylum and however barbaric their torture or persecution. Few would disagree that these people deserve our sympathy, our help and our tolerance. However, if we are to retain that tolerance when people seek sanctuary on our shores, it is vital that a proper structure is in place—a structure that does not place unfair burdens on particular communities, as has happened in Kent, and that quickly rejects those applications that are false.

Parts of Dover and Thanet contain some of the poorest areas within Kent—its objective 2 status renewal is confirmation of that. It does not take a great deal of imagination to work out the consequences of large numbers of asylum seekers entering a community that is not familiar with them and that suffers also from high unemployment. It is an unhealthy blend, and requires careful handling.

There are two tasks for those in positions of responsibility—to put in place a different structure to resolve the difficulties and the burdens that the Asylum and Immigration Act 1996 has put upon Kent and other port areas, and to reimburse the local authorities—and the Government are carrying out both of them. In the meantime, before we can resolve the matters before us with legislation, those concerned should tread carefully indeed and avoid anything that causes unrest.

Sadly, the temptation to gain publicity from this situation has proved too much for some of those in positions of responsibility. Instead of seeking solutions, they have sought the camera and fanned the flames of unrest. We have seen the consequences of that on the "dross"—a word used by local newspapers. The editor of the *Folkestone Herald* was warned by Kent police that his editorial in October last year could incite racial violence. It is important for hon. Members to know what local papers have been carrying within Kent at a time of such sensitivity. That editorial last October said:

"We want to wash dross down the drain.

Illegal immigrants, asylum seekers, bootleggers and the scum-of-the-earth drug smugglers have targeted our beloved coastline. We are left with the back-draft of a nation's human sewage and no cash to wash it down the drain."

Those are the views of the local newspaper editor. Hon. Members will understand the atmosphere that has been created in the towns of Dover, Folkestone and Thanet, and throughout Kent.

The most outrageous aspect of the situation is that some of those scoring points are from the party that brought us the dreadful Immigration and Asylum Act 1996, which forced people to stay in their port of entry and put the costs on the local council. I worked for Kent social services while the legislation was going through the House. The problems have been brewing for years. To deny that events in Europe and the rest of the world had an effect on the number of people coming into this country is to deny reality.

It is worth noting that, when Kent county council asked for help in 1996-97 because it was incurring a £2 million debt as a direct consequence of the legislation, it was told to stop whingeing and go away. No help was forthcoming from the Kent Conservative Members of Parliament. Why? Because Kent county council was run by a Labour-Liberal administration.

The world has changed now. We have a Conservative administration in Kent and a Labour Home Secretary. Suddenly, Tory Members of Parliament and the Tories on Kent county council have seen the consequences of the disastrous legislation. It is not quite so marvellous after all. I am pleased to say that, in contrast to the Conservative Government, my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary and his team have not ignored the difficulties. Unlike the Tories, they have not said "Go away, it's not a problem." They have met many of the costs. Instead of ignoring the issue, they have delivered a one-off payment of £670,000 to Kent police. The chairman of the Kent police authority described the granting of 42 extra police officers as generous.

We are also getting more immigration officers, and the £12 million costs of that were reimbursed to Kent county council. There is a continuing commitment to consider reimbursing the Ashford reception centre and the costs of unaccompanied minors, as well as bringing forward the dispersal programme early before the new legislation comes into force. The Kent Tory administration and Kent Members of Parliament have got what they wanted. The Tories have also got what they wanted: they have been able to play the issue in the media.

Mr. Allan: We are considering the issues of dispersal in other parts of the country, such as Sheffield, where we may be asked to receive people. We have two primary concerns. The first is that we shall need extra support like that given to Kent, which the hon. Gentleman has described, if we are not to suffer community relations problems. The second is the comments that he has referred

to, which give the impression that other parts of the country are being asked to take incredibly difficult and dangerous people who are no longer wanted in Dover and Kent. It is counterproductive for people to make such negative comments.

Mr. Shaw: I agree with the hon. Gentleman. As I have said before, the dispersal programme is right, but it needs to be carefully managed. It is important that the Home Office works closely with local authorities to ensure that it is successful. It is the right policy. The burden should not fall only on particular communities.

The Tories in Kent know a good excuse when they see one. Despite the best social services budget in years, with a 6 per cent. increase on the standard spending assessment, they are blaming the cost of dealing with asylum seekers for their decision to put up the cost of old people's meals on wheels. What a cynical attempt to use a problem that they created to cause fear among elderly people. That increase in cost comes to £18,000. At the same time, they are spending £5 million on new computers and a new call centre. We can see where their priorities lie.

I thank my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary for the listening ear that he has provided. However, the Government are about more than just listening; they have provided real resources. I have lived in Kent all my life, but never before have I witnessed such scenes of intolerance and violence as I saw in the ports and elsewhere last summer, and I hope that I never see them again. It is our responsibility to do everything that we can to handle the delicate situation. In a letter to the Home Office Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for North Warwickshire (Mr. O'Brien), who was then responsible for immigration, the Tory leader of Kent county council said that there was a tinderbox atmosphere in the port towns. I agreed with him but, sadly, he felt the need to release the letter to the press. A couple of weeks later, there were attacks in Dover. He added to the problems rather than seeking solutions.

The performance of the Tories in dealing with the matter has been a disgrace. They passed the 1996 Act and put the burdens on Kent and now they are blaming the Government. We welcome the additional resources and we look forward to the new legislation to lift the burden on areas of Kent.

5.56 pm

Mr. Charles Wardle (Bexhill and Battle): The hon. Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Mr. Shaw) and I have spoken together about Kent from time to time. We were both brought up in the county, although in different eras, I suspect. I hope that he will bear it in mind that, when there is uncontrolled immigration, the first people who suffer tension and prejudice are not those such as he or I, living in relatively leafy towns and suburbs, but British born and bred ethnic minorities.

This short debate covers a wide range of Home Office responsibilities, which have in common the indelible mark of the Government's failure to fulfil their promises to the electorate, their failure to make their policies work and their failure to sustain the services and standards that they criticised so stridently when they were in opposition.

The fall in police numbers and the slump in police morale this year and last year vividly illustrate the deficit between Labour's pre-election boasts and its performance in government. Large numbers of police officers are leaving the service and the pattern is the same throughout the country. The Police Federation has been unable to conceal its dismay at the undisguised hostility of the Macpherson report, the shortfall in promised funding, the betrayal of the Blakelock family, the manipulation of recruitment statistics and the creeping disease of political correctness that hampers authority. No wonder that crime is rising under a Government insensitive to victims, muddled about practical crime prevention measures and slow to act on the causes of crime.

On asylum seekers, the Government are compounding a growing and acute problem. I do not doubt that the Home Office will continue to honour the Geneva convention and will try at the same time to use the fair but effective means at its disposal of ruling out the large number of applicants who do not have a well-founded fear of persecution, but the scale of the influx, genuine or bogus, will not diminish as migration from eastern to western Europe continues unchecked.

The Government are compounding the problem in three ways. First, as I have said in the House before, the Home Office and the Treasury should recognise that the existence of a long asylum queue, with all the delays that that entails, is the biggest attraction for others to arrive here and join the queue. The several hundred million pounds that Ministers have spoken about will not resolve the problem. To massage numbers from the list by awarding exceptional leave to remain status and through other devices is not the answer. That did not happen in the first half of the previous Parliament, as one Minister wrongly claimed during the summer recess. To process the whole queue fairly but quickly would cost a great deal more in the short run but, once it was done, the repeated annual savings would be much larger than the once-and-for-all processing cost.

Secondly, the no-doubt-genuine aspirations of the Government's new legislation will soon be undermined if the appeal procedures are not conducted as swiftly in practice as Ministers have claimed theoretically will be the case. The Asylum and Immigration Appeals Act 1993 had provisions for a seven-day determination of manifestly unfounded applications, but that foundered when the Lord Chancellor's Department refused to add enough extra adjudicators to process the appeals within the prescribed timetable. That failure by the Lord Chancellor's Department could have been remedied, but it was overlooked in the second half of the previous Parliament, and has—unwisely, in my view—been disregarded by the present Home Secretary.

Thirdly, the European Union cross-pillar and comprehensive approach to asylum, to which the Government too readily subscribe, is turning attention away from a basic principle of the Geneva convention that, because of our island geography, is advantageous to the United Kingdom. The convention requires that asylum seekers must apply in the first safe country that they reach—so all the applicants who arrive in the United Kingdom via continental Europe should, by definition, be returned to whichever other convention country they first reached. Even if they have a well-founded fear of persecution, their cases are manifestly unfounded in the United Kingdom, because they should have been considered elsewhere. That is the way to respond fairly and properly to the convention.

[Mr. Charles Wardle]

Immigration control is similarly affected, as events in Tampere showed, by the European Commission's plans to absorb more third-pillar interior and justice policies within treaty competence. Rights of appeal to the European Court on immigration cases are the thin end of the wedge.

A greater threat to the integrity of our controls comes from the Commission's desire that a standard format European visit visa, issued, say, by a Greek entry clearance officer, should have some legitimacy when presented to an immigration officer at a British port of entry.

As Ministers know, I applauded the Government for having kept our border controls. However, the Commission will not rest until it has found other ways in which to envelop United Kingdom immigration controls within treaty competence. No one should doubt that, with EU enlargement, the already porous external frontiers will grow more porous still, as they extend into central and eastern Europe.

Finally, there is the Government's handling of the revelations in the Mitrokhin archive. The most disturbing aspect of that bizarre episode is the fact that the Security Service took it upon itself to decide whether the material provided sufficient evidence to mount a prosecution with a realistic chance of success. Surely that was for Ministers, the Law Officers and the Crown Prosecution Service, not the unaccountable Security Service, to decide.

In a recent letter to the Home Secretary, I said that I believed strongly in our constitutional monarchy and in a framework of authority that promotes the rule of law and safeguards genuine national interests, but that I abhorred the abuse of power. The Security Service is virtually immune from the law, and has no legal status, but it can break and enter, bug and tap telephones under the Royal Prerogative. It communicates as it pleases with a parliamentary Committee that cannot even report to Parliament, and that has to be content with arbitrary deletions from what it is told.

It is astonishing that the Government, who are allegedly committed to freedom of information and human rights, should fail to impose accountability on the secret service for its high-handed decisions about how to deal with the Mitrokhin archive. In 1988, Sir John Donaldson, then Master of the Rolls, said:

"It is silly for us to sit here and say that the security service is obliged to follow the letter of the law. It isn't real".

That still applies today.

Richard Tomlinson, who helped to bring the Mitrokhin files to the west, is pursued. David Shayler, who has had the temerity to criticise managerial inefficiency in the service, is hounded. However, spies whose persistent treachery has now been exposed by Mitrokhin were to be left alone without reference to the Law Officers or the Crown Prosecution Service.

The mishandling of the Mitrokhin archive, and the Government's failure to hold the Security Service accountable, are yet another example of the Labour Government's inability to put their promises into practice.

6.4 pm

Mr. Ian Cawsey (Brigg and Goole): When I returned to the House following the summer recess, one of the first things I noticed was the splendid new green annunciator screens that now hang half way across the Chamber on each side. I wondered what they were for, but now I know: they are large enough to cope with the titles of Opposition day motions. The subject of the debate was rather more succinctly expressed by Madam Speaker, who simply introduced it as "general Home Office matters".

I realised that the Tories could not describe the subject in those words because if they said that the debate was about general Home Office matters, that would put the shadow Home Secretary, the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe), in a difficult position. Because of the actions of the Leader of the Opposition, she is not allowed to speak on all Home Office matters. Now I understand why our debates have such long titles, and why we need such large screens.

I intend to speak only about police numbers, but first I must say briefly what a delight it is to follow the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Mr. Wardle). I worked for a short time for a Member of the previous Parliament, when the hon. Gentleman was an immigration Minister. He was an extremely effective and good one, and we always thought that he was fair. All Members should take seriously the comments that he makes on such matters in the House—I am sure that they will.

I want to speak about police numbers because I am one of the two Members—the other is a Liberal Democrat Member, whose constituency escapes me for the moment—who chaired police authorities before we entered the House.

Mr. Allan: Somerton and Frome.

Mr. Cawsey: Yes, I meant the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath).

I chaired the Humberside police authority from 1993 to 1997, which was a key time in the history of police authorities. When I first became the chair, our authority was an integral part of local government. Then came the Police and Magistrates' Courts Act 1994, and I was chair for the transitional period. The authority finally broke into full independence as the 1997 general election approached.

Listening to some of the comments in the debate, it strikes me that although police authorities, local authorities and police services are well aware of the effect of the changes, and their impact on powers and responsibilities, despite the fact that the Act originated from this building the House seems full of Members who have no understanding, or little understanding, of what has changed. Perhaps they do not want to understand.

I was not always a complete and utter fan of the 1994 Act when it was first drafted, but, due to many efforts in this House and in the other place, it turned out to be a fairly good and robust piece of legislation. For many years before it was enacted, I, and many other chairs of police authorities, had argued strongly that we wanted greater independence for police authorities and chief constables to decide establishments and police numbers for themselves, taking into account what they believed were the priorities for their areas, and the other things that they could spend money on, such as greater civilianisation, more training or more equipment. We were therefore pleased when the Act was passed. However, it had a knock-on effect, in that the ability of any Home Secretary—it does not matter any more of what political colour—to predict police numbers

is now not simply limited, but non-existent. Home Secretaries no longer have that power. It would be much better if we at least started from that point, and accepted that fact.

The hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes), who now speaks for the Liberals on such matters, said that he did not think that the Home Secretary could have it both ways, by saying that he was not responsible when police authorities employed fewer officers, but that he was responsible when numbers went up. On the contrary, not only can my right hon. Friend have it both ways, that is the only way to explain the present position. He has no control over decisions that police authorities and chief constables make about their own establishments. If he wants to increase police numbers, all that he can do is to ring fence a sum of money and say, "I am willing to give you this money only if you spend it for that purpose." Whether we think that that is a good or a bad thing, that is the reality; that is the law.

I believe that the hon. Member for Sheffield, Hallam (Mr. Allan) said that he hoped that we were not going to go back to the time when establishments were all centralised and decided in Westminster and Whitehall. That would be a retrograde step. For instance, in Humberside during my chairmanship we decided to buy a police helicopter. We covered a large rural area as well as the cities of Hull, Scunthorpe and Grimsby, and a helicopter would, in our opinion, be a good way of fighting crime and giving us fast access, especially to the rural parts of the county, in all kinds of circumstances. The helicopter has proved a great success, but let us not kid ourselves—it is extremely expensive to buy and run, and the money that we spend on it has had an impact on the number of officers that we can recruit.

We acquired the helicopter as part of a deal offered by the previous Government, whereby half the cost would be paid if we made an application. That was a generous offer—we took it and we got our helicopter. However, by doing that and following the policies of the Government of the day, there was an impact on the number of officers that we could recruit.

The idea that somehow the Home Secretary can be personally responsible for all such decisions is not credible, and it is not true. Furthermore, that would not even be desirable. Having funded the police authorities, we should allow them and their chief constables to write their own policing plans, set their priorities and decide for themselves how many officers, how many civilians, what equipment and what training would be right for their areas.

Conservative Members have claimed that when they were in power there were more constables. That is true, because within the freedom and flexibility that police authorities now have they have taken a decision to push down the rank structure. There are now many fewer superintendents and more constables. That is right and proper, because more constables can perform more active duties on the beat.

Civilianisation has also had an impact. Scenes of crime officers used to have to be police officers, but there is no reason why that should be the case, and many forces now have civilian scenes of crime officers and many other jobs have passed to civilians. In the end, whether the Government keep their promises of more officers on the beat cannot be judged only by how many police officers there are—the issue is the rank of those officers, what they do and what infrastructure is provided around them.

Special officers have been mentioned, and it is right to say that they make a tremendous addition to the resources of a local police force. However, I urge caution in judging how well a force is doing on the bare numbers. Specials are volunteers and they work the hours that they wish to work. In other words, a small number of special constables may make a bigger contribution to a police force because they are able to put in more hours. Therefore, I warn the House against some of the simplistic judgments that we have heard today.

The shadow Home Secretary spoke about reversing the decline and said that however many police officers were left, she would return the numbers to what they were when we came to power. I have mentioned the impotence of Home Secretaries under the legislation, so that promise is not deliverable. Even if the Home Secretary wanted to increase recruitment by a certain amount, he has no control over the decisions that police authorities and chief constables make about replacing officers who leave. Unless that power is re-centralised, the promise is unachievable. It may be that the shadow Home Secretary intended to announce by the back door that she would re-centralise that power, but I hope not because that would be a retrograde step.

Across the country, local authorities are dealing with community safety and crime reduction with great success on the back of the Morgan report, which was provided for the previous Government but never implemented. The Crime and Disorder Act 1998 means that the report is being implemented and partnerships are being formed between the police, local authorities, the business sector and the voluntary sector. That is making a big difference. We need to have proper debates about how to achieve community safety and crime reduction—the real issues—instead of point scoring.

I have had the great honour of working with hundreds of police officers with Humberside police, and the one thing that really cheeses off police officers is debates like this, in which their work is undervalued and we do not consider what should be done to support them. The solution is not as simple as the numbers: it involves money, resources, priorities—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order.

6.14 pm

Mr. Humfrey Malins (Woking): As always in Home Office debates, I declare an interest as an acting recorder of the Crown court, a metropolitan stipendiary magistrate and a founder and first chairman of the Immigration Advisory Service. I wish to address the issue of asylum and immigration, and in doing so it is important to use language that is not emotive. I shall try to be constructive and courteous while, at the same time, trying to identify the problem that faces the country and the Government.

The newspapers today contained reports of record numbers of people seeking asylum in this country. Total asylum seeker numbers for 1999 have already exceeded applications for the whole of the previous year. It is anticipated that by the end of this year there may be 70,000 applications for asylum, plus dependants. August and September both had record numbers—more

[Mr. Humfrey Malins]

than 7,000—of applications. That creates a tremendous strain on the adjudication and courts service which has to hear the applications.

The Home Office faces a crisis in the backlog of asylum and immigration cases that still await decision. In March, the backlog stood at 125,000; by June, it had risen to 140,000—today, it is just over 150,000, and by the end of the year, on present trends, it will reach more than 160,000. That is a huge burden on the Home Office and the resources of this country.

Mr. Julian Brazier (Canterbury): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving me the opportunity to respond to the shameful attack by the hon. Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Mr. Shaw) on the councillors, editors and people of Kent. Does my hon. Friend agree that Kent needs a reduction in the number of asylum seekers, as was achieved in the last year of the previous Government, and not the enormous increases that he has just described?

Mr. Malins: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend's work in that area. He has shown great devotion to his duty to his constituents, and he has been in his place throughout the debate today.

Why is the backlog of asylum and immigration cases so big? It is because decisions are being made at half the rate at which new applications are made. It is no good continuing with a system that makes decisions so slowly. This morning, at the meeting of the Home Affairs Committee, I put some straight questions to the Home Secretary. I said, "Home Secretary, there were 7,300 applications for asylum in September. How soon will their cases be heard? How soon will the results of those cases and any appeals be known? How soon will those who fail in their applications be removed?" The Home Secretary could not answer, and nor could the official who accompanied him.

That is the scale of the problem that faces the country, and the Home Office is not getting to grips with it. It has let the problem, which it admittedly inherited from the previous Government, get worse and worse. Incidentally, I take this opportunity to pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Mr. Wardle) for the outstanding work that he did as an immigration Minister in the previous Government.

The Government are not doing enough and the Home Office is in chaos. The Immigration and Nationality Directorate in Croydon faces impossible queues. Telephones go unanswered and the computer system is in chaos. In my surgeries on Friday nights in Woking—which has a large, settled ethnic community—I see many constituents with ongoing cases who come to me in despair because their correspondence and telephone calls are never dealt with. They tell me, and I tell the House, that the Home Office appears to the communities outside the House to have lost its grip on the problem.

The Home Office needs to decide asylum and immigration applications quickly. In Croydon, the 28 teams of 16 people each are doing their best to decide the cases, but more money may be necessary and may save time in the long run. More money now may lead us to a system that would be in the better interests of those many genuine cases who are being elbowed aside by those who have less claim. Therefore, we should decide cases fast and hear appeals quickly. There is no reason why they should not be heard quickly and why decisions should not be made thereafter. If it is decided that the appeal has failed and someone has to be removed—remove them fast. The slower the system, the worse the problem will get. Nothing that the Home Office said this afternoon or the Home Secretary said this morning gives me any reason to believe that the system will do anything save slow down even more.

Finally, what of the problem of those tens of thousands of people whose immigration or asylum applications have been lost all the way down the line and who are out there in the community? Many thousands of asylum applicants have lost all contact with the Home Office. That is not good enough. In this modern computerised age, this Home Office ought to be able to get to grips with retrieval. Those people who should not be here should be taken to account and removed. One adjudicator told me recently, "It is ludicrous that I hear appeal after appeal in the certain knowledge that even if the appeal fails all the way up the line, the applicant will go to ground and stay in this country for ever."

The current situation will not do. The many thousands of people in the ethnic communities in this country recognise that the Government have lost their grip on all matters connected with asylum and immigration. They have come out with a good line, but they have not acted and thought through the problem properly. They may need more money or resources. If the House finds in six months that the list of those waiting for an initial determination in an asylum or other immigration case is getting longer, it will be a clear sign that the Government are continuing to fail.

6.22 pm

Mr. Gwyn Prosser (Dover): My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary spelled out why the total number of asylum seekers coming into the country has increased, and why many of them are settling at their ports of entry due to the changes in the Asylum and Immigration Act 1996. I shall concentrate on some of the difficulties that this has caused my constituents.

Until 1996–97, although about 21 million passengers travelled through Dover every year, very few stayed in the port. Few asylum seekers who passed through settled in Dover because the legislation was very different. At that time, we had an ethnic minority of less than 0.6 per cent., which was one of the smallest in the country.

In the past few years, as the changes introduced by the Conservatives took effect, asylum seekers have been required to claim in the port of Dover. Therefore, the numbers started to increase. For sensible and practical reasons—practical in the short term—the county council, which is picking up the bill, and Dover district council, which is settling the housing, housed those people in inexpensive accommodation in bed-and-breakfast areas close to the port. Large numbers of asylum seekers were concentrated in one small area of the town—an area that is not prosperous.

The early settlers who came across in large numbers in 1997 were mostly Slovakian Romany people. The local perception was that they were not fleeing from oppression—certainly not from state oppression or tyranny—and were not genuine claimants.

Given that background, social tensions started to get worse. They were badly exacerbated by some of the issues mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Mr. Shaw). The hostile comments in one local newspaper, the *Dover Express,* and the attacks of editor Nick Hudson on asylum seekers in his editorials raised tension and created an inflammatory atmosphere. He used the terms "human sewage" and "dross" in referring to asylum seekers. He published stories that most respectable newspapers would flush down the sink, puffing them up as story of the week, with headings like, "The good ship DSS Scrounger docks at Dover" and with many pejorative remarks. Those stories almost gave some legitimacy to the feeling of local people that they were being put on and having a hard time, or that they were not being dealt with fairly. His language was really hostile.

My hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford could have told the House that senior members of the Kent police called in that same editor twice because of the language that he was using and the atmosphere that he was creating with his newspaper. The *Dover Express* is one of a number of local newspapers, but it stands alone in terms of that coverage. It changed its response to asylum seekers only when that editor took control. Many of the reporters have been at the paper a long time and still have the respect of the community, although I know that they have some problems.

Apart from being called in by the police, the Press Complaints Commission judged that the editor's coverage was likely to incite racial violence. Just this week, local churches in Dover put together a petition, which has been mentioned from the pulpits, entitled, "Christians against the Dover Express". It was handed in to the local paper last week. The police in Kent, the Press Complaints Commission and the local churches all say that that coverage is exacerbating the problems and adding to our difficulties.

Something else that added to our difficulties was the unwelcome intervention of the shadow Home Secretary in the summer. When we were trying to heal wounds, asylum support groups were coming in, the police were explaining the situation to the community and we were looking for calm, the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) came posturing and pirouetting into Pencester gardens, saying all sorts of silly and spurious things—some of her remarks were inflammatory. On numerous occasions, she asked why the Government did not do something and why the Home Secretary had not acted.

The reality is that most of our problems were due to the large numbers of asylum seekers. What the right hon. Lady should have known—perhaps she did know—was that Kent county council could move asylum seekers who wished to go outside Dover and Kent. What she should have known, but did not tell the newspapers, was that months before the violence in Pencester gardens, the council had encouraged more than 100 asylum seekers to move away voluntarily. The numbers had started to decrease, but that did not suit the right hon. Lady's agenda on that day.

Today, the situation in Dover is much calmer. The police are taking appropriate action—not merely enforcement but liaison work. They are getting into the community and talking to both sides. A liaison officer is working with Kent county council and Dover district council, and talking to local people, especially in the hot spots. Life is returning to normal. The last figures that I have seen show that the number of asylum seekers in the area has dropped from 1,000 or more to less than 600.

In the remaining time, I must mention the good news stories in Dover—the stories behind all those headlines, which have been blown up and exaggerated by some Conservative Members. Local groups within the churches and voluntary asylum support groups have joined together into a network of asylum support without much outside funding and without any direct advantage to themselves. In a difficult situation, they have been working with asylum seekers and their families, in particular with the children, to give them some sort of welcome and to help integrate them into the community.

I am convinced that the practical changes in the Immigration and Asylum Bill, which I hope will soon become an Act, will deal with nearly all the problems that I have identified in Dover. The large numbers of asylum seekers can be reduced through sensible and sensitive dispersal, and Dover's attractiveness to asylum seekers can be removed by reducing the cash benefits to sensible support level. I welcome also those other provisions in the Bill that will give further protection to Dover.

I shall conclude my remarks with the message that there is a mixture of stories to be told about Dover, and that the hostility of one particular newspaper means that it will be very difficult to return matters to the way they were before 1996.

6.31 pm

Mr. Peter Brooke (Cities of London and Westminster): I am delighted to follow the hon. Member for Dover (Mr. Prosser), with whom I share some sense of being in the front line when it comes to constituency asylum problems, and I acknowledge the experience with which he spoke. I shall be brief, in the hope that there will be time for a contribution from at least one other colleague.

Since the sad death of the late Alan Clark, I have become the only Conservative Member of Parliament in the country with an inner-city constituency. This debate is very germane to my constituency, which has a heavy crime rate because of the number of day visitors. It also has a continuing involvement with asylum seekers, given that 15 per cent. of the households in Westminster are now not on the electoral register.

I shall begin with a brief word about the police. This is the season in which amenity societies and residents associations in Westminster have their annual or general meetings. A feature of those meetings is the patient replies from the police that there is a limit to what they can achieve, given the fall in police numbers with which they have had to cope.

I witnessed only one event associated with last week's visit by the Chinese President. That was at Guildhall, where I thought that the City of London police handled the protesters extremely well, and gave them ample opportunity to make their views known to the President of China.

I wish to concentrate on asylum seekers. I think that it is still reasonable to describe the situation as a shambles. I declare an interest, in that I am a vice-chairman of the all-party refugees group.

One index of a shambles is that the new Minister of State at the Home Office, the hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Mrs. Roche), had to be diverted from

[Mr. Peter Brooke]

the Financial Services and Markets Bill, an extremely important piece of legislation, to take over responsibility for asylum seekers from the Under-Secretary previously in charge, the hon. Member for North Warwickshire (Mr. O'Brien). That decision was made by the Prime Minister: I can tell the House that the Royal Navy manual states, with regard to typhoons, that the first evidence of an approaching typhoon is a general sense on the part of the captain that all is not well.

A second index of a shambles is that, six months after the Home Secretary's very welcome letter telling colleagues that the very worst was over in the immigration service, lawyers daily release cases into my lap because they cannot get answers, in writing or by telephone, from the Home Office. Frankly, that worries me, because it looks as though a two-tier immigration service may be developing, in which those who can afford lawyers may be able, through Members of Parliament, to secure answers more quickly than other constituents.

Although I acknowledge that a huge number of the latter are still writing to me too, I have a specific question for the new Minister of State, the hon. Member for Norwich, South (Mr. Clarke), whom I congratulate on his promotion. When he winds up the debate, will he say whether constituents who write in to the Home Office through Members of Parliament—either directly or through their lawyers—receive quicker responses than those who do not? Ideally, Members of Parliament should intervene in such matters only exceptionally, rather than as a matter of course.

My question is especially important in the context of travel documents. Constituents' letters about those documents are now invariably accompanied by details of urgent family reasons for travelling. Those reasons include medical treatment, car crashes or even imminent death. The consistency of those rationales suggest that travel document requests are now being taken out of order, and that word has gone out on the grapevine that pressing family reasons are, in the Home Office's eyes, a good each-way bet.

By and large, and to its credit, the Home Office has not allowed queue-jumping to occur in the naturalisation procedure. Such queue-jumping always disadvantages the rest of the queue. However, I would welcome a statement of policy on travel document practices. It is currently taking the travel document section more than 60 days even to acknowledge an application's arrival. Even then, the accompanying statement that it may take at least six months to resolve the application does not indicate whether the six-month period starts with the date of application or with the acknowledgement of the application. That makes travel planning still more difficult.

However, what I ask for most of all is a clear statement of the detail of the backlog facing the immigration service. I can see that the service might be crying out for a period of peace and quiet in which staff can get on with sorting out that backlog. It would be much easier for some of us to afford the service that relief and respite if we had a much clearer idea of the present policies, procedures and situation that we could advance to our desperate and bewildered constituents. Home Office officials are personally very courteous to me. I should like to respond to them in kind, if they would give me the tools to do so.

6.35 pm

Mr. John Greenway (Ryedale): I begin by welcoming to his new job the Minister of State, the hon. Member for Norwich, South (Mr. Clarke), who I assume will be winding up the debate. My colleagues and I are looking forward to debating police matters and other issues with him.

This debate has again revealed the Home Secretary as a master of equivocation and obfuscation. In one of his least convincing performances, he failed today to answer any of the key questions posed by my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe). I shall repeat those questions for the benefit of the House.

Will there be 5,000 more police officers than there are now in 2002, or 2003? If not, will there be more officers than there are now, or fewer? How many more or fewer officers will there be?

Is it true that the new police radio project will cost £1.5 billion? How will that project be paid for? How much extra are the Home Secretary and his Department giving police authorities? Is the amount merely the £50 million that the Home Secretary announced to the Labour party conference, or will more money be announced later? Will the shortfall have an impact on the ability of police authorities to recruit officers? Police authorities up and down the country say that it will.

Does the Home Secretary agree that there are significantly more asylum seekers now than when he took office?

Mr. James Clappison (Hertsmere): Does my hon. Friend agree that the shortfall has affected some areas more severely than others? In Barnet and Hertsmere, for example, we have lost 60 of the 285 officers that we had in 1997. That fall of 20 per cent. has left our force hamstrung.

Mr. Greenway: There will not be time for many interventions, but I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that one. It illustrates exactly what is happening throughout the country. The cost of paying for the radio project imposed by the Home Office is already impacting badly on police recruitment plans.

I return now to the question of asylum seekers. Does the Home Secretary agree that there are significantly more of them now than when he took office, and that there is a backlog of 90,000 cases? Is it true that mail at the immigration and nationality department of the Home Office has remained unopened since July? Is it true that only 1,800 of the 52,000 telephone calls made to the department in September were answered?

Did any Government Department give instructions to the police in connection with the demonstrations during the visit by the President of China? Is the Home Secretary aware of what appeared in last weekend's edition of *The Sunday Times*? The newspaper alleged that

"a senior Metropolitan police officer said last week that his colleagues had been instructed by the Foreign Office to adopt a 'zero-tolerance' approach to prevent causing offence during President Jiang's four-day visit. 'If the minutes of meetings between police and Foreign Office officials are made public, the Government is going to have egg on its face,' the officer said."

Is that true? When will the Government come clean about just what instructions were given?

The Home Secretary failed to answer any of those important questions. The extent to which he was floundering was made evident when he prayed in aid rail privatisation, the Child Support Agency, BSE, and even the matter of arms to Iraq. He seemed also to suggest that the excellent web site of my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidstone and The Weald was the cause of his embarrassment. While the debate has gone on, we have managed to find the right hon. Gentleman's own web site. Actually, we first found a web site maintained by an unofficial fan club at the university of York. We found the "Jack Straw Fan Club Home Page", which notes, "We love Jack Straw", and adds:

"I ate his liver with some fava beans and a nice Chianti."

The official web site of the Home Secretary lists, among other things, the right hon. Gentleman's recreations:

"walking, music, cooking puddings and supporting Blackburn Rovers."

That is hardly as good as my right hon. Friend's excellent web site. The right hon. Gentleman will be walking back to the Opposition Benches when he has faced the music at the next election. The proof of his pudding is in the eating; it is going down horribly with the police service, just as Blackburn Rovers went down at the end of last season.

Try as he may, the Home Secretary cannot camouflage serious crises in the key areas for which he is responsible. Police numbers are falling at an ever faster rate. Asylum seekers are at record numbers. There is a shambles in the Immigration and Nationality Directorate, with a record backlog of unsettled cases. We have yet to hear a plausible—let alone a complete—explanation of the right hon. Gentleman's handling of the Mitrokhin spy archive and related matters.

We have heard today a complete abdication of responsibility for the problems in the right hon. Gentleman's Department. His revised explanations to the Select Committee on Home Affairs of police recruitment plans reveal that he has lost all credibility as regards any information that he gives on police numbers. The power of Opposition day debates is truly amazing. Their effect is astonishing. Some 4,000 more police recruits are planned today than were yesterday. Chief constables and communities up and down the land will be praying for more Tory Opposition days in the months to come when they see police numbers beginning to fall.

The Home Secretary has never explained how the 11,000 recruits already planned were calculated. Now he tells us the figure was 15,000. What was the original figure on which he based his request for more money? Was it 11,000, or was it 15,000? How can anyone have confidence that he has any idea of the true figure? Chief constables know the figures, and so do police authorities and the Police Federation. The numbers being recruited are being frozen for authorities throughout the country. Numbers are falling as a result. Today's announcement confuses the issue rather than clarifying it. The sudden conjuring up of 4,000 more recruits insults the intelligence of the electorate and the police service.

We have previously drawn attention to the problems of police recruitment in the police grant debate and July's debate on the police in London. Our concerns were dismissed as alarmist, but we can see now that the Home Secretary was himself alarmed at the trend on police numbers. Behind the scenes, he was asking for more money. We welcome that, and we welcome the recognition—at long last—that a serious problem had to be resolved. However, what angers the police and increasingly appals the public is that an initiative intended to shore up police manpower was portrayed as an initiative to recruit 5,000 extra police officers—5,000 more than now.

That was no unintended or mistaken misinterpretation of the Home Secretary's announcement. The former Chief Secretary to the Treasury could see what was up, when he wrote that if the Home Secretary promised 5,000 extra—that is additional—officers, the Chief Secretary would end up having to find the money to pay for them. That is why the Home Secretary was forced to clear his announcement. What is even more telling is the tone of the Chief Secretary's reported remark:

"I will not countenance a further reserve claim".

What a telling message that is to the police service. Some £35 million is being provided for police recruitment, and £50 million for radios that cost £1.5 billion. The police can expect no more help. There was absolute silence on the growing crisis of funding police pensions. We must conclude that the crisis will only get worse.

In recent days, there has been no better example of the effect of all that on policing than the comment of the Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis, Sir Paul Condon, who told the Home Secretary last Thursday that he had insufficient manpower even to cover murder inquiries. We have seen a complete abdication of responsibility by the Home Secretary today in his failure to say what he intends to do about these crises.

The Home Secretary has been caught redhanded, but he is not alone in his conspiracy to hoodwink the voters. The Prime Minister was clearly a willing accomplice. He was offered the chance to protest his innocence at the Dispatch Box last week, but he perpetuated the hoax, telling my right hon. Friend the Member for Richmond, Yorks (Mr. Hague):

"Yes, there will be 5,000 extra police officers."—[*Official Report*, 20 October 1999; Vol. 336, c. 433.]

One must admire him for standing by a mate who has been caught, but he could, in truth, do little else. The Prime Minister was well aware of what was going on, and he had to stand by his Jack or give him the sack.

The Prime Minister and the Home Secretary also knew that Labour spin doctors were busy selling the story to the media that there would be 5,000 extra police. Perhaps that is why there was no attempt to correct the story. Today's revelation does nothing to rectify the situation. The penny is beginning to drop in the public mind. They see the thin blue line getting thinner, and they remember that new Labour claimed it would be tough on crime, tough on the causes of crime. The public remember the Labour manifesto promise that the police had Labour's strong support. They remember the Home Secretary saying that he would get 5,000 more police. They will recognise all too well that every one of those promises has been broken.

The public will also recall that the Prime Minister told the country that there would be no more lies and no more broken promises. What a shambles. The public will take their revenge at the ballot box.

The Government promised more police, but they are supervising the biggest fall in police numbers in living memory and the complete erosion of police morale.

[Mr. Greenway]

The Government said that they had secured the United Kingdom's borders, but they have presided over the biggest influx of asylum seekers that we have ever experienced. The Government embarked on a modernisation programme that has left the Immigration and Nationality Directorate in complete disarray. When faced with the revelation of the most serious spy scandal in a generation, the Government dithered and prevaricated, entirely failing to understand the seriousness of the situation or to report it to the House.

New Labour's slipshod stewardship of policing, immigration and national security are just the latest in a catalogue of mistakes and incompetence. Such mismanagement demands that the House register the strongest possible reprimand. I urge hon. Members on both sides to do so by voting for our motion.

6.49 pm

The Minister of State, Home Office (Mr. Charles Clarke): I thank the hon. Member for Ryedale (Mr. Greenway) for his courteous welcome to me, which I appreciated. In his speech, his only palpable hit was on the Home Secretary's support for Blackburn Rovers football club; the whole House will be aware that Norwich City's tremendous victory over Bolton—the team supported by the Chief Whip—took us above Blackburn in the first division, and I am very glad about that.

I welcome this debate. It is an opportunity for the Government to set out their case on the various issues that have been raised. I had hoped that it would be an opportunity for the Opposition to set out their policies on the issues, but I regret that yet again the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) showed herself to be more of a rent-a-quote and an unguided missile than a serious proponent of alternative policies. She is more of an embarrassment to her party leadership, as demonstrated on clause 118 of the Immigration and Asylum Bill—currently in the House of Lords—than a positive part of the Opposition team. Perhaps that is why there was no crime pledge in the Conservative list of five commonsense pledges presented at the Conservative party conference. Perhaps that is why today the right hon. Lady has tabled a compendium resolution—or as a friend of mine said, a kitchen-sink resolution. It does not mention the major progress that has been made in the youth justice system and the criminal justice system towards meeting the pledges that we made.

I shall deal with the three issues that the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald has identified. The first is that of cold-war spies, about which my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Mr. Mackinlay) spoke. There is always good theatre to be had about such issues, but in truth some serious issues need to be looked at properly in considering the future of our country following the cold war and in seeking proper accountability for our security services.

The Government's agenda is public and clear. We have set out absolutely the need to put everything on a proper basis. I pay tribute to the Conservative Government. Their legislation on the matter and the establishment of the Intelligence and Security Committee acknowledged the need to put these things on a proper footing and to have serious debate on the issues, and that is what is happening. All parties in the political process have to work together. I am sure that that is the right way to do it. We should eschew cheap political theatre of the type that the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald wants and focus on cleaning up the whole system.

My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary paid tribute to the work of the right hon. Member for Bridgwater (Mr. King) and his committee. The all-party approach of my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary is an attempt to address the issues in a proper way. That is the right way to proceed. It is not cheap posturing of the kind indulged in by Opposition Front-Bench spokesmen.

Dr. Julian Lewis: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Clarke: No, I will not.

My hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock raised some significant points. The Government must take seriously what he had to say when they examine carefully the conclusions of the Intelligence and Security Committee once it has considered the issue in the round.

The second issue is asylum seekers and immigration control. It is striking that five hon. Members raised it this afternoon: my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Mr. Shaw), the hon. Members for Bexhill and Battle (Mr. Wardle) and for Woking (Mr. Malins), my hon. Friend the Member for Dover (Mr. Prosser) and the right hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mr. Brooke). It is no secret that the turmoil in Europe at the end of the cold war, especially in the former Yugoslavia, has massively increased the problems. That was acknowledged by some hon. Members today. It is a real situation that affects not only Britain but every country in Europe. It is why we dealt in 1988 with 4,000 asylum applications a year and with 45,000 last year.

Reorganisation of the immigration and nationality department was long overdue. Investment should have been made to resolve the problems in the past, but it has been down to us to sort out the mess that we inherited. As my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary said, the stewardship of the Tories under the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald made the situation far worse. They left thousands of asylum seekers to pick up the tab. They established the unfair and arbitrary white list. They failed to tackle unscrupulous so-called immigration advisers. They did nothing whatever to speed up the process of applying for asylum.

I place on record my appreciation of the comments made by the hon. Member for Woking. He acknowledged that the Government inherited serious problems on asylum and immigration. That was an honest and correct thing for him to say, and I am glad that he had the courtesy to do so.

The hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle made some serious points. We have invested an extra £120 million over three years. We are taking forward a range of initiatives to improve productivity, develop new and speedier working methods, streamline procedures for dealing with general casework and thoroughly reappraise the IT system. We are recruiting an extra 340 staff in Croydon and we have plans to recruit a further 200 in Croydon and 85 in Liverpool. The hon. Gentleman was right to identify the need to speed up decisions. The Minister of State, Home Office, my hon. Friend the

Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Mrs. Roche), is working exceptionally hard to achieve change in precisely the way that is needed and should have been effected a long time ago.

I must make reference to the race card, which the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald raised. We could not have had a clearer illustration of what is at stake than in the speeches of my hon. Friends the Members for Chatham and Aylesford and for Dover. The hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Mr. Lansley) said in 1995, having been head of research at Conservative central office:

"Immigration was an issue which we raised successfully in 1992 and again in the 1994 European election campaign. It played particularly well in the tabloids and has more potential to hurt."

Those were not my words but the words of the former Tory strategist who is now the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire. My hon. Friend the Member for Dover put the issue straightforwardly.

We are making progress on asylum and immigration. My Home Office colleagues and I acknowledge the immense task that needs to be undertaken. Incidentally, at the G8 conference on organised crime last week we secured international agreement to inhibit trafficking in illegal immigrants throughout the world. That is an example of the international co-operation that my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary moved forward at the EU summit at Tampere. Many Opposition Members would eschew that co-operation.

The last issue that the Opposition raised was the police. It is a shame that not once has any credit been given to the Government for the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 and the establishment of local crime reduction partnerships up and down the country. The Act is described by many chief constables to me as the best legislation that any Government have introduced to inhibit and reduce crime in any area directly. Building a genuine partnership between all agencies is at the core of our approach.

Another element of our approach is recognition of the fantastic benefits that technology can provide. We are focusing on intelligence-led policing, the use of DNA and the public service radio communications scheme, which has been described. A total of £1.5 billion has been identified for a public finance initiative for the scheme and we are allocating more money to take it forward. Forces want the scheme because they want to communicate with each other and develop in an effective way. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister announced earlier this year a commitment on DNA which will massively increase our ability to use it to solve crimes.

I was interested in the remarks made by the right hon. Member for North-West Cambridgeshire (Sir B. Mawhinney) about police numbers. I will take him through the ups and downs of police numbers in the past eight or nine years so that the House has them fully on the record, given his absurd claim of an average increase of whatever it was he said. The figures are as follows: 1991–92, plus 132; 1992–93, plus 663; 1993–94, minus 393; 1994–95, minus 675; 1995–96, minus 321—this was all under the Conservatives—1996–97, plus 257; 1997–98, minus 344; and 1998–99, as my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary said, minus 715. Those figures do not show a strong record for the Conservative Government. That is precisely why my right hon. Friend made his announcement. He was right to do so and to take it forward.

The Conservatives should support the process of modernisation and change. They should have initiated it when they were in office, but they did not. The country needs a modern, effective, accountable police service that focuses its efforts in partnership with others on reducing crime. That is what the Government want and what the Government will deliver.

Question put, That the original words stand part of the Question:—

The House divided: Ayes 145, Noes 371.

Division No. 276] **[6.59 pm**

AYES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Amess, David
Ancram, Rt Hon Michael
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Baldry, Tony
Beggs, Roy
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Blunt, Crispin
Body, Sir Richard
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Rt Hon Mrs Virginia
Brady, Graham
Brazier, Julian
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Burns, Simon
Butterfill, John
Cash, William
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Clark, Dr Michael *(Rayleigh)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Kenneth *(Rushcliffe)*
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Collins, Tim
Colvin, Michael
Cran, James
Curry, Rt Hon David
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice & Howden)*
Dorrell, Rt Hon Stephen
Duncan, Alan
Duncan Smith, Iain
Emery, Rt Hon Sir Peter
Evans, Nigel
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Flight, Howard
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Fowler, Rt Hon Sir Norman
Fox, Dr Liam
Fraser, Christopher
Garnier, Edward
Gibb, Nick
Gill, Christopher
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Gray, James
Green, Damian
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Hague, Rt Hon William
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hammond, Philip
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John
Heald, Oliver
Heathcoat-Amory, Rt Hon David
Heseltine, Rt Hon Michael
Horam, John
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Hunter, Andrew
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jenkin, Bernard
Johnson Smith, Rt Hon Sir Geoffrey
Key, Robert
King, Rt Hon Tom *(Bridgwater)*
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lansley, Andrew
Letwin, Oliver
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lidington, David
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Llwyd, Elfyn
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
Lyell, Rt Hon Sir Nicholas
MacGregor, Rt Hon John
McIntosh, Miss Anne
MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
Maclean, Rt Hon David
McLoughlin, Patrick
Madel, Sir David
Malins, Humfrey
Maples, John
Mates, Michael
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Moss, Malcolm
Nicholls, Patrick
Norman, Archie
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Paterson, Owen
Pickles, Eric
Prior, David
Randall, John
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Laurence *(Tewk'b'ry)*
Rowe, Andrew *(Faversham)*
Ruffley, David
St Aubyn, Nick
Sayeed, Jonathan
Shephard, Rt Hon Mrs Gillian
Shepherd, Richard
Simpson, Keith *(Mid-Norfolk)*
Smyth, Rev Martin *(Belfast S)*
Soames, Nicholas
Spelman, Mrs Caroline

Spicer, Sir Michael
Spring, Richard
Steen, Anthony
Streeter, Gary
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Townend, John
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Tyrie, Andrew
Viggers, Peter
Walter, Robert
Wardle, Charles
Waterson, Nigel
Wells, Bowen
Whitney, Sir Raymond
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Wilkinson, John
Willetts, David
Wilshire, David
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Woodward, Shaun
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mrs. Jacqui Lait and
Mr. Stephen Day.

NOES

Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Alexander, Douglas
Allan, Richard
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Armstrong, Rt Hon Ms Hilary
Atherton, Ms Candy
Austin, John
Ballard, Jackie
Barnes, Harry
Battle, John
Bayley, Hugh
Beard, Nigel
Begg, Miss Anne
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Bell, Stuart *(Middlesbrough)*
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Benn, Rt Hon Tony *(Chesterfield)*
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Berry, Roger
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Blunkett, Rt Hon David
Boateng, Paul
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brand, Dr Peter
Breed, Colin
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brown, Rt Hon Nick *(Newcastle E)*
Browne, Desmond
Bruce, Malcolm *(Gordon)*
Burgon, Colin
Burstow, Paul
Butler, Mrs Christine
Byers, Rt Hon Stephen
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell–Savours, Dale
Cann, Jamie
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chaytor, David
Chidgey, David
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Cooper, Yvette
Corbyn, Jeremy
Corston, Ms Jean
Cotter, Brian
Cousins, Jim
Cranston, Ross
Crausby, David
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Rt Hon Dr Jack *(Copeland)*
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Dalyell, Tam
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Dobbin, Jim
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, F[illegible]
Dowd, J[illegible]
Drew, David
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Elman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Etherington, Bill
Fearn, Ronnie
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Fyfe, Maria
Gapes, Mike
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godman, Dr Norman A
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Grant, Bernie
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Grogan, John
Gunnell, John
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hancock, Mike
Hanson, David
Harman, Rt Hon Ms Harriet
Harvey, Nick
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Healey, John
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hesford, Stephen
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hood, Jimmy
Hoon, Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howells, Dr Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Rt Hon Barry *(Alyn)*
Jones, Mrs Fiona *(Newark)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Ms Jenny *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Jones, Nigel *(Cheltenham)*
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Kelly, Ms Ruth
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Charles *(Ross Skye)*
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lawrence, Ms Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Liddell, Rt Hon Mrs Helen
Linton, Martin
Livingstone, Ken
Livsey, Richard
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester E)*
Lock, David
Love, Andrew
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McCartney, Rt Hon Ian *(Makerfield)*
McDonagh, Siobhain
Macdonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
McIsaac, Shona
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
Maclennan, Rt Hon Robert
McNamara, Kevin
McNulty, Tony
MacShane, Denis
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Marshall–Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michie, Bill *(Sheff'd Heeley)*
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll & Bute)*
Milburn, Rt Hon Alan
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin
Moffatt, Laura
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Moore, Michael
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Morris, Rt Hon John *(Aberavon)*
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Murphy, Rt Hon Paul *(Torfaen)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Oaten, Mark
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Osborne, Ms Sandra
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Pendry, Tom
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris

Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Sir Raymond
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prescott, Rt Hon John
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Quin, Rt Hon Ms Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Radice, Rt Hon Giles
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd
Raynsford, Nick
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Reid, Rt Hon Dr John *(Hamilton N)*
Rendel, David
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Cov'try NW)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rogers, Allan
Rooker, Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Roy, Frank
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Salter, Martin
Sanders, Adrian
Sarwar, Mohammad
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Snape, Peter
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Ms Helen
Spellar, John
Squire, Ms Rachel
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr Howard
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Temple-Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tyler, Paul
Tynan, Bill
Vaz, Keith
Vis, Dr Rudi
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Ms Claire
Wareing, Robert N
Watts, David
Webb, Steve
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Wigley, Rt Hon Dafydd
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Willis, Phil
Wills, Michael
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wise, Audrey
Wood, Mike
Woolas, Phil
Worthington, Tony
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, Dr Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. David Clelland and Mrs. Anne McGuire.

Question accordingly negatived.

Question, That the proposed words be there added, *put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 31 (Questions on amendments) and agreed to.*

MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *forthwith declared the main Question, as amended, to be agreed to.*

Resolved,

That this House applauds the Government for its achievements on Home Office issues; notes that the previous government left the youth justice system in disarray, left chaos in the immigration and asylum system, in particular as a result of provisions in the Asylum and Immigration Act 1996, and that police numbers fell by 1,500 between 1992–93 and 1997–98; further notes the action that the Government has taken in asking the Intelligence and Security Committee to review the handling of the Mitrokhin Archive, including key decisions taken before 1997; and welcomes the Government's initiatives to provide new money to fund the recruitment of 5,000 police officers over and above the number that would otherwise have been recruited, comprehensively to tackle crime and disorder and to develop a fairer, faster and firmer immigration and asylum system, through the Immigration and Asylum Bill, which will better serve genuine refugees and help reduce the number of abusive claims in the United Kingdom.'.

National Health Service

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael J. Martin): We now come to the next motion. I inform the House that Madam Speaker has chosen the amendment in the name of the Prime Minister and has ruled that there will be a 10-minute limit on Back-Bench speeches.

7.15 pm

Dr. Liam Fox (Woodspring): I beg to move— *[Interruption.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I ask hon. Members to leave the Chamber quietly as the hon. Gentleman is addressing the House.

Dr. Fox: That was a short soundbite, even for me.

I beg to move,

That this House notes and applauds the dedication of those who work in the National Health Service but regrets the inadequacy of the support they receive from Her Majesty's Government in their efforts to deliver a first-class service; deplores the mismanagement of the National Health Service by Her Majesty's Government; regrets the continued distortion of clinical priorities in favour of political targets; urges the new Secretary of State to acknowledge the damage the waiting list initiative has caused to the National Health Service and to abandon waiting list targets as a measure of performance; calls on him to acknowledge the existence of rationing in the National Health Service and to ensure that in future such rationing takes place solely on the basis of clinical need; and calls for a fully informed and wide-ranging debate on the future of health care delivery to ensure that the people of this country have the health services they deserve.

I hope that tonight's debate will be the first in a series of mature and incisive health care debates. However, given the amendment that has been tabled by Her Majesty's Government, I imagine that it will be a rather rhetorical conversation initiated by those on this side of the House, with Government Members advancing the usual simple, puerile arguments about how the Conservatives seek to privatise the national health service and so on. The Opposition will present reasonable, well thought out ideas about the future shape of health care, which I expect will be met with hissing and booing from the second-rate pantomime audience opposite.

We have three aims for health care in this country. We want a shift from throughput to outcome and from waiting lists to waiting times, and we want clinical priorities to replace political priorities. I say at the outset that I have some sympathy for the Secretary of State because he knows that we are absolutely right in those aims—he probably shares most of them. He must tonight defend not his waiting list initiative but that of his predecessor, the right hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras (Mr. Dobson), and of the Prime Minister. The initiative has been condemned by almost every health care group, including the British Medical Association—that reactionary force which the Secretary of State loathes so much—the Royal College of Nursing, another reactionary group; the Royal College of Physicians; and the Royal College of Surgeons, each of which belongs to the forces of darkness that the Prime Minister sees around every corner. The Secretary of State is desperate to claim our territory, but he knows that he cannot dismiss the Prime Minister's pledge.

The Secretary of State is another of the Government's political prisoners: he is impotent in his Department because he cannot do what he knows to be right. He is desperate for a dose of political Viagra which, in this Government, is in as short supply as the real thing. The real problem that we face is not simply the Government's policy but the culture of the Government. As was revealed by the Home Office team in the previous debate, this Government engage not just in creative accountancy but in crooked accountancy. The Home Secretary's school of accountancy is applied in the Department of Health and in every other Government Department, so when the Secretary of State says that there will be an extra 410 cardiologists by 2005, he does not bother to add that those people are already in training and would be available to the NHS anyway.

The Government have a wonderful definition of "extra". Mr. Deputy Speaker, if you asked me to get you a sandwich from the Tea Room and I returned with an extra sandwich, you would expect to receive two sandwiches. However, if you sent the Secretary of State, you would get not only just one sandwich but an explanation that it was one more sandwich than you would have received if he had not gone in the first place. That is how the Government manage their accounting and their rhetoric.

More important is the Government's fundamental dishonesty. The Government promise things that they know they cannot deliver—it is part of the great Labour lie. While that is bad in other policy areas, to promise in health care things that one cannot deliver is to take advantage of the weakest and most vulnerable in our society when they are at their weakest and most vulnerable. The Government say that there will be extra consultants, but there are none. They say that there is no rationing when rationing is occurring. With Viagra and Relenza we have the most specific examples yet of health care rationing. The Secretary of State says that every drug that patients need will be made available—he should tell that to those whose consultants say that they would benefit from beta interferon. The Government, whose rhetoric does not match their actions, take cynicism to heights previously unknown in our politics.

Mr. Ronnie Campbell (Blyth Valley): How does the hon. Gentleman square all that he is going to do for the health service with the fact that a Tory Government would cut taxes at the same time?

Dr. Fox: During the 18 years of Conservative government we made dramatic moves, not only in increasing the funding for health care available in this country but in reducing the burden of taxation, which was higher when we came into office in 1979 than when we left. It is entirely possible with economic growth, as we demonstrated, to increase health expenditure while reducing taxation. The two, of course, are not mutually exclusive.

The Government's cynicism is most apparent in their manipulation not only of money but of waiting list figures. There have been several examples recently of quite scandalous manipulation of statistics.

Mr. Hilton Dawson (Lancaster and Wyre): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Dr. Fox: In a moment; I look forward to hearing the hon. Gentleman's defence.

In Bradford, for example, it was decided that patients who had previously had surgery to insert metal plates or screws in their bodies through various types of orthopaedic surgery and were waiting for them to be removed were not really waiting for treatment because they had received part of it. They could not get through an X-ray machine at Heathrow, but, according to the Government, they were not waiting for any treatment. They were put on a new list called O5 and are part of the Government's great disappeared of the health service.

In Derriford in Plymouth, those who reached the 18-month maximum waiting time for heart surgery were, strangely enough, subject to further investigation, after which the clock was stopped. They may have had chest pain or angina, and they may have been waiting in fear for the surgery, but, according to the official statistics, no one waited more than 18 months for surgery at those hospitals. That is a crude and repulsive manipulation of the data. At the Alexandra hospital in Redditch, 759 patients simply disappeared off the waiting list. That was called an administrative clean-up, which is a rather nice term for removing from the list patients who are still waiting for treatment.

Mr. Dawson: As we are talking about manipulation, can the hon. Gentleman explain why the previous Conservative Government totally failed to give any credence whatever to the Black report, to health inequalities or to the prime role of poverty as a precursor to ill health?

Dr. Fox: We are talking about patients who are waiting for surgery that could be life saving and who may die prematurely if it is denied to them. That argument demands more than a cheap, sixth-form debating point.

How many patients are living in pain and fear while awaiting surgery but are simply being removed from the statistics because it is awkward for the Government if they appear in them? Getting on the waiting list is in itself quite an achievement. People have first to get on the waiting list for the waiting list and then, if they are very good, they might get on the waiting list itself. The total number of such people—those who have seen their general practitioner but have not yet had treatment—has increased massively under this Government: 237,000 extra patients are waiting for treatment. They are the real waiters in the NHS, not those who are defined narrowly by the Government.

The problem of waiting lists lies at the heart of all the Government's troubles. The trouble with the waiting list initiative is that it treats all patients on the list in exactly the same way. Someone who is waiting for a coronary bypass graft is treated the same as someone with an ingrowing toenail. They matter, and are weighted, the same on that particular list, so within a finite budget there is inevitably pressure on clinicians from hospital managers and others to try to get the numbers down by using theatre time in a way that gets the maximum number off the list. That means that three inguinal hernias can be dealt with instead of a coronary bypass and in the same amount of theatre time. That is what has been happening.

People say, "Surely getting waiting lists down is a good thing?" It would be if the initiative were applied according to correct clinical priority, but clinical priority is being completely distorted to fit the Government's political priorities. That, if not unethical, is certainly an immoral way of running our health care system.

Since he took office, the Secretary of State has been willing to talk about a change of tack. I urge him to ditch the waiting list initiative, which is continuing to cause clinical distortion across the country. Surgeons and doctors are all complaining that their clinical freedom is being interfered with. He knows that the initiative is causing problems in the service—why does he not just ditch it? That might offend the Prime Minister's ego, but there would be plenty left if we lost a bit of it.

One matter that I want to concentrate on is the Government's attitude to cancer treatment. I did my junior doctor training in haematology and oncology, and I would be the first to agree that we need to improve our outcomes dramatically in respect of almost all cancers. I am right behind any Government of any political colour who seek to achieve that, but it has to be done in the proper way. The Government's cancer policy, as with everything else that they have tried to achieve, is not properly thought out and is run by gimmicks, headlines, crooked accountancy and incompetence.

Let us begin with some of the gimmicks. We have a drug tsar, so we have to have a cancer tsar. No doubt they will be joined by the gastroenterology tsar, the respiratory tsar, the cardiology tsar, the over-spending patient care group tsar and, when winter arrives, the winter crisis tsar. We may be short of consultants and have the smallest number per head of population of any comparable western country, but—my God—we will have the highest number of tsars per head of any western European country. What good will that do patients? None whatever. It is one of the many gimmicks employed by the Government, but what matters is the policies that follow.

The question of crooked accountancy comes up time and again. We hear great announcements of extra money and, before he deserted the sinking ship, the Secretary of State's predecessor sent all Members of the House a letter entitled "Cancer funding boost". It says:

"I wrote to you with details of £93 million . . . to provide the biggest ever investment in cancer equipment in England."

However, sources in the profession tell us that exactly the same money had been earmarked for quite some time. Without extra funding, that money is enough to keep operating about only half the linear accelerators, which are an essential part of cancer treatment. It is a fraud and a sham. The whole thing is a complete charade.

On top of that, we have another example of Government incompetence. A serious point was put to the junior Minister at Question Time last week. We said that there was a grave danger—the point has today been echoed by the president of the Royal College of Surgeons—of swamping the system if every woman with a breast lump was to be referred within two weeks. I gave the Minister an example: neither the general surgeons nor the gynaecologists could cope if every woman with post-menopausal bleeding was referred within two weeks.

I asked:

"What level of clinical suspicion is required"

before the Government's time pledge comes into account. Is every patient with suspected cancer or only those with urgent referral for suspected cancer included? My understanding is that only urgent patients fall within the two-week time scale. I look to Ministers for clarification of the position, but I assume from the Secretary of State's silence is that my understanding is correct—only patients who are referred urgently will be seen. It is important to

[Dr. Fox]

clarify that because the belief out there, and that which has been spun by Ministers to the press, is that every patient with suspected cancer would be seen within two weeks. Which is it? We look for clarification because it makes a huge difference to the real running of the system with real doctors, not spin doctors, and real patients.

When the Minister was asked that question, answer came there none. She said:

"We are working with GPs on the guidelines to ensure that referral takes place properly and according to appropriate clinical priorities."—[*Official Report*, 19 October 1999; Vol. 336, c. 244.]

That was very interesting because the letter that we received from the British Medical Association said:

"I have checked with the GP Committee and discovered that they have not been involved in discussions with the Department of Health on any guidelines."

Will the Minister clarify exactly whom she was talking to?

My hon. Friend the Member for New Forest, West (Mr. Swayne) has tabled a parliamentary question about what recent discussions have taken place between the Department and representatives of general practitioners regarding guidelines, the level of clinical suspicion in cancer diagnosis and when those discussions took place. Having had a week to consider her diary, the Minister said that she would let my hon. Friend have a reply as soon as possible. Despite all the extra special advisers and civil servants, Ministers cannot even look back in their diaries and decide when they met GP representatives. We suspect, therefore, that no such discussions have taken place, and that that is another part of the fantasy politics in which Ministers are engaged.

Ministers scoff at the potential overworking of the system, but the president of the Royal College of Surgeons said:

"Clinics are being snowed under with inappropriate referrals for breast cancer. Breast surgeons are coping, just, at the moment, but it could be at the expense of other things.

The College is particularly concerned that when they bring on bowel cancer this is going to place an even greater load on hospital services."

We need to know tonight with far greater clarity exactly what the Government's policies are and what the Government will do in response to those important criticisms from people at the cutting edge of the service.

We have made our priorities clear. We believe in instituting a patients guarantee, ensuring that the sickest patients will be treated first; and those with less urgent conditions will have to take their appropriate place in the queue.

Mr. Christopher Leslie (Shipley): The hon. Gentleman talks about taking pressures off the NHS. Would he advise people who can afford it to take out private medical insurance?

Dr. Fox: I shall deal with the private sector in a moment—it is essential that we do so as part of a rational debate. I want to ensure that people take their appropriate place in the queue, that there is no queue jumping and that some people are not pushed up the queue ahead of those with greater clinical need because some political priority is being forced on hospital managers.

We have said that we would continue to increase funding for the NHS in real terms year on year, as we did during our period in office. However, we believe that there is a place in health provision for the independent sector and that we should have more mixed provision. The biggest difference between what this country spends on health and what comparable European countries spend is that while our state spend is similar, people in other countries spend rather more from their post-taxation income.

The hon. Member for Shipley (Mr. Leslie) implied that it is bad to take out private health insurance. That is strange logic for any Government who rake in money from tobacco sales but tell us that we should not buy private health insurance; in other words, people can buy ill health but they must not buy health—what a twisted sense of morality.

I want to make one or two things absolutely clear for the sake of this debate. My party does not want an entirely private system. I have had experience of such a system in the United States, and I find the idea of a health care system that is not free at the point of use absolutely repugnant, and would not support such a system. Given that the culture in this country has developed from our experience of the national health service, we have the chance to get the best of both worlds. A Government who talk about partnership and mixed provision show how Luddite they are on health when they totally deprecate individuals who want to take out private health provision for themselves or their families.

Certain conditions must be attached to any independent sector involvement. It must augment NHS provision, not seek to replace it, and it must increase the total capacity of available health care. It must be uniformly regulated, because it would be unacceptable for a Health Secretary to use public money to buy private health care that was not regulated and did not guarantee certain minimum standards that we take for granted in the NHS.

The most important change needs to come from the insurance industry. I have no private health insurance because, like many people, I believe that the private health insurance products on offer are too inflexible and heavily loaded, have too many exemptions and are too expensive. We need far cheaper and more flexible products which are accessible to a much wider range of our fellow citizens at all income levels. The restriction in that market holds people back from helping to augment the spend on health, which would relieve some of the burden on the NHS.

Dr. Peter Brand (Isle of Wight): In continental Europe, there are compulsory insurance-based systems. Does the hon. Gentleman accept that that is not dissimilar to raising money through taxation, because people have no choice—they have to insure privately? What he advocates would work only if standards in the NHS—the publicly provided service—were such that people had an incentive to go private. What does he think might attract people to pay extra money on top of their taxes?

Dr. Fox: The hon. Gentleman confuses two issues: access and quality. What we should be able to have from the NHS is an absolute assurance that, if we or members of our family are ill, the most serious complaints will be treated first and within a reasonable time, and there will be no distortion of clinical priorities. However, it is

perfectly acceptable that people may choose to spend their private incomes on any product that they choose, to buy convenience in health care with their post-taxation income, thereby relieving the burden on the NHS. What is wrong with a system that buys everybody the best of every possible world, while allowing us to get better value from the NHS?

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Dr. Fox: I am conscious of the time and the fact that many hon. Members want to speak.

Our motion begins by discussing the first-class staff in the NHS. Sadly, however, they are increasingly first-class staff in a second-class service. Morale is very low, from GP recruitment to early retirement for consultants. Despite the Government's attempts to increase recruitment, we are short of midwives and nurses because we cannot retain them. We must increase the total amount that we spend on health. Some money can come from the Treasury, but not enough. We must encourage people to spend more on getting good health through prevention and other products—some 15.5 million of us buy private health insurance for overseas travel every year, and the ground does not open up and swallow us.

We need more doctors, not more spin doctors. The Government say that they want to think the unthinkable, but now they will not even think the thinkable. They are obsessed with monopoly provision in health, whereas in everything else they claim partnership and mixed provision. It is not the British Medical Association or the royal colleges that are bound by the dark forces of conservatism, but the Government through their health policies. Just as they resisted people's right to buy their council homes and to have their own pension funds, so they seek to deny us choice in the provision of our own health care. The Conservative party, not the Government, will genuinely set the people free.

7.37 pm

The Secretary of State for Health (Mr. Alan Milburn): I beg to move, To leave out from "House" to the end of the Question, and to add instead thereof:

"applauds the dedication, skill and professionalism of the staff of the National Health Service but regrets that Her Majesty's Opposition seek to undermine the National Health Service at every turn; welcomes the Government's success in cutting waiting lists in line with its manifesto pledge and its programme to make services faster and more convenient; supports the Government's commitment to modernise cancer, heart disease and mental health services, and to ensure high standards of National Health Service care everywhere; notes that a modernised National Health Service funded through taxation and offering treatment according to need not ability to pay is both fairer and more efficient than private alternatives supported by the Opposition; and so believes that the National Health Service should be modernised not privatised.'.

It is a privilege to stand here as a Labour Secretary of State for Health in a Labour Government committed to modernising the national health service, which a Labour Government created in the first place. Incidentally, the Conservative party voted against it not once, not twice, but 51 times.

The hon. Member for Woodspring (Dr. Fox) promised a mature debate. I am still looking forward to precisely that. What we heard tonight was a Conservative party committed not to the future of the NHS or to modernising it, but to demoralising it. It is committed to demoralising the public who use it and the dedicated staff who provide treatment and care day in, day out.

Sir Raymond Whitney (Wycombe): The right hon. Gentleman started his career as Secretary of State for Health with the hoary old myth to which Labour politicians cling. Is he aware that the structure of the NHS was set out in the 1944 White Paper produced by the coalition Government led by a Conservative Minister of State for Health?

Mr. Milburn: I am aware of how the Conservative party voted when it came to push and shove: it voted against the NHS. Conservative Members entered the No Lobby 51 times. Indeed, some Conservative Members— *[Interruption.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. Hon. Members must not shout across the Chamber.

Mr. Milburn: At that time, some Conservative Members warned that the coming of the national health service would bring about the demise of civilisation as we had known it. I believe, as do the staff and the public, that it has been the greatest civilising force this century.

Mr. Andrew Robathan (Blaby): The Secretary of State talked about the future of the national health service. The debates to which he refers took place before I was born, and I am not young. He may be a little younger than I am, but it was before he and most of the people in this Chamber were born. Let us talk about the future instead of the past.

Mr. Milburn: I am happy to rise to the hon. Gentleman's challenge. It is our intention to build up the national health service, whereas the mantra that we have just heard from the hon. Member for Woodspring (Dr. Fox) is the new Conservative mantra for the NHS: talk it down, run it down, deny it can ever succeed. We all know that the national health service must change and improve—staff and patients also know that. It must be fairer, faster and more convenient. Yes, it must modernise, but no, it does not have to privatise. That is the difference between the Labour party and the Conservatives.

Mr. David Wilshire (Spelthorne): The Secretary of State says that the NHS must be more convenient. In that case, why will my constituents be forced to travel further because our local accident and emergency department and 70 acute beds are to close? Services are being transferred out of the constituency. Does he consider that to be more convenient?

Mr. Milburn: The hon. Gentleman will recognise that changes in NHS structures and services are not a peculiar development of the past two years: they have been going on for the past 50 years or more, and will continue. We should welcome what is happening in the national health service. With the advent of new technology, such as telemedicine, and new treatments and drugs, more and more treatments are being brought closer to where people live. That is a welcome development.

[Mr. Milburn]

I can give the hon. Gentleman a good example of that. Twenty or 30 years ago, patients with a stomach ulcer would have gone into hospital for invasive surgery, which would have been risky, and would sometimes have resulted in time off work or serious injury. Nowadays, such patients are treated with drugs. That is better, faster, more convenient and a good development. Those who say that we have an enormous problem with the NHS drugs budget and that it is growing exponentially forget that those new drug treatments are welcomed by patients and by staff. Such developments are not peculiar to the past couple of years. They have been part and parcel of the national health service for the past 50 years or more.

Mr. David Tredinnick (Bosworth): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Milburn: I shall make a little progress, and I shall allow the hon. Gentleman to intervene in a moment.

The hon. Member for Woodspring made allegations about fiddled figures. It is slightly galling to hear Conservative Members talk about fiddled figures, but I shall let that go for a moment. He made an allegation about Bradford, which was first raised in the House on 9 November 1998, and was repeated on 25 March this year. The hon. Gentleman knows that that allegation has no foundation in truth. He referred to metal plates. Patients go into hospital to have a plate inserted and subsequently have to have it removed. Of course they are not on a waiting list to have it taken out. On that logic, pregnant women would be on a nine-month waiting list. As the hon. Gentleman knows fine well, that is a planned admission.

The hon. Gentleman and his party seem to gain some perverse satisfaction from trying to convince people that the national health service is failing. What is worse, they try to convey the impression that it is bound to fail and can never succeed.

Mr. Gerald Howarth (Aldershot): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Milburn: In a moment.

The Conservatives present a catalogue of doom and a counsel of despair. There they are: Dr. Gloom on the Front Bench, and the doom merchants on the Back Benches. They are like some failed 1960s pop group. For each of the past 51 years, the NHS has proved the doom merchants wrong. It has coped with new ailments, new treatments, new drugs and an ageing population. It will go on coping for at least the next 51 years, but it will do that only by modernising and introducing new drugs and treatments.

There has been a lottery of care. The Conservatives were responsible for that when they created the divisive internal market. The uptake of treatments that work has been too slow, and the uptake of treatments that do not work has been too fast. We want fairer and more effective decision making in all parts of the national health service. That is why we established the National Institute for Clinical Excellence, new national health service frameworks and the Commission for Health Improvement. Our answer to those problems is not crude rationing decisions, but clear rational decisions. That is the difference between us and the Conservative party.

Mr. Howarth *rose—*

Dr. Fox *rose—*

Mr. Milburn: I shall first give way to the hon. Member for Aldershot (Mr. Howarth).

Mr. Howarth: The Secretary of State should not display such complacency. The Labour party is losing a lot of ground on this issue. How would he respond to my constituent who was diagnosed in February this year as requiring heart surgery? He was told that he would not be able to have that surgery until June or August next year. The reason given was that the Government have said that consultants should set themselves the objective of getting waiting lists down, not addressing clinical priorities. The Secretary of State had better beware, because the complacency that he has shown tonight will not go down well. He should respond to my hon. Friend the Member for Woodspring (Dr. Fox)

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Member for Aldershot (Mr. Howarth) should not make a speech.

Mr. Milburn: There is no complacency on these issues. If the hon. Gentleman had bothered to listen, he would know fine well that one of the first things that I did when I became Secretary of State was to find new, extra money—

Mr. Philip Hammond (Runnymede and Weybridge): It is not new money.

Mr. Milburn: It is new money. I made the first allocation from NHS budgets for next year. No money had been allocated for next year. I allocated extra money to speed up heart surgery—£50 million to pay for 3,000 extra heart operations. Surely the hon. Gentleman should have welcomed that, rather than run it down.

Dr. Fox: I counsel the Secretary of State against using the word "extra", because it has the same currency as "read my lips". He said that there was no rationing in the health care system. People would say that there is rationing if a new drug is not made available, and if some drugs are available in some parts of the country but not in others on the ground of cost. What is the right hon. Gentleman's view? Does he believe that there is rationing in the health care system?

Mr. Milburn: The national health service has always faced hard choices. That is the reality of life in the NHS. It is the reality for clinicians on the ground, and it is the reality for those of us who are charged with running the service. There has always been priority setting in the national health service, and there always will be. The issue is how priorities are set. We believe that priorities should be set on the grounds of effectiveness and what works. The difference between us and the Conservatives is that they want a system based not on what works, but

on who can afford to pay for their care. That is the dividing line between Tories and Labour on health care. It is not about rationing: it is about rational decisions.

Dr. Fox *rose—*

Dr. Brand *rose—*

Mr. Milburn: I shall give way to a Liberal Democrat for a change.

Dr. Brand: The Liberal Democrats supported the National Institute for Clinical Excellence, and I support the Government's approach to rational decision making. However, hamstringing NICE by making affordability one of the criteria for NHS treatment is too restrictive. That decision should be made by politicians—the Secretary of State himself—rather than clinicians.

Mr. Milburn: Clinicians and managers throughout the national health service, whether in fundholding or other systems of care, have always had to decide how to align clinical and financial responsibility. What we are doing is helpful to clinicians. Doctors and managers on the ground want to know that when they take difficult decisions they have support from the centre. We are not abdicating responsibility—that is what happened under the previous lot. We take responsibility and make difficult decisions. I applaud my right hon. Friend the Member for Holborn and St. Pancras (Mr. Dobson), the previous Secretary of State, for the difficult decisions that he had to take on Viagra and Relenza. By and large, those decisions have been welcomed in the national health service.

Dr. Fox *rose—*

Mr. Milburn: I shall make some progress, if the hon. Gentleman does not mind.

The truth is that, in the debate about rationing, the Conservatives' aim is to stimulate not a debate, but doubts. They do not believe that the national health service can cope, and they do not want the public to believe that it can cope. They want more people to be treated privately. The hon. Member for Woodspring was explicit about this, both today and in his speech yesterday, with which I shall deal in a moment. As the Prime Minister said in Bournemouth just a few weeks ago, we want a health care system that delivers care when people want it, where they want it—and we want it on the national health service.

The Opposition motion is the product of a strange Conservative form of selective amnesia. Since the Conservative party's visit to Blackpool, there seems to have been an outbreak of it. First, on that occasion, the Conservatives forgot even to mention their former Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major). *[Interruption.]* It is true: they forgot to mention him. As you know, Mr. Deputy Speaker, slips are made in politics. These things can happen.

Secondly, the Conservatives managed to expunge from the record their former conference darling, the right hon. Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Mr. Lilley)—he of the famous "little list". They now want to take that amnesiac approach to politics a stage further by conveniently ignoring their own record on the national health service. This must be the first occasion on which a political party has tried to airbrush itself out of politics. Well, the Conservatives may have forgotten what they did, but we have not—and neither have the staff of the national health service, or the public who rely on it.

Let me remind the Opposition of the Conservative record on health, and the difference that a Labour Government are making to the state of the NHS. When we came to office, the Tories had cut the number of nurses in training by more than 4,000. It is no use the hon. Member for Woodspring going on about the shortage of nurses; the Conservatives created that shortage in the first place. This year, following the biggest real-terms pay increase that nurses have had in a decade, the number of student nurses is at a six-year high.

When we came to office, investment in new buildings, plant and equipment was at a 10-year low. This year, the NHS capital budget is at an all-time high. The biggest new hospital building programme in the history of the NHS is now under way, and about 200 casualty departments and 1,000 GP surgeries are being modernised. When we came to office, the Tories had undermined the NHS and demoralised its staff by introducing the hated internal market. The motion deplores mismanagement; I deplore it too. That is why we have abolished the internal market in the national health service. That is why we have ended the two-tier system introduced by GP fundholding, and that is why we are putting doctors and nurses in the driving seat to share the task of providing health care in the future. In the process, we are freeing £1 billion from bureaucracy so that we can reinvest it in front-line patient services. Those are the public's priorities for the national health service, and they are our priorities too.

Dr. Fox *rose—*

Mr. Milburn: I will give way to the hon. Gentleman, for the last time.

Dr. Fox: I am grateful to the Secretary of State.

As a matter of historical fact, can the Secretary of State tell us what proportion of this record capital spend on the NHS is due to PFI projects? Can he also tell us what was his party's attitude before the election?

Mr. Milburn: Let me tell the hon. Gentleman what my party promised in its manifesto at the last general election. We promised that we would rejuvenate the private finance initiative and make it work. The hon. Gentleman raises the issue of the private finance initiative in health at his peril, because the Conservatives had not done a single hospital deal by the time we came to office.

The hon. Gentleman talks of management consultants. The Conservatives spent £30 million on consultants' salaries and lawyers' salaries, and not a single hospital was built. We have the hospital building programme under way, through both the PFI and the public route. Communities throughout the country which have waited for decades are now seeing the building of new hospitals.

It is this Government, too, who have invested an extra £21 billion in the national health service. The hon. Gentleman skated over that today, which did not surprise me. After all, it was his party that described the extra spending as reckless, madness and irresponsible. Try as

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the hon. Gentleman might to rewrite history once again, his right hon. Friend the shadow Chancellor of the Exchequer gave the game away when he accused my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of being goaded on class sizes and waiting lists, and to have gone soft on spending. We are spending more; the Conservatives want us to spend less. We will take no lessons from them on the inadequacy of support for the health service.

Nor will we take any lessons on waiting lists. When we came to office, waiting lists were at a record level, and rising fast. Today, they are falling. They are already down by 69,000, and we will keep them going down. By the end of the current Parliament, they will be 100,000 lower than the level that we inherited. The hon. Gentleman says that I should abandon the promises that we made at the last election. That is the cavalier Conservative way with election promises. When we make promises, we keep them. Indeed, it is because of our success in getting waiting lists down that we are now able to move into the next phase of our modernisation programme.

Cutting waiting lists was always just the start. I want all aspects of NHS care to be modernised. We start with services dealing with our country's biggest killers, cancer and coronary heart disease. Those are my priorities for modernisation. In the last fortnight, I have been able to put more money into paying for extra heart operations, so that patients can gain quicker access to the surgery that they need.

The hon. Gentleman says that I did not announce the provision of 400 extra consultants. Let me tell him that I did. He should know that there is a difference between doctors in training and doctors in post. The Opposition are in training, while we are in post—and the same applies to my announcement.

Yesterday, I also announced more money for cancer services. The hon. Gentleman dismissed that as a gimmick, but it is £80 million of new, extra money, enabling cancer patients to obtain faster, fairer access to care. Let us hear no more from Conservative Members about the distortion of clinical priorities. The question for the hon. Gentleman is simple: does he support our efforts to modernise services dealing with the most severe clinical conditions, or does he not? The public support them; staff support them; patients with suspected cancer support them. They want faster, fairer care, and they know that it will be delivered by this Labour Government.

Miss Anne McIntosh (Vale of York): Will the Secretary of State give way?

Mr. Milburn: I will give way one last time.

Miss McIntosh: Last week, the Secretary of State was kind enough to suggest, in reply to a question, that Shaun Johnstone should have had a brain tumour scan within two weeks. He was not given a scan within two months. The health service clearly failed him. Indeed, the photographer on the local newspaper in his home constituency—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. Interventions should be brief; they should not be seen as opportunities to raise constituency matters at length.

Mr. Milburn: Let me repeat what I said to the hon. Lady last week at Question Time. I understand the circumstances surrounding the tragic case of Shaun Johnstone. I know that it has been looked into by the health authority, and I know that Shaun Johnstone's parents have been advised that they should go to the health service commissioner, which is the right thing for them to do. Nevertheless, I repeat my promise to examine the case, and when I have had an opportunity to do so, I shall return to the hon. Lady.

Mr. Simon Burns (West Chelmsford): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Milburn: No, I will not.

It will take time, effort and investment to turn the national health service around, but, notwithstanding the allegation in the motion, the national health service is not getting worse; it is getting better. More patients are being treated, more doctors are being trained, more nurses are being recruited, more hospitals are being built and more services are being modernised. It will go on getting better each and every year that this Government are in office. No doubt, every step of the way, it will go on being talked down by the Conservative party. The Conservatives are determined to brand the NHS a failure.

Yesterday, we saw the clearest contrast between Conservative priorities for the NHS and Labour priorities. Yesterday, both the hon. Member for Woodspring and I visited NHS hospitals. I went to visit patients and staff in the cancer care unit at St. Thomas's hospital, which is opposite this place. He visited an NHS hospital in Burton-upon-Trent. I outlined plans for modernising England's cancer services. He outlined plans to get more people to buy private health insurance.

I talked about more money for the NHS. The hon. Member for Woodspring talked about pricing policy in private health care. I talked about national standards to end the lottery in health care. He talked about product standards in private medicine. What better contrast could there be—Labour creating a faster, fairer health service, available to all; the Tories encouraging a private, pay-as-you-go health system that is available only to a few.

The differences between Labour and the Conservatives on health have never before been clearer. They believe that improvements in health care can come only through an enhanced role for the private sector. We believe that improvements in health care have to come through the NHS. Only the NHS is capable of offering care on the basis of need, and need alone, not of ability to pay.

We now know what the next Conservative manifesto will mean for the national health service; the hon. Member for Woodspring has been explicit about that at least. He calls his approach the "silent revolution", although, as he told a conference fringe meeting just a few weeks ago:

"no one has really picked up on what it actually means".

I can tell him. We have picked up on exactly what it means. I am determined that his secret revolution gets all the publicity that it deserves in communities throughout the land. He believes that

"the biggest problem we have in the NHS is that it is not a proper market".

That will come as a bit of a surprise to NHS staff, who could not wait to get rid of the last market that the Conservatives introduced to the NHS.

The hon. Member for Woodspring says that the secret revolution could

"revolutionise private insurance in the way we revolutionised pensions in the 1980s"—

no doubt with the same impact. The Conservatives' secret revolution can be summed up in a simple phrase: not modernisation, but privatisation. It is a measure of how far today's Conservatives have moved from the political mainstream. They are prisoners of their own extremism.

Today's Conservatives have no ambition for the NHS. They do not feel comfortable with the NHS's values. They want market forces in a service that is founded on co-operative principles. Fifty years after they opposed the creation of the national health service, they oppose its modernisation. They deserve to be rejected now, just as they were rejected then. I invite my hon. Friends to do just that in the Division Lobby later.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I remind the House that Madam Speaker has ruled that there will be a 10-minute limit on Back-Bench speeches.

8.3 pm

Mrs. Virginia Bottomley (South-West Surrey): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Darlington (Mr. Milburn) on his appointment as Secretary of State for Health. For all the demands and pressures, I think that it is one of the most exciting and rewarding roles in government, but there is a profound difference between the way in which he sees the health service and the way in which many Conservative Members see it.

Behind the rhetoric, the Secretary of State knows the position. He consults the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, the World Health Organisation and other international bodies, which believe that others are copying our changes in the health service over the past decade, the essence of which his party has endorsed. They include a focus on primary care, the introduction of a preventive strategy and greater efficiency: what is called corporatisation of hospitals. Those are all developments that, for all the rebranding and rebadging, his party has, with a lot of noise, endorsed. Evidence-based medicine was the labour of love, if we like, of my term of office. I am delighted to see it move forward with the service frameworks and the development of NICE.

Where the Secretary of State and Conservative Members differ is that he really believes that the service is getting better. It is a serious criticism of his party that, in office, he and his colleagues rarely visit constituencies of Members who do not belong to their party.

I spent many days in Darlington, Newcastle, Manchester and Leeds. I saw the investment in hospitals and primary care. I recognise the variations in health and the need for economic and social policies to address the problems, but I ask the Secretary of State and his colleagues to spend the same amount of time in South-West Surrey and other comparable constituencies. The degree of pessimism in the health service in my area and in those of many of my right hon. and hon. Friends is appalling.

I would have liked to have asked the hon. Member for Shipley (Mr. Leslie), who has now left the Chamber, an ethical question about private health services. If your child went to an accident and emergency department with a teacher or nurse—both have come to me in the past fortnight—was not seen after an hour and a half, and it was suggested that you took the child home, would you think that that was a good enough service? If mental health provision were so inadequate that a young man with developed schizophrenia burned his parents' house to the ground, even though they warned the services of his deteriorating condition, would you think that the service was good enough? If you spoke to a consultant, as I did today, who said that the situation has never been worse—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The right hon. Lady should not use the term "you" at such great length.

Mrs. Bottomley: I profoundly apologise, Mr. Deputy Speaker. The degree of emotion being generated in west Surrey is such that I want the Secretary of State to be aware of how desperate people feel.

The Royal Surrey county hospital has moved psycho-geriatric patients into surgical beds. Waiting lists are all rising. On the day that the Secretary of State's initiative on cancer was announced, a cancer specialist approached me saying, "Yes, we have to see people within a fortnight, but the surgery cases and chemotherapy waiting lists are both lengthening." On the day of the heart disease announcement, a doctor rang and said, "That is all very well, but the angiography waiting list has almost trebled in the past year."

The Secretary of State asks why I did not do anything. During my term as a Minister, I do not believe that I ever suggested that change would lead to a deterioration of services. No one in West Surrey health authority believes anything other than that services will deteriorate.

The ethical issue is: in those cases that I have identified, when a constituent says, "Should I go private if I can?", what is the appropriate response of the Member of Parliament? I have never believed that that situation would develop, but I have read the headlines of the local paper over the past month:

"Health chiefs must cut services by £20m by 2002.

"Anger at cuts in child health services.

"'Blocked' beds put pressure on services."

The funding raid on the home counties, which the Government describe as tackling inequalities, means that social services have lost £10 million. At the same time, the health service has a funding package that does not fund staff costs in an area with a high cost of living. It does not cover the cost of rents and all the other expenses in the area, which the Labour party dismisses as prosperous and treats in the same way as it treated the eight children from an independent school at its party conference. Other headlines state:

"A and E patients forced to wait up to 20 hours";

and:

"Hospital could be £1m in the red by March."

I appreciate that Labour Members have little interest in areas such as the one that I represent. However, I wonder whether the right hon. Gentleman might have been concerned about recent newspaper reports that tour operators have been advising people visiting the United

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Kingdom to take out private health care insurance. When I held the right hon. Gentleman's office, a frequently heard quip—which no one ever challenged—ran, "If you're abroad and ill, what do you do? You come back to the use the NHS. If you're ill and a foreigner in Britain, what do you do? You use the NHS." Why, therefore, should tour operators, such as the German equivalent of the Automobile Association, now be advising people to take out private health insurance?

Nouvelles Frontieres states:

"People have had lots of problems seeing a doctor in Britain. With insurance they can see a doctor straight away."

Portuguese tour operators have said that special health insurance was mandatory for the United Kingdom, but not for anywhere else in Europe. Elder Alves, of Top Tours, said:

"We always arrange health protection for people visiting London. We do not use NHS hospitals."

The French Guide states:

"You have to have an appointment to see a doctor. Insist that it is urgent—otherwise you could end up being healed next week for this week's flu."

Henri Menna said:

"I tell French parents to take out private medical insurance so they can have peace of mind. If the person contracts something serious or needs surgery while in England, it is better to get the person straight back to France, where the treatment and care are much better."

Those comments should disturb Ministers and other Labour Members as much as they disturb Conservative Members.

If the reality is that the right hon. Gentleman cannot deliver services or provide adequate resources, it would be better to be courageous and say that there must be more co-payment and more explicit rationing, so that patients might know what is or is not available. Currently, however, people are being told to wait ever longer, and they are getting ever more worried about their inability to receive treatment. The situation is unacceptable.

Difficulties are being experienced not only by patients. The right hon. Gentleman will be aware that the problem of disillusioned doctors is bigger than ever before, partly because of the public sector salary structure compared with opportunities available for comparable graduates outside the public sector. However, the difficulties facing doctors, and Ministers' lack of realism, is causing doctors' frustration to become ever greater outrage.

Time and again, the Government's policy has been driven by the need to please No. 10 Downing street, with media initiatives such as supernurses, walk-in centres and NHS Direct. However, a telephone line will not help to cure the health service's problems. NHS Direct is perfectly all right, but it is essentially a trivial and marginal initiative. It is well known in the service that No. 10 Downing street drove that initiative, and imposed it on the previous Secretary of State for Health.

The right hon. Gentleman is about to encounter an extremely serious winter situation and all the problems caused by the new millennium. I do not know the accuracy of *The Independent*'s report that the previous Secretary of State decided that seeking the office of London mayor would be preferable to facing the difficulties that he has left the right hon. Gentleman, but my—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. Time is up.

8.14 pm

Mr. David Hinchliffe (Wakefield): The Opposition motion demonstrates the remarkable narrowness of Conservative Members' views on health issues. In it, they make two key claims—first, that the waiting list initiative has damaged the national health service; and secondly, that there has been a

"distortion of clinical priorities in favour of political targets".

As the Secretary of State said, in their motion Conservative Members are sending a clear and quite profound message—that the Government's electoral promises do not matter. I accept that, for all political parties represented in the House, a sad fact of modern politics is that, frequently, hugely complex issues are slimmed down to one-line soundbites or pledges. Nevertheless, rightly or wrongly, an election pledge is an election pledge, and, like other Labour Members, I was elected on a waiting list pledge. Like my colleagues, I owe it to my constituents to ensure that the Government deliver that pledge.

Mr. Graham Brady (Altrincham and Sale, West): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Hinchliffe: No, I shall not; I have only 10 minutes.

It is wrong for the Opposition to criticise the Government for trying to meet the commitments and promises that we made at the general election. None the less, politics seems to have reached that strange state.

What evidence has been presented to support the claims made in the Opposition motion? Supporting evidence from Opposition Members has been very thin. However, I am able to state that, in Health Committee sittings, I have seen evidence of distortions in the formulation of waiting list targets. I saw it in 1991, after the introduction of internal markets. The hon. Member for Macclesfield (Mr. Winterton)—who usually attends health debates, but is not here today—will recall evidence that we received from some trusts, which said that the internal market's emphasis on competition with neighbouring trusts had forced them into skewing their priorities. I am also able to state that I have seen distortion of clinical priorities in favour of political targets. It happened in my own constituency, when, under the previous Government, the two-tier fundholding system was operating and some of my constituents who were not patients of fundholders were denied operations.

It is remarkable that the Opposition motion makes absolutely no reference to wider health issues. Earlier, my hon. Friend the Member for Lancaster and Wyre (Mr. Dawson) raised the issue of public health—a fundamentally important issue, which, at long last, a Government are taking very seriously. In response, however, the shadow Secretary of State dismissed the public health issue as a sixth-form debating point. Nevertheless, the Government's amendment to the motion rightly mentions cancer and heart disease, which were dealt with at length by the Secretary of State.

Today's *British Medical Journal* report on the number of young women who die from heart attacks caused by smoking is also entirely relevant to the public health issue. Let us consider those figures, which the Tories have not bothered to quote today.

The fact is that, since 1950—during the lifetime of many hon. Members, including me—6 million people in the United Kingdom have died prematurely from

smoking. The fact is that, every year, 120,000 people die from smoking-related illnesses. Smoking is the single most preventable cause of premature death.

In 18 years in government, what did the Tories do about those facts? They blocked successive attempts in the House to pass United Kingdom legislation preventing tobacco advertising. They also blocked European Union efforts to reach agreement on tobacco advertising. Why? They did so because they were paid to do so by the tobacco companies. They were in hock to the tobacco companies, and therefore have a direct responsibility for the vast numbers of people who have died prematurely in the United Kingdom. The Tories could have acted on tobacco in their years in government, but they regarded public health—the point that was raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Lancaster and Wyre—as a public school debating point.

I ask Conservative Members: who is calling the tune on their health policy? Who is paying for their policy? I have my own suspicions on that. Since the general election, implicit in every statement made by a Tory Front Bencher has been the desire to shift health care into the private sector. Their desire is now explicit, having been written into their document, "The Common Sense Revolution". In their proposal to shunt patients into the private sector, we have an explicit recipe for destruction of the national health service.

Mr. Brady: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Hinchliffe: I shall not give way.

I should like Opposition Members to answer one question that I have asked in probably every health debate since the general election. If people on a waiting list cannot be treated within the time set by whichever Government, possibly because there is a staff shortage in a particular hospital, what sense would it make to push them into the local private sector? That local private sector recruits entirely from the local NHS to treat those same patients. They will take the staff out of the NHS and shunt them into the private sector. It is a downward spiral that will lead to the destruction of a national health service in which the Tories do not believe and in which they have never believed.

The vast majority of the public, whatever their politics, believe in the basic principles of the NHS, as set out in the motion tonight. I wish the Government well in the process of rebuilding the NHS in accordance with those basic principles.

8.20 pm

Mr. Nick Harvey (North Devon): I welcome the opportunity to participate in the debate this evening on the state of the NHS. When I looked at the motion, I could not help admiring the brass neck of the Conservatives in tabling it. As I listened to the entertaining and rhetorical speech of the hon. Member for Woodspring (Dr. Fox), I felt that one could have been forgiven for imagining that all the catalogue of problems—

Mr. Hammond: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Harvey: I have barely begun. The hon. Gentleman will have to give me a chance to get started.

I felt that one could have been forgiven for believing that the catalogue of problems that the Conservative spokesman ran through had magically commenced on 1 May 1997, and had come about in the last couple of years. Nothing could be further from the truth. The fact is that the Conservatives caused many of the problems that have been described this evening. Having passed them over—albeit reluctantly—to Labour two and a half years ago, their motion does not seem to have come up with any new solutions.

Apart from the idiosyncratic ideas of the hon. Member for Woodspring about private health care insurance policies, we heard nothing new tonight. I could have been forgiven for closing my eyes and thinking that this debate was indistinguishable from an Opposition day debate before the last election.

It all boils down to a question of resources. The NHS Confederation has been warning that the significant problems that authorities and trusts face in the coming winter will come about because there has been a history of ruthless year-on-year slicing and efficiency savings which has gradually stripped the system of flexibility and has eaten into service quality.

We hear from the Government that £21 billion is going into the NHS. That is a large sum of money which, on initial inspection, seems generous. However, when one looks more closely at the figures, one realises that it is not as much as it sounds. One must consider that, for the first two years of this Parliament, there was a freeze on public expenditure. The Government stuck to Tory spending plans—which it was highly improbable the Tories would have stuck to themselves.

As the £21 billion is measured out throughout the remainder of a four-year Parliament, we see that the Government will not even have increased spending on the NHS up to the same standard, year-on-year, as the Conservatives did during their 18 years in office. When we take out a few spoonfuls from the £21 billion pot to pay for the latest Government initiatives, we see that the pot shrinks even further.

The Government come up with eye-catching initiatives which keep the spin doctors happy, but do not result in improvements in the NHS. Some of the initiatives are good ideas. NHS Direct—although it would have been better to have done it on a local footing—undoubtedly contains the kernel of a good idea. However, the extra funding needs to go to the basic bread-and-butter service before we start having Government wheezes and initiatives which, frankly, amount to honey on top.

As we look forward to winter, reports are coming in that trusts are being forced to overspend, and many are running up deficits that are much bigger than expected. This news comes five months before the end of the financial year, and before we know the scale of the problems that the coming winter may bring with it. More resources are needed.

I agree with the call by the hon. Member for Woodspring for a rational debate on the issue of rationing, and I was depressed to hear the Secretary of State, yet again, dodge the questions about rationing. Of course there is rationing in the health service—there always has been and there always will be.

The Government should define clearly the constraints that are presently applied in the rationing of resources within the NHS, and they should take full responsibility

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for the decisions that have to be made within national guidelines. It may be a question of semantics or vocabulary but, in my opinion, that amounts to rationing. We need to have national policies that patients and members of the public understand—for example, on infertility, cosmetic and obesity treatments, and a variety of other issues.

I was depressed to hear the Secretary of State dodging this matter by hiding behind decisions that will be taken by the National Institute for Clinical Excellence. NICE should stick to the remit that it was given when it was set up—of looking at clinical effectiveness and cost-effectiveness. It may be semantics again but, in my view, there is a fundamental difference between cost-effectiveness and affordability. Some things can be cost-effective and yet very expensive. When the White Paper set up NICE, affordability was not included as one of the criteria for the body to consider. When the chairman of the body took up his task, he emphasised that point in response to questions put to him at the time.

This evening, the Secretary of State surprised us by saying clearly that it is already the role of NICE to consider issues of affordability. That is the Government dodging decisions that they ought to take. I disagree with the general thrust of some of the other remarks this evening—the Government should be making such decisions on a political basis, having received from NICE expert advice on clinical efficiency and cost-effectiveness. The issue is becoming confused.

I would welcome a broader look at what constitutes cost-effectiveness. It should not be a question simply of what the NHS's current budget can afford, but rather what UK plc will have to pay out as a result of decisions. For example, there may be a variety of treatments that would enable people to get back to work—and which would save money on benefit bills and housing provision by local authorities—which should be incorporated into any true consideration of what constitutes cost-effectiveness.

I welcome the fact that the Minister with responsibility for public health has a role in considering public health issues that will rove across Departments, but I cannot understand why the same cannot be true when we look at cost-effectiveness issues.

I wish to refer also to the tension that arises following the central diktats launched by the Department of Health, and the difficulties that these cause to the local providers who must carry them through. The Government are forcing health care suppliers to fund some of their well-spun schemes without providing adequate resources.

I listened with interest to the comments of the hon. Member for Woodspring. I agree with those who have suggested that the basic Conservative prescription for increasing health care provision seems to be an expansion of private health insurance. However, I was puzzled by the logic of the hon. Gentleman's case. Some of his comments about the shortcomings of private health insurance policies were right. I understand why they are unattractive for many people. However, I do not understand how a modification of those policies would suddenly make them vastly more attractive to great swathes of the population, unless the NHS was so unappealing and unattractive that people felt driven to go to such lengths. If we follow his logic, he was almost arguing—I am not suggesting that he said this—in favour of maintaining long waiting lists to encourage people to make provision for themselves in the private sector. As an hon. Friend said to me yesterday, that is replacing rationing by postcode with rationing by tax code, which is no more desirable than the current situation.

Mr. Brady: The hon. Gentleman is right to draw attention to the problem. However, that is what is happening under the current Government. I have a constituent who has paid from his life savings to have a life-saving operation because he could not put up with the ludicrous waiting lists that the Labour Government were inflicting on him.

Mr. Harvey: It is certainly true that with the current long waiting lists, some people are paying to go into the private sector. I do not query what the hon. Gentleman says about that. However, the thrust of his hon. Friend's case seemed to be that there needed to be a great increase in the extent to which people were making such provision for themselves. A better objective would be to run the NHS so well that such provision became less attractive.

I also congratulate the Conservatives on taking up the issue of waiting times. It is not an entirely original idea that they seem to have come up with over the past few weeks. The Scottish Administration formed in May after an election campaign that addressed those issues decided that their performance should be judged by waiting times, not by the number of people on waiting lists. It is common sense that the key issue for a patient awaiting care is how long they have to wait: first how long it takes to see a consultant; then perhaps how long it is before they can have a scan or some diagnostic measure; and then how long they spend on the waiting list that the Government measure. Although there have been some extreme comments this evening about the manipulation of figures, it is not a fair assessment of the performance of the NHS simply to look at waiting lists for in-patients and not to consider the growing waiting lists for out-patients.

Mr. Hammond: For the record, will the hon. Gentleman clarify his party's current estimate of the amount that would have to be added to income tax to deliver, from taxation, the NHS that he feels that the British people deserve in the 21st century?

Mr. Harvey: One cannot bring about the service that one wants to build in the longer term on the basis of this year's or next year's income tax revenues. We have to invest over time to make good the underinvestment that has been going on for decades. Over time, we have to move towards the proportion of gross domestic product that other European countries spend on health. I agree that the private sector must be counted in that. We have to make progress towards the European average if we are to have health provision comparable with that in our competitor countries and put right the problems to which the right hon. Member for South-West Surrey (Mrs. Bottomley) referred in her comments about travel agent's brochures.

Sir Geoffrey Johnson Smith (Wealden): The proportion of GDP spent on health care through the national health service is about the same as that spent

on the continent. The difference between spending on the continent and spending here is accounted for by the private sector.

Mr. Harvey: That is simply not true. Our spending is about 2 per cent. lower than the average of other European Union members. The split between public and private provision differs from country to country, but on the total spent we are trailing well behind our competitor nations. I am sorry to disagree with the right hon. Gentleman, but that is the fact.

The Secretary of State asked the Opposition to say whether they welcomed the new focus that he has adopted in the past couple of weeks. I should like to make it clear that I do. I hope that he will address the worrying gap between the level of care for cancer patients in this country and that in our competitor nations. Patients and the general public will welcome having those priorities mapped out clearly. If the new cancer tsar, Professor Richards, is to make the progress that we all want, he will need a full increase of resources behind the surgeons to whom the Secretary of State has already referred. That includes nursing staff and equipment. I agree with the comments from the Conservative Front Bench. There have been many representations from health service professionals about the state of the equipment used for cancer care. That will all be important to the work that the Secretary of State is trying to do, and I fear that there will be no scope for recycling any money already committed; the money will need to be genuinely new. Indeed, in planning a work force capable of delivering the new priorities, we must consider what staffing levels throughout the profession will be required.

The Secretary of State talked about the increase in nursing salaries. Certainly the sharp increase in salaries for new nurses is welcome. As the right hon. Gentleman rightly said, that is beginning to have an impact on recruitment into the profession. However, retention is equally important. If we are to solve that problem, we must do something about salaries for existing nursing staff. There have been some examples of new staff earning almost the same as experienced staff. It costs about £33,000 to train a nurse, and £5,000 to replace one who leaves the profession; that figure covers recruitment costs, agency costs and so on. We must think about cost-effectiveness in a broader sense, because spending on nurses can save money.

We also need more nurse-led care, more prescribing by nurses and more specialist nurses. In addition to the impact that that would have on efficiency and on the economics of the national health service, it would also encourage nurses to stay in the profession and relieve some of the pressure on doctors. I was pleased to hear about the GP practice in Derbyshire that is run entirely by a nurse, who sees the patients first and employs a GP to whom she passes them if she thinks it is appropriate and necessary.

Ultimately, without additional funding the NHS cannot remain comprehensive, high quality and free at the point of entry. In the longer run, however, funding the NHS could save other Departments money. When we think about the winter ahead, and the sort of problems that are piling up, including the fact that one quarter of the trusts say that their financial position means that they will have to postpone or cancel developments in the Government's priority area of mental health, we realise that the immediate problems are very serious.

Expecting trusts and authorities to go through the process of efficiency gain and to continue to come up with savings year on year on year is simply causing additional problems, and adding to the problems that we already have is no solution to the headaches that those who try to provide our health service are already experiencing.

8.38 pm

Mr. Stephen Hesford (Wirral, West): Having heard the hon. Member for North Devon (Mr. Harvey) speaking on behalf of the Liberal Democrats, I cannot help observing—this is an old one but a good one—that in the health debate, the Liberal Democrats have bladder trouble again. I am talking about a continuation of the longest "pee"—*[Interruption.]* I shall take no lessons from them when they talk about funding.

The Conservatives, as well as the Liberal Democrats, have a problem. We heard nothing from their Front-Bench spokesman about spending—nothing about the £21 billion that the Government have placed before the nation to be spent on the national health service over three years. The Conservatives do not talk about that, because they cannot say what they would do.

We heard nothing about the Health Act 1999, either. I had the honour and good fortune to serve on the Standing Committee on that Bill, so I know that one of the reasons why the Conservatives will not talk about it is that they have lost the argument about the structure. In Committee, they talked for hour upon hour about how abolishing fundholding would be the ruin of the health service. Yet we have heard nothing about that today. The Conservatives do not mention it any more, because they lost the argument, and the argument has now moved on.

We heard nothing from the hon. Member for Woodspring (Dr. Fox) about mental health services. He said that he wanted a mature debate, so why did he not welcome the national frameworks that the Government have recently introduced for major sectors of the health service? My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health mentioned public health. If we are having a mature debate, why did the Opposition not welcome "Saving Lives: Our Healthier Nation", the White Paper that addressed that very issue?

The present Government are the first to consider the effects of ill health when determining health policy. Why do we hear nothing from the Opposition about the wider health debate, including the effect of the new deal on poverty? We hear nothing about the national minimum wage, because the Opposition have lost the argument. We hear nothing about the working families tax credit, which will make work pay for families and do much to reduce ill health.

Shamefully, we heard nothing from the hon. Member for Woodspring about staff. In a debate on the health service, he failed to welcome the commitment and dedication of the staff. The Opposition are too churlish to welcome the Government's investment programme which will provide more nurses after years of cuts in nurse numbers under the Tories' regime.

The hon. Member for Woodspring mentioned his theory that private health insurance would get extra money into the national health service. Several powerful criticisms of that approach have been made already, but they are worthy of reiteration. Private health insurance

[Mr. Stephen Hesford]

would mean a massive boost for the Tories' friends in the City in the health insurance market. That is one of the by-products of that approach.

Mr. Brady: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Hesford: No, because I have only 10 minutes. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State made the powerful point that the Tories were not trusted after the mis-selling of private pensions, so why should they be trusted on the idea of health insurance?

The hon. Member for Woodspring did not mention what it would take to attract people to private health insurance. One curious theory, expounded by the hon. Member for North Devon, was that waiting times would be lengthened to force people into it. That is one potential method, but what else could be done?

The method that dare not speak its name was revealed by the hon. Member for Rutland and Melton (Mr. Duncan) when he made a speech in March 1999 to the Social Market Foundation as a shadow Health Minister. He gave the game away about using tax relief to encourage people to take out private health insurance, although the Opposition seem since to have suffered collective amnesia on the issue. They do not talk about it because of the cost implications. It would cost between £500 million and £1 billion a year to achieve the take-up of private health insurance that the hon. Gentleman talked about.

I would be grateful if the hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr. Hammond), who is to reply for the Opposition, could deal with that sort of costing. It flies in the face of the tax-cutting agenda that his hon. Friend the shadow Chancellor discussed. So much for the Opposition.

The right hon. Member for South-West Surrey (Mrs. Bottomley) described what goes on in her constituency, but I will not take from her that doom-and-gloom-merchant view of the health service. I visit my local hospitals, see my local primary care groups and talk to the local trusts. I know what the health service is achieving in my constituency and how the Government's agenda sits very well with the people with whom I speak. I very much welcome the Government's modernising agenda.

In the Wirral, we will get a walk-in centre, which will reduce waiting times and lists for patients. We have been allocated £800,000 to modernise our accident and emergency unit. The Opposition do not mention that. Waiting lists are down in my constituency and I have received no letters from constituents complaining about shorter waiting lists. It is nonsense to say that we should not honour that commitment, as has been said rightly and powerfully in this debate.

My local hospital, Arrowe Park, which does an excellent job, is to get a new 12-bed unit to help deal with winter pressures. We are part of the Merseyside health action zone, which returns me to the public health agenda. On the Wirral, we are considering occupational therapies to get those who are suffering from long-term ill health back into employment.

I will end on this note. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health said that this debate is fashioned around the idea of year zero—the idea that the Conservatives were not in power for 18 years. Their collective amnesia is—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. I am afraid that the hon. Gentleman must end now. I call the hon. Member for Spelthorne (Mr. Wilshire).

8.48 pm

Mr. David Wilshire (Spelthorne): My constituents are growing weary of the NHS propaganda that this Government are pumping out. My constituents are getting less money, not more, they are getting a worse and not a better service, and their interests are being sacrificed on the altar of financial cuts and provider convenience.

The Government's propaganda machine drones on and on about more money for all, but the truth in Spelthorne is the exact opposite. West Surrey health authority's pro rata share of the much hyped £20 billion would be £5 million a year. Instead of getting that £5 million, the health authority has been ordered by the Government to make £20 million in cuts in the next three years. Those are real cuts—the ending of real services—and not merely getting £20 million less than the authority thought it needed. That is a total disgrace. So much for the propaganda about more money for the health service under Labour. Spelthorne is the victim of one of those Labour lies.

The Government's propaganda machine drones on and on about better services for all. Again, the truth in my constituency is very different. West Surrey health authority is savaging services in my constituency in order to cut expenditure. The total pay bill is being cut by 4.6 per cent. The hon. Member for Wirral, West (Mr. Hesford) said that he had heard nothing about staff from Conservative Members. However, I can tell him that in my constituency the cuts will mean fewer nurses and doctors. That is the truth about Labour's national health service. It is the real message about staff that the hon. Gentleman ought to hear.

West Surrey health authority is cutting spending on surgical, medical and intensive care services by £775,000 a year. It is also cutting spending on clinical support services by £1.6 million a year. I am talking not about savings through modernisation or through cutting overheads, but about cuts to front-line services. The consequences of those cuts for Ashford hospital in my constituency include the closure of the accident and emergency department, and the loss of all its intensive care beds and of 70 other acute care beds.

That is the truth of what is happening in my constituency. The House need not take my word for it. When one of the consultants in my constituency was asked what the cuts would mean, he said that they would lead to increased suffering and inconvenience for patients. He added that a few of those patients would die as a result of the cuts. So much for better services under Labour: Spelthorne is the victim of yet another Labour lie.

The Government's propaganda drones on and on about putting patients first, but once again, the truth in my constituency is very different. The Government say that services should be provided where patients want them, and the Secretary of State spoke today about convenience.

However, the closure of local services in my local hospital—for purposes of saving money for the health service and of provider convenience—is forcing my constituents to travel ever further.

The Government say that patients will get the drugs that they want. There has been a lot of hype about that, but my patient care group has been told by my health authority to restrict prescribing in order to cut costs. The Government go on and on about how patients will be referred to the most suitable consultant. However, my PCG is being told to restrict referrals, again in order to cut costs. So much for Labour putting patients first: yet again, Spelthorne is the victim of another Labour lie.

One other truth needs to be taken very seriously, and my constituents know all about it. That truth is that the Labour Government are very willing to play party politics with the NHS in my constituency. Earlier this year, the proposals to cut £20 million worth of services were being drawn up. They were ready to be published when the edict from on high came down prohibiting their publication until after the European elections. We know why that happened, but I am happy to say that my constituents are sensible. They were able to rumble the Government's ploy to protect the Labour position in those elections. Fewer than 4,000 of the 70,000 electors in my constituency voted Labour, because they knew the truth about the Government.

On top of all that, my local health authority has told me that the Government were pressing it only last week not to make any concessions to the local opposition to the cuts that are being made. That is because when the matter reaches the Secretary of State, he will wish to disguise the cuts that he will make by offering sweeteners that he knows my health authority is thinking about. That sort of politicking disgusts me and my constituents.

The Labour party needs to understand another truth: however hard the Government spin and no matter how much propaganda they pump out about the health service, patients will always know the truth. The truth will out. The truth is that my constituency has less money than it did when the Government came to power. We have worse services than we did when the Government came to power. Once the cuts are made, Spelthorne will have fewer doctors and nurses than it did when the Government came to power.

It is time Ministers understood a few simple truths. I shall offer just two tonight: first, propaganda will not cure cancer; and secondly, it is time the Government stopped picking on people just because they vote Conservative.

8.56 pm

Ms Oona King (Bethnal Green and Bow): I commend the Opposition for choosing the national health service for debate. If there is one thing on which both sides can agree, it is the importance of health.

I am afraid, however, that my conciliatory approach might have to end at that point. Those who know me know that I do not engage readily in party political point scoring, but I was astonished by the speech given by the shadow Health Secretary, who did nothing but score points. Frankly—if foolishly—I expected a tiny bit more of him. I was particularly shocked when he described the statement by my hon. Friend the Member for Lancaster and Wyre (Mr. Dawson) that poverty causes ill health as a cheap sixth form debating point. If that is the starting point taken by the hon. Member for Woodspring (Dr. Fox), I welcome this debate because it gives everyone the chance to see the Opposition score yet another spectacular own goal.

The debate also gives me the opportunity to challenge the Opposition on why they want to see an end to specific improvements to the quality of service that the Labour Government's actions of the past two and a half years have already brought about. I shall turn later to improvements in my constituency.

Meanwhile, what is the latest wheeze dreamed up by the free marketeers at Conservative central office? What do they have in store for the national health service? We have heard all about the patient's guarantee. When I first heard the Leader of the Opposition talk about that, I let my imagination run wild. Perhaps, I thought, the Tory party has undergone a collective conversion on the road to Damascus. But then I read the small print—which, incidentally, hundreds of thousands more of our pensioners are able to do because of the Labour Government's restoration of free eye tests for the over-60s—and found that the Conservatives are offering nothing but a massive expansion of private health care. The policy is simply a way of farming out NHS treatment to the private health sector. It is back-door privatisation, an assisted places scheme in health care that will be used to subsidise private medicine for the privileged few.

The only guarantee that patients would receive from a Tory-run NHS would be a health service based on where the patient lives, who the general practitioner happens to be and—worst of all—the patient's ability to pay. Fortunately, while the Tories dream up ever more bizarre ways to flog off the NHS, the Labour Government are introducing modernising reforms alongside massive new investment that will underpin the quality of service. That fact cannot be disputed: my constituents are doing amazingly well out of the Government's commitment to the NHS—

Mr. Wilshire: Mine are not.

Ms King: If the hon. Gentleman wants to intervene, I shall be happy to give way. What is his point?

Mr. Wilshire: I wish that the hon. Lady had listened to what I said. My constituents are suffering as a result of her Government's actions.

Ms King: I find it astonishing that you say that your constituents can be suffering after a—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I remind the hon. Lady that she must speak in the third person.

Ms King: I find it astonishing that the hon. Gentleman says that his constituents are suffering under a Government programme that has put £21 billion extra into health, to which his party has objected.

Mr. Brady: Perhaps I can explain the situation both in a way that will please the hon. Lady's side and to my hon. Friend the Member for Spelthorne (Mr. Wilshire). The reason why my hon. Friend's constituents and mine are losing out although the hon. Lady's are gaining is precisely because the Government have changed the

[Mr. Brady]

allocation formula. They are transferring money to less privileged areas from other parts of the country. The problem that I have with that is simply that the Labour party was not honest and did not say at the election that that was what it intended to do. It did not tell my constituents that they would lose health service resources.

Ms King: I find it amazing that the hon. Gentleman is pointing out the very well known fact that we believe that health resources should be allocated on the basis of need. Yes, we do, absolutely, and we are proud of it. I shall come to the funding allocation—*[Interruption.]* I have given way, if the hon. Member for Spelthorne will allow me to proceed.

Let us examine the improvements that my constituents have seen. Conservative Members will be aware of improvements up and down the country in Tory-controlled health authorities as well. They are well documented and they have shown a move away from the political engineering in which the previous Government were so quick to engage.

In Bethnal Green and Bow in Tower Hamlets, East London and the City health authority is receiving an additional £37 million to spend on local health services. That is an increase of 8 per cent.—something that could only have been dreamed of under the previous Administration. Yet all the increased funding is opposed by the Conservative party, with its blanket claim that the funding is reckless.

In Tower Hamlets we will get a brand new 900-bed hospital on the site of the Royal London hospital at Whitechapel. That is part of the largest hospital building programme ever known in this country. Again, it is opposed by the Conservative party.

The health action zone in Tower Hamlets is enabling health service professionals to introduce innovative approaches in partnership with other agencies to tackle ill health among our children and young people, to reduce deaths and illness from heart disease and strokes, and to improve the quality of life for those with mental health needs. Again, all of that is opposed by the Conservative party.

Basically, as far as I can work it out, the Tories do not have a policy to improve health. They have a policy of entrenching ill health among ordinary people. So I am rather less interested in what they have to say and instead I would like to look at how we can continue to deal with the health inequalities that the Government have so vigorously been tackling.

First, we need to increase access. That is high up the Government's agenda. Access to health care in the poorest areas is denied to many people. Some of my constituents have problems, whether cultural or language problems or just social exclusion pure and simple. Those problems prevent their access to health care.

A second point about which we do not often hear much is the need to link health care initiatives and regeneration. It is an important point, which the new deal for communities is tackling.

Thirdly, there is a need to break down health departmentalitis. That is one of the main aims of the health action zone. The best thing about the HAZ is that for the first time the Government have embraced, in a way the previous Government never could or would, the wider definition of ill health and its causes, such as poverty. That brings us back to the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Lancaster and Wyre. I welcome the Government's approach. If we are to help the poorest people in the poorest areas, we must ensure that the amount of funding that the health authority attracts reflects the number of people who live in an area rather than the number included in the census. I hope that we can ensure that the index of deprivation plays a key part in the funding formula for health authorities.

Finally, the Government, and, indeed, the Prime Minister, have made it clear that these cash increases are not a one-off flash in the pan such as those that the Tories used to throw at us during the year before an election; rather they are sustainable, year on year, to increase access and quality of treatment, so that the NHS is once more the envy of the civilised world.

9.5 pm

Mr. David Amess (Southend, West): Yes, there is a crisis in the national health service, but it is not only there. I must inform the hon. Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Ms King) that there is also a crisis in education in Southend, where class sizes are growing and we do not have enough places for our secondary schoolchildren. There is a crisis in policing—[HON. MEMBERS: "What about the health service?"] I shall come to the health service in a moment. There is a crisis in foreign affairs, but, above all, there is a real crisis in the national health service. *[Interruption.]* Does the hon. Member for Harrow, East (Mr. McNulty) want to intervene from a sedentary position?

Last night, I spent a little time in the House of Commons Library, where I was referred to the comic section. There, I found the Labour party manifesto for the 1997 general election. After reading it, I felt physically sick. Obviously, many people have read that manifesto recently because it was well thumbed. It is headed:

"Britain will be better with new Labour."

It states:

"Our case is simple: that Britain can and must be better."

Turning to page 20, we read that Labour will "save the NHS". I hope that the Secretary of State for Health will soon return to the Chamber because he needs to read that manifesto. In a moment, I shall deal with both the present and the past ministerial teams.

It is garbage for Labour to claim to be saving the national health service. It should now be stated that after nearly three years of this wretched Labour Government, it will be left to the incoming Conservative Government to save the national health service. After all the drivel that the Secretary of State came out with about the Labour party being responsible for the NHS, I am extremely glad that my right hon. Friend the Member for Wealden (Sir G. Johnson Smith), who is somewhat older than the present Secretary of State, and my hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Mr. Woodward) were quietly able to put him right on precisely who was responsible for the national health service.

In the Labour manifesto, we were told that the NHS

"is under threat from the Conservatives. We want to save and modernise the NHS."

The document states that

"access to it will be based on need and need alone—not on your ability to pay, or on who your GP happens to be or on where you live."

There is much that I could say about that. When we turn to the next page, we see an attractive picture of some chap looking at X-rays, with the caption:

"We'll spend more on patient care and less on NHS red tape."

There are also the five daft election pledges, which Labour tells everyone are being honoured, but they are not; it is merely that the goalposts are being completely changed.

Finally, the manifesto refers to

"our contract with the people"

and states "save the NHS". It continues:

"Over the five years of a Labour government . . . we will rebuild the NHS"—

no; the Conservatives will have to rebuild it—

"reducing spending on administration and increasing spending on patient care."

The Labour party—new or old—should be thoroughly ashamed of all that nonsense.

As for the past ministerial team, I become extremely angry when Labour Members try to portray the Conservative party as never having any interest in the health service. I do not have private health insurance, although I wish I did. However, at present, I do not earn enough to afford it—I hope that I am not bombarded with application forms for it.

It is wicked for Labour Members to try to portray the Conservative party as uncaring. It is interesting to note that, after nearly three years in government, Labour Members are becoming annoyed for being blamed for things going wrong in the NHS. For 18 years—day in, day out; week in, week out; and month in, month out—as soon as someone died, it was all the fault of the Conservatives; Labour Members never worried about the effect on the relatives. Any problem in the national health service was the fault of the Conservative Government. After three years, Labour has been found out, and I do not believe a thing that Government Members say.

On 10 July, we were treated to an interview in *The Daily Telegraph* with the former Secretary of State for Health, the right hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras (Mr. Dobson). When asked about his job, he said:

"I'm the Health Secretary, not Jeffrey Archer. I love my job and hope to have it for a very long time."

At the end of the interview, he said:

"It's the only job I have ever wanted".

When interviewed on live television about the Dick Whittington job, he had the cheek to say that he had been doing a rather good job as Health Secretary—in case you had not noticed, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I am a member of the Health Select Committee, and when the right hon. Gentleman and his Ministers appeared before us I found their so-called responses to our questions deeply disappointing. I am looking forward to dealing with the new ministerial team—I note that the Committee Chairman, the hon. Member for Wakefield (Mr. Hinchliffe), is in the Chamber.

My hon. Friends will be aware that the Government are seeking to present a new health care image. We have a new team and a softer, gentler image. There will be no distasteful jokes told at big functions, which was the habit of the previous incumbent. The Government's approach to health care will be more sophisticated in the future; this is a new start. However, I think that the new incumbent will find it difficult to distance himself from the original policy. He was a Health Minister after the general election, and I have pages and pages detailing his recent remarks as Health Secretary. I do not take anything that Government Members say at face value—I get the truth from the Library—and I think that the new Health Secretary will regret some of his comments.

Labour has undoubtedly broken many promises and let the public down. As shadow Health Secretary, the present Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport said that there would be no upheaval in the NHS. Yet Dr. Ian Bogle described the pace of the Government's health reforms as "frightening" and said that doctors were

"apprehensive and fearful for their future".

The right hon. Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman) said that Labour would cut NHS waiting times—that is a joke. In March 1997, 30,100 patients waited more than a year to be seen by a doctor, and that figure has now increased by 63 per cent. Many of my hon. Friends have described the growth in NHS waiting lists.

In Southend, we see the result of Labour's policies at first hand. Since Labour came to power, waiting times for radiology treatment, and particularly barium enemas, have increased dramatically. That is a serious matter. I am advised that the problem has arisen because the hospital has had to divert one radiologist from the barium list to mammogram sessions. That is a direct consequence of the two-week waiting time edict for breast cancer treatment and a good example of robbing Peter to pay Paul.

There are no secrets about the health service: unless Labour puts up taxes, which it is loth to do for popularity reasons, it will fall on its sword. I am concerned for Mrs. Sara Ashworth who, at 93, is awaiting a cataract operation. I am advised by my local hospital that she will have to wait between 15 and 18 months—which, at 93, is a hell of a long time. I am very concerned about Mrs. Ena Pluckrose who lives opposite me. She is in her eighties and looks after her husband who is in his nineties. She has been told that she is being moved to the "soon" category, which means that she will be waiting 12 to 15 months.

There is a crisis in the NHS and I blame the previous Secretary of State, the present Secretary of State and, most of all, the leader of the Labour party. The sooner he and this wretched Government lose the next general election, the better.

9.15 pm

Dr. Howard Stoate (Dartford): I have listened to the debate with great attention and interest as this subject is dear to my heart. I am one of only two general practitioners who are Members of the House; the other, who is sitting opposite me, is listening closely as well.

The Opposition have played their usual tricks, which has rather disappointed me. I was hoping for an intelligent and adult debate, as billed by the Opposition spokesman, but unfortunately his words did not match his intentions and what we heard from them was not intelligent or enlightening discussion but a series of tricks to run down the NHS, demoralise staff and frighten patients into believing that the NHS is falling apart around their ears.

[Dr. Howard Stoate]

The truth is exactly the opposite. I am becoming well versed in parliamentary ways, and I was afraid that that might happen, so I took the precaution of phoning around my health authority, my trust and my local primary care group yesterday and today to find out exactly what is happening in my patch, which is in the West Kent health authority area. It is not noted for its left-wing leanings or views and, in the main, is represented by Conservative Members, so the allegation that the Government are rigging the NHS in favour of Labour-controlled areas is nonsense. I shall give examples to back that up.

My local hospital told me that its waiting list stood at 4,395 on 31 March 1998. By 30 September 1999, the figure was 3,429, which is a 22 per cent. decrease, with no patients waiting more than 18 months and all Department of Health targets being met.

I asked about recruitment, which is often mentioned.

Mr. Brady: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Dr. Stoate: I am afraid that I do not have time. I have a lot to get through and, unfortunately, only 10 minutes in which to do it.

I was told that there was no problem in recruiting junior doctors and that consultant posts are generally well filled, apart from one in radiology. There is a national shortage of radiologists and the problem is being addressed by the trust as that post is currently covered by a locum. The trust is short of 70 nurses and has planned a recruitment drive for the new year, but it told me that that figure is considerably better than it was.

Today, West Kent health authority has published its annual report, which is entitled "West Kent's Health" and headlined "A Healthier West Kent". The area contains places such as Sevenoaks, Tunbridge Wells and Maidstone, which are not represented by Labour Members. Nevertheless, it is doing extremely well in terms of health care. I shall give an example from the document, which was sent to me this morning, concerning winter pressures. Time and again, we have heard that the health service is about to fall apart and that it disintegrates when winter comes on, but last year

"schemes were put in place across Dartford and Gravesham, Medway and Swale, Maidstone, and Tunbridge Wells to help community health teams to provide more services to enable people, particularly the elderly, to stay in their own homes. Over £1 million went to Social Services to provide more care packages for people in their own homes . . . Half a million pounds was spent on additional packages of care from Nursing Homes . . . Additional money was also made available for Community Hospital beds in the Livingstone Hospital, Dartford and Sittingbourne Memorial Hospital . . . Some innovative schemes were developed, for example a Recuperative Care Scheme in Dartford".

That is all well and good, but did it work?

The document says:

"The Hospitals and Community services were very busy over the winter period but this was managed and the effects of the additional pressures created by the flu epidemic and other seasonal demands were minimised. The success of the initiatives was seen in the Acute Trusts enabling them to achieve waiting list reductions and maintain bed availability for non-emergency admissions."

That was during a so-called winter crisis. Obviously, the health authority coped very well indeed.

I contacted Dr. Alasdair Thomson—

Dr. Brand: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Dr. Stoate: Unfortunately, I do not have time.

Dr. Brand: On that point.

Dr. Stoate: Very well; I give way.

Dr. Brand: I believe that interventions are treated as injury time in these debates. Was the winter pressures money not a one-off arrangement, and does the hon. Gentleman agree that it is sad that there can be no consistent planning in the NHS? These schemes ought to be learned from and incorporated in the proper delivery of service.

Dr. Stoate: In answer to the hon. Gentleman, I shall continue to quote the article. It says that this winter

"The Health Authority is working with GPs and Trusts to repeat the successful plans of last winter and to improve them further."

That is not my document, but a West Kent health authority document.

As I was saying, I contacted the chairman of my local primary health care group, Dr Alasdair Thomson, a GP in my constituency, about what the group was doing to progress to primary care trust status. A ballot has just been held and 116 ballot papers were sent to GPs in the area; 72.4 per cent. responded and 69 per cent. of those who voted, voted yes. That was an overwhelming majority in favour of proceeding to primary care trust status as soon as possible. Public consultation will begin next week and continue until January.

The group has also started partnership working in many areas, including mental health, and a new psychiatric unit will open in January in my constituency. It has also joined the partnership in action scheme, involving health, social services and user groups of mental health services, radically to improve mental health services in my patch. It is developing clinical pathways with consultants, the idea being that GPs will be able to carry out more investigations more quickly, thereby reducing the number of people passed on to consultants, which in turn will reduce waiting lists and waiting times to see specialists. That is all good, innovative stuff coming out of a primary care group that wants to become a primary care trust as soon as possible.

However, not everything in the health service is perfect. Many hon. Members have made some valuable points about the difficulties. I wish to raise a number of issues about what we can do to improve the health service yet further. Of course, the health service needs more money, and I am sure that the ministerial team will work hard with the Chancellor to free up resources for it as money becomes available in the economy.

Naturally, we must continue to increase efficiency in the health service. Will the Minister say how the Government are getting on with their task of cutting red tape and the money spent on bureaucracy? We must make best use of resources, ensuring that every penny is spent to best effect. That means cost-effectiveness as well as clinical effectiveness. It means looking at clinical outcomes to ensure that best practice is available everywhere, every time. We must also ensure that we get

best value from goods and services. I am alarmed by the rise in the cost of generic drugs due to shortages and difficulties in obtaining them, and I am pleased that my colleagues on the Health Committee have agreed with my suggestion to meet to discuss that issue next week to see what we can do to improve the supply of generic drugs so that primary care groups do not overspend their budgets because of the unavailability of drugs.

We must also make best use of expertise in the health service. I am particularly concerned that community pharmacists are an under-used resource. They are highly trained and qualified and have much to offer. If there are extra winter pressures—for example, because of respiratory infections or flu—who better than community pharmacists to give good, sensible general advice and symptomatic treatment to people suffering from unpleasant, but generally not life-threatening conditions? That would free up clinicians, doctors and nurses to treat people who really need medical and nursing help and the few who may need hospital treatment. I am working with the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Dr. Tonge) to try to set up an all-party pharmacists group in this House. It will look at exactly that issue and try to raise awareness of how community pharmacists could be used to best effect within the health service.

Factors outside the health service can also affect health. We have already heard tonight that public health is a huge issue. It is not just about the NHS but includes many other aspects of society as we seek to improve the nation's health. We have heard about the smoking epidemic and the fact that every five minutes someone in this country dies from a smoking-related illness. We are beginning to find out that children are becoming fatter and less active because their diets do not necessarily suit them, and they are storing up the possibility of ill health in later life. That must be tackled. We must ensure that exercise programmes are geared to young people in schools so that they achieve maximum fitness.

We have heard that poor health is closely related to poverty, social circumstances, life chances and poor education. I know that the new Minister responsible for public health is working hard on that. All the different strands of government should be brought together to ensure that health is a matter not just for the health service but for the whole Government.

I believe that the NHS is under healthy pressure. Pressure is often a dynamic force for change. If properly harnessed, that pressure can be the driving engine of meaningful change, because we must respond to changing needs in society, changing expectations and the fact that people rightly expect more from the health service. They are entitled to more from the health service and, under this Government, they will get more from the health service.

9.24 pm

Mr. David Tredinnick (Bosworth): I congratulate the Secretary of State and his colleagues on the Front Bench on their appointments. I wish them well, but I think that they are up against it. That became all too evident when I heard my hon. Friend the Member for Spelthorne (Mr. Wilshire) talk about the cuts in his constituency.

If hon. Members are in doubt about statistics, they tend to go to the House of Commons Library. I did just that before the debate. I discovered—there may be some comfort for the Minister—that, as at 31 March 1997, the waiting list for patient admissions to the NHS trusts in Leicestershire stood at 16,546 and, by the end of June 1999, the list was 16,539. The Government have achieved a reduction in the waiting list of seven patients. However, there had been an increase of 514, or 3.2 per cent., over the previous quarter, which covers the period since the ending of fundholding on 1 April this year.

The trend is upwards, and perhaps that is not surprising given what has happened at Hinckley Sunnyside hospital in my constituency. Owing to a lack of funding, 10 rehabilitation beds have been closed at Hinckley Sunnyside hospital, where staff have an excellent record of getting patients back into the community. Six of those beds have been moved to Hinckley and District hospital through the redesignation of six surgical beds for geriatric rehabilitation. That is a reduction in provision for the ever-increasing need for rehabilitation beds, and a reduction in the number of in-patient beds for local people to have operations locally without having to go to Leicester.

The Secretary of State said that the issue raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Spelthorne had to do with the need to move patients around. That is not the problem. The problem is to do with funding in Hinckley, where there is not enough money to go round. I have received a letter about a 45-year-old stroke victim who cannot get a rehabilitation bed at Sunnyside, and must go to Leicester general hospital, which involves a difficult journey on public transport. Is that what the Secretary of State meant, because it is not what we need? People will face considerable problems if they have to take a half-hour journey to Leicester.

I want to raise two key issues: the Government's central funding policy and the position of primary care groups post fundholding. The Government have pledged to provide equity in funding across the nation. The situation in Leicestershire is catastrophic. The hon. Member for Wakefield (Mr. Hinchliffe) will recognise that. We are right at the bottom of the heap, and suffer from an historic problem of underfunding.

For the financial year 1999-2000, Leicestershire health authority has a funding allocation of £517 million compared with a target funding allocation of £530 million, so there is a gap of £13 million. The Government will not be able to make their policy work in Leicestershire unless the Secretary of State can find more money. I have spoken to the chairman and chief executive of the health authority, and they are cobbling things together by shifting money around from the old fundholding budget, but that will not work in the long term. Leicestershire spends £4 million less on community services than the average health authority.

The second big issue is the transition to primary care groups. In Hinckley, doctors rightly refused to join the primary care group board, and instead are opting to advise through the medical advisory panel. The problem for doctors is that they are not being given any real authority, and are not being allowed to exercise control over financial decisions. They said from the outset that they knew that the funding of primary care groups entailed the handing over of their fundholding money, and that they would be asked to administer and, as members, give tacit approval to what would increasingly become inadequate funding.

[Mr. David Tredinnick]

I have been told privately that the Hinckley model is likely to become a model for the health service in the future. Doctors have refused to take on the burden that the Government wanted to impose on them, but are making a contribution through an advisory panel.

One of the problems that we have had in Hinckley since the demise of fundholding has been its impact on minor operations carried out by GPs at Hinckley and District hospital. General practitioners in my constituency have complained that the number of minor operations at Hinckley hospital has dried up. The Minister should take that on board. In April 1999, the waiting list stood at nil; since the cessation of fundholding, it has become fairly substantial, and there has been a tremendous knock-on effect, in that operations must now be performed at Leicester general hospital and the Leicester royal infirmary. The waiting list problem—the problem that the Minister and the Secretary of State want to solve—is being exacerbated by the reduction to zero in the number of minor operations at Hinckley hospital. We now have a six-month waiting list, which is growing.

Under the new arrangements for primary care groups, scheduled operations under fundholding have been stopped. The hon. Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Ms King) referred to the policy of privatisation; I wonder how she will feel about this. A constituent of mine, Isabel Edgar, was due to have a second hip operation under the new primary care group arrangements. The operation had been scheduled under fundholding. She was told, "This is not possible: we will not do it." She has therefore had to have the operation done privately. Is that the kind of privatisation to which the hon. Member for Bethnal Green and Bow was referring?

One of the offices that I hold as a Back Bencher is treasurer of the parliamentary group for alternative and complementary medicine. In that capacity, I recently visited Bath to look at the new Bath spa project, which I commend to the Minister. Doctors whom I met there told me that, when they were fundholding, they were able to save 25 per cent. of their drug budgets through efficient management. That allowed them to offer a three-month wait for all operations, as well as to develop a full complementary medical team on their premises. They had homeopaths, hypnotherapists, herbalists, an osteopath and an acupuncturist.

Since the introduction of primary care groups—I beg the Minister to listen to this—complementary and alternative medical therapies are not being offered. There is a fundamental problem. People come to our surgeries saying that they can no longer benefit from homeopathy, herbal medicine, healing and other therapies. That represents a serious crisis for the Government. It will not be possible to meet the exponential increase in demand for complementary and alternative medicine, and the Minister must deal with that, because it is a vital issue.

At health questions last week, I raised the issue of how the prison service is dealing with complementary and alternative medicine. The Government have cut the list of services available from about 20 to about six. I visited Coldingley prison, and saw prisoners being treated there. One, a very violent man, had been treated by a cranial osteopath who had massaged and adjusted his skull plates. Another had received hands-on healing to channel energy. Both had responded well, but, although osteopathy remains on the list, cranial osteopathy is a different matter.

Let me draw the Government's attention to a newspaper cutting from *The Times* of 12 October in which someone is quoted as saying:

"I don't know how healing works, but it helped my son."

The lady says:

"Sam spent his last 18 months at home, going to school, being a normal boy."

The boy, a cancer patient, went into remission after someone channelled energy to him through the use of hands. Such services should be available not just to prisoners, but in the health service. If the Minister wants to cut his budgets and to secure a wider service, he should draw on the services of complementary practitioners, many of whom offer their services free.

What about the future? The level of confidence in the NHS can be measured by a leaflet that has been dropped in my constituency today advertising Nuneaton private hospital and asking "Why Wait?" The truth is out: the waiting time for first out-patient appointments is up, and the waiting time for operations is up. I ask the Minister to note that. We look forward to better funding in Leicestershire.

9.34 pm

Mr. Philip Hammond (Runnymede and Weybridge): It has turned out to be a rather predictable debate. The Secretary of State for Health set the tone. He told us that waiting lists were down. That is clearly incorrect, given the total number of people who are waiting for treatment, or specialist consultation. He told us that the money that he has announced over the past couple of weeks is "new money." That is clearly incorrect as well. It is part of the £21 billion that was announced with so much fanfare last year. Again, he misrepresented Conservative policy. I find it odd that all the professions and patient organisations, and the great majority of informed commentators, agree with us that the waiting list initiative is a disaster.

My right hon. Friend the Member for South-West Surrey (Mrs. Bottomley) and my hon. Friends the Members for Spelthorne (Mr. Wilshire) and for Bosworth (Mr. Tredinnick) gave a cameo of the position in many parts of the country: a funding crisis, services being cut and dissatisfaction among professionals and patients alike.

That was in stark contrast with the view of the world that was given by the hon. Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Ms King), who seems to have a narrow, at best boroughwide, view of what is happening in the health service. All I can say to her—my right hon. and hon. Friends would echo it—is good luck to her constituents if they have been so lucky in the lottery of the Government's NHS funding formula.

The hon. Member for Wakefield (Mr. Hinchliffe) treated us to his usual review of history, with scarcely a glance to the future. On the only specific question that he asked, he based his position on the fallacy that there would be no complementarity between the private and public sectors.

The hon. Member for North Devon (Mr. Harvey) criticised the motion, but did not bother to table an amendment on behalf of the Liberal Democrats. He argued for greater health spending as a proportion of gross

domestic product. We would agree with that, but he failed to tell us what split he would like between tax-funded and privately funded spending and, therefore, what income tax increase his party would propose at the next general election.

The hon. Member for Wirral, West (Mr. Hesford) accused us of not talking about the Government's additional spending plans for the NHS and challenged us to say what our approach would be. I am happy to confirm what it would be. My hon. Friend the Member for Woodspring (Dr. Fox) has already stated it, as did my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) when she was the shadow spokeswoman.

The next Conservative Government will increase tax-funded spending on the NHS in real terms year on year, but we do not believe that that is enough to deliver the health service that people need and deserve as we go into the 21st century. That is why we alone are looking for innovative solutions that will add to—supplement, not supplant—the NHS's work.

As usual, my hon. Friend the Member for Southend, West (Mr. Amess) made a fine and rousing speech. The hon. Member for Dartford (Dr. Stoate) made at least one important point, which I am happy to endorse: community pharmacists are an under-used resource. I wish that he had put that point to the Government before they jumped in with both feet in support of NHS Direct, an untried and untested idea.

The overall picture that has been painted in the debate is depressing. We have shown the position after two and a half years of government by a party that, in opposition, posed as the NHS's saviour. It is a picture, too, of shocking complacency among Labour Members. Who would have believed just a couple of years ago that, in opinion polls, 41 per cent. of people would tell pollsters that the NHS had got worse under Labour; that staff morale would be at record lows; that waiting lists overall would be completely out of control; and that half the NHS trusts would face massive deficits? Almost all PCGs have overspent, with the likelihood of cuts in drug prescribing later this year, despite the Secretary of State's pledge when he was Minister of State, Department of Health that patients would not be denied the drugs that they needed.

Clinical priorities are being distorted throughout the system. Patients are being deceived and hospitals are struggling to meet targets, with the sickest people often being put at the back of the queue in consequence. Does it please the Minister to think that, this very week, one of the largest and greatest teaching hospitals in London is having a blitz on grommets, possibly the cheapest and certainly the least clinically proven surgical intervention available, simply to meet the numbers that they need to meet to access a bonus?

In the face of all that, we have a Government who have not a clue of what their policy or strategy should be. They have their head firmly in the sand. They are perpetuating the myth, in the face of evidence to the contrary, that the NHS can deliver both excellence and comprehensiveness across the range of all demands, and further still the myth that, if the NHS cannot afford something, that something is valueless and should not be available from any other source.

The Government cannot decide whether they are trying stimulate demand, with 24-hour access and walk-in centres, or manage demand by controlling referrals and banning drugs. Indeed, the collective mind of the Government has become so confused on the matter that the previous Secretary of State, in his speech to the Labour party conference, seemed to suggest that the main purpose of the NHS was to compete with the private sector.

The appointment of a new Secretary of State might have been an opportunity for genuine change—a chance to put behind us the failed policies of the past two and a half years, and embark on a new and coherent approach to mapping out the future of our national health service. However, the Secretary of State has arrived already shackled by the Prime Minister's political pledge, and hemmed in by an ideological refusal to learn from the examples of the health care delivery systems of our European neighbours.

We have learned from this debate that there will be no change in the old Labour approach to health care. The waiting list pledge subordinates clinical to political priorities, and makes the sickest wait the longest. It turns the ethic of the national health service on its head. However, far from delivering on the waiting list pledge, as the Prime Minister's amendment might suggest, and based on their own fiddled figures, the Government have presided over a 170,000 increase in the total number of people waiting both for treatment and for first specialist consultation in the national health service.

In opposition, Labour Members said that they would spend £100 million to achieve a 100,000 reduction in the waiting list. In government, they have already spent £780 million to achieve a 170,000 increase. It is no wonder perhaps that the previous Secretary of State was sacked. I only hope that he never gets the chance to inflict on the bus queues of London what he has inflicted on the waiting lists of the national health service.

The truth is that, as long as the waiting list pledge remains the Government's key target—the one on which they base the rewards and penalties that they levy on hospital trusts—all other announcements are a zero-sum game; the rhetorical equivalent of rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic. The facts are simple, and the Secretary of State knows them, but he cannot respond to them because he is a hostage to the Prime Minister's political pledge.

The NHS has limited resources and cannot manage now on those resources. If the waiting list initiative continues, any other focus or initiative must be at the expense of something else. Therefore, when the Secretary of State tells us that he is focusing on coronary heart disease, cancer and mental health, he must tell us also, if the waiting list initiative is to remain, what will bear the burden—which services will be discontinued or cut to finance those initiatives?

In focusing on the killer diseases, the Secretary of State is cherry-picking from the Conservatives's patients guarantee. My hon. Friend the Member for Woodspring has proposed precisely that the most serious complaint should be treated first, and that clinical priority should be the sole basis of running the national health service. He has also said that he would scrap the damaging waiting list initiative. He has had the courage and honesty to acknowledge that shorter waiting times for those who are most seriously ill will mean that those with more trivial conditions will have to take their place in the queue for treatment in the national health service. Surely,

[Mr. Philip Hammond]

the rational way to run a health service is to deal with the sickest people first, but that is not the way that it works under the waiting list initiative.

The Secretary of State ignores the evidence all around him of chaos and demoralisation, and piles on more targets without scrapping the old ones. He displayed a frightening complacency when he told us last year that we have the best health service in the world. That is a health service which produces twice as many coronary heart disease deaths per 100,000 population as France; delivers half the lung cancer survival rate of Germany; and is pipped only by Romania for bottom place in a Europewide league table on the availability of renal dialysis. It is a system that delivers us the lowest number of doctors per thousand of population of any country in the European Union, and the lowest health spending as a percentage of gross domestic product.

If that is the health care system that the Secretary of State thinks that Britain deserves in the 21st century, that is a measure of the contempt in which this Government holds the British people.

The Government's insistence that the NHS can meet every last demand of every last person is a cruel deception which induces a dangerous complacency and becomes apparent only when it is too late. People are discovering that the NHS is not there for them, and the increasing numbers of elderly people using their life savings to pay privately for drugs and operations will testify to that.

We have set out our policy—transparent and explicit about the resource constraints on the system, putting the sickest at the front of the queue and letting doctors, not politicians, decide the priorities. That is a commonsense approach.

The Secretary of State is trying to ride two bicycles at the same time. He is trying to pursue the contradictory agendas of the Prime Minister's failed waiting list initiative, and his own well-meaning, but ultimately doomed, killer disease initiative. The Secretary of State is not stupid, and he knows that he can effectively refocus the NHS towards the killer diseases only if the Prime Minister's misguided and damaging pledge is dropped.

It is time for the Government to grasp that nettle and start the real debate on how to resource the NHS for the 21st century—something about which we heard nothing from the Government this evening. They should stop letting the British people and the staff of the NHS pay the price for the Prime Minister's refusal to acknowledge what every responsible body has told the Government—that the waiting list pledge was a grave error, the pursuit of which is causing serious and lasting damage to our national health service.

9.47 pm

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr. John Hutton): The hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr. Hammond) described the debate as predictable. I would prefer to describe it as fairly comprehensive. We have heard nine Back-Bench speeches, beginning with the speech by the former Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for South-West Surrey (Mrs. Bottomley). Much to the surprise of my right hon. and hon. Friends, she began with an apology. It was not, however, the one that many patients and the public would have liked her to make. We would have preferred her to apologise for her stewardship of the NHS. Sadly, she declined to do so.

Much to our surprise, the right hon. Lady dismissed NHS Direct as trivial and marginal. She should say that to the 500,000 people who have used the service, and she could learn about the contribution that the nurse-led service has made for many people.

Mrs. Virginia Bottomley: Does the Minister believe that the two children with head injuries who were not seen within one and a half hours at the local accident and emergency department and finally went home could have been helped by NHS Direct?

Mr. Hutton: Obviously, I do not have the details of that case. If the right hon. Lady refers it to me, I will look into it. However, lives have been saved as a result of NHS Direct, and it was sad and unfortunate that she and her right hon. and hon. Friends declined to acknowledge that.

My hon. Friend the Member for Wakefield (Mr. Hinchliffe) mentioned the importance of public health—rightly so—and the importance that we have placed on tackling health inequalities. He referred also to "The Common Sense Revolution"—a document recently published by the official Opposition. It is true to say that only in the modern Tory party could common sense ever be described as revolutionary.

The hon. Member for North Devon (Mr. Harvey) made a thoughtful speech, but he was weak on the arithmetic and in his appreciation of the £21 billion of additional resources going into the NHS over the next three years. Like many Opposition Members, he called for more money to be spent on the national health service, but when asked by the hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge, he declined to say how much more he wanted to spend.

At the election, the Liberal Democrats promised to spend an extra £540 million per year on the national health service. The hon. Member for North Devon might want to contradict that. We have done significantly better, exceeding that target within the first two and a half years of the Parliament, even without taking into account the additional resources available to the NHS under the comprehensive spending review.

Mr. Harvey: The hon. Gentleman refers to pledges at the election. They were on top of NHS inflation. The Government have tried to dupe the nation by bundling up NHS inflation and holding it back until the second half of the Parliament to make people think that the money was on top of what they should have been expecting. The fact is that by the end of this Parliament, the Government will not have increased health service spending as much as the Conservatives did when they were in office.

Mr. Hutton: I repeat, I do not think that arithmetic is the hon. Gentleman's strong point. He is wrong about the figures.

However, the hon. Gentleman coined a good soundbite about the new Tory policies on the national health service, saying that they would replace the postcode lottery that we inherited with a new tax code lottery. That would be the effect of Conservative policies. They will be rumbled and rejected by the people of this country.

I welcome the support of my hon. Friend the Member for Wirral, West (Mr. Hesford) for the action that we have taken to improve mental health services, particularly his welcome for the national service framework that we published recently. It will help to drive up standards and improve the quality of care for millions of people who suffer from mental health problems and turn to the national health service for support. I am also grateful for his support for our initiative on health action zones.

The hon. Member for Spelthorne (Mr. Wilshire) complained about propaganda and then indulged in a serious dose of it. He has probably recently arrived in the Chamber with copies of the press release that I am sure he had written before he made his speech. We all look forward to reading that press release in his local papers.

Mr. Wilshire: That is yet another Labour lie. The Minister might care to know that I have with me a petition signed by 25,000 of my constituents and that his party in my constituency helped to organise it, because even the local Labour party thinks that he is wrong.

Mr. Hutton: I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will not mind if I do not take his word for that. I should like to point out some of the facts to which he conveniently failed to refer. The cash growth for West Surrey health authority this year is nearly £20 million, which is a 3 per cent. real terms increase. He and other Conservatives who referred to the situation in Surrey conveniently forgot to refer to the £9 million that is going into the new accident and emergency department at St. Peter's hospital, or the £4 million scheme that has now been approved to redevelop the Weybridge community hospital in the constituency of the hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge. It is unfortunate but predictable that the good news stories about the NHS always slip through the fingers of Conservative Members.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Ms King) made a conciliatory speech, but she also skilfully shot the Tory fox, rumbling the real implications of their new policies on the national health service. We know what their intentions are and they have been made clear for everyone to see. Like my hon. Friend the Member for Wakefield, she was right to emphasise the importance of reducing health inequalities and the benefits of the health action zone in her constituency. We have not forgotten that the Conservatives were consistently unable to bring themselves to talk about the health inequalities that were the legacy of their policies. We are determined to tackle the problems.

The hon. Member for Southend, West (Mr. Amess), in a typical speech, covered a lot of ground very quickly. Intriguingly, he referred to a foreign affairs crisis in Southend. I am sure that we would all like to hear from him what he had in mind. He also kindly reminded the House of some of our election promises, and I can tell him, and all other hon. Members, that we are meeting those promises and will keep them.

My hon. Friend the Member for Dartford (Dr. Stoate), in a very good speech, referred to the improvements in the national health service in his county of Kent, putting some of the gloom and doom spread by the Conservative party into some sort of context. My hon. Friend asked how successful we had been at cutting red tape and transferring resources to front-line care, and I can tell him that nearly £200 million has already been transferred to front-line services.

The hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge said that he wanted to add to health spending by encouraging more private health care, but his sums simply do not add up. When we were debating the Health Bill in Standing Committee, he said that health spending in the United Kingdom would have to increase by 2, 3 or 4 per cent. of GDP. Current spending on health care in the United Kingdom is about £48 billion—5.8 per cent. of GDP—and an extra 3 to 4 per cent. of GDP spent on health would require at least an extra £24 billion.

If we assume, as we should, that currently 3.2 million people spend £1.7 million on private health insurance, at an average annual payment of £531, the hon. Gentleman's policy could be delivered only if we increased the number of people covered by private health insurance from 3.2 million to 45 million. That means almost every adult person in the United Kingdom.

The hon. Gentleman and his hon. Friends say that they do not intend their policies to result in compulsory private health insurance, but that does not add up. The only other way to meet the hon. Gentleman's promise to raise £24 billion would be to increase the average annual payment for private health insurance from £531 to £7,500.

Obviously, the Conservatives have lost some of the talents and skills necessary to run a country and be in government, but I suggest to the hon. Gentleman that, as a matter of urgency, he goes away, does his sums again and comes back with something slightly more credible. Throughout the debate we have heard nothing from the Conservative party that could be described as credible.

Mr. Hammond *rose—*

Mr. Hutton: No; I have given way three times to Conservative Members, and I do not believe that the hon. Gentleman gave way once.

The debate has highlighted some important differences between the Government and the Opposition concerning the future of the national health service. We want a service in which everyone can have confidence, which provides first class treatment and care to all who need it. The Conservatives want the NHS to be a second-line service for those who cannot afford to buy private health care. We want to modernise the NHS so that it can provide faster and better services where and when people want them. The Conservatives oppose all those changes.

The Tories opposed the new primary care walk-in centres. They oppose the appointment of a senior specialist to direct our fight against cancer. They do not want the number of people on waiting lists to be cut, and they oppose putting doctors and nurses in the driving seat through primary care groups, which are now up and running. They oppose the new public health strategy, and they described our commitment to spend an extra £21 billion on the NHS as reckless. Their position on all those issues is as dishonest as it is untenable. They claim to support the NHS, but they undermine it at every available turn.

The Conservatives say that the NHS cannot do everything, yet they oppose all attempts to improve the ability of the service to respond more quickly and

[Mr. Hutton]

effectively to patients' needs. We say that the NHS needs to be modernised so that it can provide the fast, convenient, high quality service that people want—

Mr. James Arbuthnot (North-East Hampshire) *rose in his place and claimed to move,* That the Question be now put.

Question, That the Question be now put, *put and agreed to.*

Question put accordingly, That the original words stand part of the Question:—

The House divided: Ayes 176, Noes 341.

Division No. 277] **[9.59 pm**

AYES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Allan, Richard
Amess, David
Ancram, Rt Hon Michael
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Ashdown, Rt Hon Paddy
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Baldry, Tony
Ballard, Jackie
Beggs, Roy
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Blunt, Crispin
Body, Sir Richard
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Rt Hon Mrs Virginia
Brady, Graham
Brand, Dr Peter
Brazier, Julian
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Burns, Simon
Burstow, Paul
Butterfill, John
Cash, William
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Clark, Dr Michael *(Rayleigh)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Kenneth *(Rushcliffe)*
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Collins, Tim
Colvin, Michael
Cotter, Brian
Cran, James
Curry, Rt Hon David
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice & Howden)*
Dorrell, Rt Hon Stephen
Duncan, Alan
Duncan Smith, Iain
Emery, Rt Hon Sir Peter
Evans, Nigel
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Fearn, Ronnie
Flight, Howard
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Fowler, Rt Hon Sir Norman
Fox, Dr Liam
Fraser, Christopher
Garnier, Edward
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
Gibb, Nick
Gill, Christopher
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Gray, James
Green, Damian
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Hague, Rt Hon William
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hammond, Philip
Hancock, Mike
Harris, Dr Evan
Hawkins, Nick
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John
Heald, Oliver
Heathcoat-Amory, Rt Hon David
Heseltine, Rt Hon Michael
Hogg, Rt Hon Douglas
Horam, John
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jenkin, Bernard
Johnson Smith, Rt Hon Sir Geoffrey
Jones, Nigel *(Cheltenham)*
Kennedy, Charles *(Ross Skye)*
Key, Robert
King, Rt Hon Tom *(Bridgwater)*
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lansley, Andrew
Letwin, Oliver
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lidington, David
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Livsey, Richard
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
Lyell, Rt Hon Sir Nicholas
MacGregor, Rt Hon John
McIntosh, Miss Anne
MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
Maclean, Rt Hon David
Maclennan, Rt Hon Robert
McLoughlin, Patrick
Madel, Sir David
Malins, Humfrey
Maples, John
Mates, Michael
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll & Bute)*
Moss, Malcolm
Nicholls, Patrick
Norman, Archie
Oaten, Mark
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Paterson, Owen
Pickles, Eric
Prior, David
Randall, John
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Rendel, David
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Laurence *(Tewk'b'ry)*
Rowe, Andrew *(Faversham)*
Ruffley, David
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
St Aubyn, Nick
Sanders, Adrian
Sayeed, Jonathan
Shephard, Rt Hon Mrs Gillian
Shepherd, Richard
Simpson, Keith *(Mid-Norfolk)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Smyth, Rev Martin *(Belfast S)*
Soames, Nicholas
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spring, Richard
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Streeter, Gary
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Townend, John
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Tyler, Paul
Tyrie, Andrew
Viggers, Peter
Walter, Robert
Wardle, Charles
Waterson, Nigel
Webb, Steve
Wells, Bowen
Whitney, Sir Raymond
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Wigley, Rt Hon Dafydd
Wilkinson, John
Willetts, David
Willis, Phil
Wilshire, David
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Woodward, Shaun
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mrs. Jacqui Lait and
Mr. Stephen Day.

NOES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainger, Nick
Alexander, Douglas
Allen, Graham
Armstrong, Rt Hon Ms Hilary
Atherton, Ms Candy
Austin, John
Barnes, Harry
Battle, John
Bayley, Hugh
Begg, Miss Anne
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Bell, Stuart *(Middlesbrough)*
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Benn, Rt Hon Tony *(Chesterfield)*
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Berry, Roger
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Blunkett, Rt Hon David
Boateng, Paul
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brown, Rt Hon Nick *(Newcastle E)*
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Browne, Desmond
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Butler, Mrs Christine
Byers, Rt Hon Stephen
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell-Savours, Dale
Cann, Jamie
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chaytor, David
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*

Cooper, Yvette
Corston, Ms Jean
Cousins, Jim
Cranston, Ross
Crausby, David
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Rt Hon Dr Jack *(Copeland)*
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Dalyell, Tam
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davis, Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Dobbin, Jim
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Etherington, Bill
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Fyfe, Maria
Gapes, Mike
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godman, Dr Norman A
Goggins, Paul
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Grogan, John
Gunnell, John
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hanson, David
Harman, Rt Hon Ms Harriet
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Healey, John
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hesford, Stephen
Hewitt, Ms Patricia
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Hoey, Kate
Hood, Jimmy
Hoon, Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, Alan *(Newport E)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Rt Hon Barry *(Alyn)*
Jones, Mrs Fiona *(Newark)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Ms Jenny *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Kelly, Ms Ruth
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lawrence, Ms Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Liddell, Rt Hon Mrs Helen
Linton, Martin
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Lock, David
Love, Andrew
McAllion, John
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McCartney, Rt Hon Ian *(Makerfield)*
Macdonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
McNamara, Kevin
McNulty, Tony
MacShane, Denis
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Marshall–Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Meacher, Rt Hon Michael
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michie, Bill *(Sheff'ld Heeley)*
Milburn, Rt Hon Alan
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin
Moffatt, Laura
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morgan, Rhodri *(Cardiff W)*
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Morris, Rt Hon John *(Aberavon)*
Mowlam, Rt Hon Marjorie
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Murphy, Rt Hon Paul *(Torfaen)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Osborne, Ms Sandra
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Pendry, Tom
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Powell, Sir Raymond
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prescott, Rt Hon John
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Quin, Rt Hon Ms Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Radice, Rt Hon Giles
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd
Raynsford, Nick
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Reid, Rt Hon Dr John *(Hamilton N)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rooker, Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Roy, Frank
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Salter, Martin
Sarwar, Mohammad
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Rt Hon Chris *(Islington S)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Snape, Peter
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Ms Helen
Squire, Ms Rachel
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Sloate, Dr Howard
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tynan, Bill
Vis, Dr Rudi
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Ms Claire
Wareing, Robert N
Watts, David
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Wills, Michael
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wise, Audrey
Wood, Mike
Woolas, Phil
Worthington, Tony
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, Dr Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. David Jamieson and Mr. Robert Ainsworth.

Question accordingly negatived.

Question, That the proposed words be there added, *put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 31 (Questions on amendments):—*

The House divided: Ayes 330, Noes 167.

Division No. 278] **[10.14 pm**

AYES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainger, Nick
Alexander, Douglas
Allen, Graham
Armstrong, Rt Hon Ms Hilary
Atherton, Ms Candy
Austin, John
Barnes, Harry
Battle, John
Bayley, Hugh
Begg, Miss Anne
Bell, Stuart *(Middlesbrough)*
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Benn, Rt Hon Tony *(Chesterfield)*
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Berry, Roger
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Blunkett, Rt Hon David
Boateng, Paul
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brown, Rt Hon Nick *(Newcastle E)*
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Browne, Desmond
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Butler, Mrs Christine
Byers, Rt Hon Stephen
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell–Savours, Dale
Cann, Jamie
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chaytor, David
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Cooper, Yvette
Corston, Ms Jean
Cousins, Jim
Cranston, Ross
Crausby, David
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Rt Hon Dr Jack *(Copeland)*
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Dalyell, Tam
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davis, Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Dobbin, Jim
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Etherington, Bill
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Fyfe, Maria
Gapes, Mike
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godman, Dr Norman A
Goggins, Paul
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grogan, John
Gunnell, John
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hanson, David
Harman, Rt Hon Ms Harriet
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Healey, John
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hesford, Stephen
Hewitt, Ms Patricia
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Hoey, Kate
Hoon, Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, Alan *(Newport E)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Ilsley, Eric
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Rt Hon Barry *(Alyn)*
Jones, Mrs Fiona *(Newark)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Ms Jenny *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Kelly, Ms Ruth
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lawrence, Ms Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Liddell, Rt Hon Mrs Helen
Linton, Martin
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Lock, David
Love, Andrew
McAllion, John
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McCartney, Rt Hon Ian *(Makerfield)*
Macdonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
McNamara, Kevin
McNulty, Tony
MacShane, Denis
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Marshall–Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Meacher, Rt Hon Michael
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michie, Bill *(Sheff'd Heeley)*
Milburn, Rt Hon Alan
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin
Moffatt, Laura
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morgan, Rhodri *(Cardiff W)*
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Morris, Rt Hon John *(Aberavon)*
Mowlam, Rt Hon Marjorie
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Murphy, Rt Hon Paul *(Torfaen)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Osborne, Ms Sandra
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Pendry, Tom
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prescott, Rt Hon John
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Quin, Rt Hon Ms Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Radice, Rt Hon Giles
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd
Raynsford, Nick
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Reid, Rt Hon Dr John *(Hamilton N)*
Rooker, Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Roy, Frank
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Salter, Martin
Sarwar, Mohammad
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Rt Hon Chris *(Islington S)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Ms Helen
Squire, Ms Rachel
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr Howard

Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tynan, Bill
Vis, Dr Rudi
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Ms Claire
Wareing, Robert N
Watts, David
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Wills, Michael
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wise, Audrey
Wood, Mike
Woolas, Phil
Worthington, Tony
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, Dr Tony *(Cannock)*

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. David Jamieson and Mr. Robert Ainsworth.

NOES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Allan, Richard
Amess, David
Ancram, Rt Hon Michael
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Ashdown, Rt Hon Paddy
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Baldry, Tony
Ballard, Jackie
Beggs, Roy
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Blunt, Crispin
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Rt Hon Mrs Virginia
Brady, Graham
Brand, Dr Peter
Brazier, Julian
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Burns, Simon
Burstow, Paul
Butterfill, John
Cash, William
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Clark, Dr Michael *(Rayleigh)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Kenneth *(Rushcliffe)*
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Collins, Tim
Colvin, Michael
Cotter, Brian
Cran, James
Curry, Rt Hon David
Davis, Cynog
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice & Howden)*
Dorrell, Rt Hon Stephen
Duncan, Alan
Duncan Smith, Iain
Emery, Rt Hon Sir Peter
Evans, Nigel
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Fowler, Rt Hon Sir Norman
Fox, Dr Liam
Fraser, Christopher
Garnier, Edward
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
Gibb, Nick
Gill, Christopher
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Green, Damian
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Hague, Rt Hon William
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hammond, Philip
Hancock, Mike
Harris, Dr Evan
Harvey, Nick
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John
Heald, Oliver
Heathcoat-Amory, Rt Hon David
Heseltine, Rt Hon Michael
Hogg, Rt Hon Douglas
Horam, John
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jenkin, Bernard
Johnson Smith, Rt Hon Sir Geoffrey
Jones, Nigel *(Cheltenham)*
Kennedy, Charles *(Ross Skye)*
Key, Robert
King, Rt Hon Tom *(Bridgwater)*
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lansley, Andrew
Letwin, Oliver
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lidington, David
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Livsey, Richard
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
Lyell, Rt Hon Sir Nicholas
MacGregor, Rt Hon John
McIntosh, Miss Anne
MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
Maclean, Rt Hon David
McLoughlin, Patrick
Madel, Sir David
Malins, Humfrey
Maples, John
Mates, Michael
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Moss, Malcolm
Nicholls, Patrick
Oaten, Mark
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Paterson, Owen
Pickles, Eric
Prior, David
Randall, John
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Rendel, David
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Laurence *(Tewk'b'ry)*
Ross, William *(E Lond'y)*
Rowe, Andrew *(Faversham)*
Ruffley, David
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
St Aubyn, Nick
Sanders, Adrian
Sayeed, Jonathan
Shephard, Rt Hon Mrs Gillian
Shepherd, Richard
Simpson, Keith *(Mid-Norfolk)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Smyth, Rev Martin *(Belfast S)*
Soames, Nicholas
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spring, Richard
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Townend, John
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Tyler, Paul
Tyrie, Andrew
Viggers, Peter
Walter, Robert
Wardle, Charles
Waterson, Nigel
Webb, Steve
Whitney, Sir Raymond
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Wigley, Rt Hon Dafydd
Wilkinson, John
Willetts, David
Willis, Phil
Wilshire, David
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Woodward, Shaun
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Noes:
Mrs. Jacqui Lait and Mr. Stephen Day.

Question accordingly agreed to.

MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *forthwith declared the main Question, as amended, to be agreed to.*

Resolved,

That this House applauds the dedication, skill and professionalism of the staff of the National Health Service but regrets that Her Majesty's Opposition seek to undermine the National Health Service at every turn; welcomes the Government's success in cutting waiting lists in line with its manifesto pledge and its programme to make services faster and more convenient; supports the Government's commitment to modernise cancer, heart disease and mental health services, and to ensure high standards of National Health Service care everywhere; notes that a modernised National Health Service funded through taxation and offering treatment according to need not ability to pay is both fairer and more efficient than private alternatives supported by the Opposition; and so believes that the National Health Service should be modernised not privatised.

PETITION

Ashford Hospital

10.27 pm

Mr. David Wilshire (Spelthorne): I have a petition from my Spelthorne constituents, opposing the savaging of services at Ashford hospital. It is signed by 25,000 local people and it was backed by all three main political parties—that means that my local Labour party does not support its own Government.

[Mr. David Wilshire]

The petition opposes the cuts of £20 million demanded by the Government; it opposes the closure of the accident and emergency department at Ashford hospital and of all its intensive care unit beds. It calls for proper Government funding of local health services in my constituency and for the scrapping of the cuts proposed by West Surrey health authority.

What is happening to the national health service in my constituency is a disgrace. This petition proves the depth of anger felt by my constituents.

To lie upon the Table.

Electrical Contracting Industry

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Betts.]*

10.28 pm

Mr. John McAllion (Dundee, East): The subject of the debate is Government policy towards the joint industry board for the electrical contracting industry—the JIB. When I first became involved with the JIB 10 years ago, I was approached by my constituent, Mr. Frank Graham. He is an electrician and, at that time, he was a member of the EETPU—the Electrical, Electronic, Telecommunications and Plumbing Union—and a JIB-graded employee. Initially, his concerns centred on a dispute that took place at Aldermaston in 1989 and which was handled by the JIB. Frank was one of 129 men who were sacked during the dispute. Subsequently, he was most unhappy with the way in which the JIB handled the dispute and he sought the assistance of his local Member of Parliament—that is the reason for my involvement.

Over the years, my concern over the JIB—and that of Frank Graham—has grown wider and deeper than the board's handling of that dispute in 1989. Together, Frank Graham and I have entered into a massive correspondence with the JIB itself, the Electrical Contractors Association, the EETPU, successive Ministers, the certification officer for trade unions, the commissioner for the rights of trade unions, the then Select Committee on Education and Employment, the Select Committee on Trade and Industry and the parliamentary ombudsman.

There is not enough time to go into all that correspondence in detail. I shall focus on what I believe to be the big issues affecting Government policy, but I must first put the JIB into a political and historical context.

The 1950s and early 1960s were a time of great stress and bitter strife within the electrical contracting industry. At that time, the union with sole negotiating rights in the sector was the ETU, which later became the EETPU. That union was riven by internal battles between right and left, which culminated in the infamous ballot-rigging case that led to the takeover of the union by its leading right-wing members, particularly Mr. Frank Chapple and his close ally, Mr. Eric Hammond.

The new leadership was determined to consolidate right-wing control of the union and to end what it believed to be confrontation between employers and employees. Militant action was discouraged and strikes were reduced from 36,800 man days lost in 1962 to just 9,900 days lost in 1966. Building upon the new moderate approach, the leadership resolved to import from the United States a new system for running the electrical contracting industry. The new model was called the joint industry board, and it had been operating in New York for more than 20 years.

Essentially, the New York JIB was a sweetheart deal between employers and the union to regulate and control the electrical contracting industry in the city. In return for the union's disciplining its members, improving productivity and eliminating strikes, the employers delivered an agreed package of pay, welfare benefits and training. The EETPU and the ECA signed a legally binding agreement in 1967 which introduced the JIB into British industrial relations for the first time. At the time, Eric Hammond boasted that it was his "first revolution" in the operation of trade unions in Britain.

The JIB has only two permanent or true members: the respective executive committees of the EETPU and the ECA. Each of them appoint the members of the ruling body of the JIB: its national board. The executive committees of the EETPU and the ECA are effectively the JIB. They control an impressive bureaucracy and have their own chief executive, secretary, industrial relations officer and other specialist staff. In the late 1960s, they had an annual income of more than £1 million and annual running costs of £100,000. With inflation, those figures would be much higher today. They also own buildings and assets and have their own employment agency. They control and regulate one of the most important industrial sectors in the British economy. The JIB matters, and that is why I have sought this debate tonight.

What has this to do with Government policy? From its inception, the JIB was registered as a trade union, but the legality of such registration was always in doubt. When it was first registered in 1967, the chief registrar noted in his annual report that it was an unusual type of registered trade union as it included representatives of both employees and employers. As I understand it, employment legislation has never allowed for the registration of a hybrid body such as the JIB.

The JIB was conscious of the doubtful legal basis of its registration as a trade union. When Frank Graham and I challenged it about its registration, it claimed initially to have received special dispensation to register in 1968 from the then Minister for Labour, Mr. Ray Gunter. The JIB made that claim in letters to the certification officer and to the Chairman of the Employment Sub-Committee, but the claim is bogus. The hon. Member for Solihull (Mr. Taylor), who was then Under-Secretary of State at the Department of Trade and Industry, told me in a letter in 1996 that he could find no reference to such dispensation in the Department's records. He added that he could find no statutory basis—past or present—under which anyone in any Government could have given such a dispensation.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Makerfield (Mr. McCartney), then a Minister of State at the Department of Trade and Industry, later confirmed to me in writing that the Department

"does not have, nor has it seen, any evidence supporting the view that any Minister ever granted any such dispensation."

If successive Tory and Labour Ministers are to be believed, we must conclude that the JIB misled the Chairman of the Employment Sub-Committee and the certification officer in claiming special ministerial dispensation to register as a trade union. I believe that the time has come for someone in Government to hold the JIB to account for seriously misleading senior Members of the House.

There are other concerns over the JIB's registration as a trade union. Why did successive registrars of friendly societies and certification officers allow an organisation that was clearly not a trade union to register as a trade union? Let me refer to some of the extensive correspondence that I have had with the certification officer. In a letter dated 23 October 1990, he writes of the JIB that

"as the organisation consists mainly of workers, it meets the definition of a trade union as set out in . . . the 1974 Act."

Another letter to me dated 10 January 1991 says:

"I have no reason to doubt the status of the JIB as a listed trade union."

The certification officer based those views on information supplied to him by the JIB. I have correspondence in which it claims to have three categories of member: the constituent parties to the JIB—effectively the executive committees of the ECA and the EETPU; more than 2,000 employer participant members; and more than 30,000 employee participant members. On the basis of those figures, he ruled that the JIB was a body mainly consisting of workers and therefore eligible to be listed as a trade union.

Right up to May 1991, that line was defended solidly by the JIB and the certification officer, but in June 1991 Frank Graham complained to him that, as a listed trade union, the JIB was in breach of the Trade Union Act 1984, which requires trade unions to elect their principal executive committees. The JIB's principal executive committee—the national board—is appointed, not elected by the members.

The certification officer, because of Frank's complaint, was required to write to the JIB to ask why its 30,000 employee participant members had not been allowed their legal right to elect the principal executive committee of the union to which they belonged. In its reply dated 17 June 1991, the JIB was forced to come clean and it was made clear that only the two constituent members—the ECA and the EETPU—were permanent or true members of the JIB. In its own words, the employee and employer members were not full members. Their participation in the JIB was in the nature of

"transient affiliation rather than true membership of the JIB."

That statement changed everything. On 23 July 1991, the certification officer wrote that, based on the JIB's own admission, it followed that the JIB was not a trade union and would have to be deregistered. More importantly, he informed the JIB that he intended to hold a public hearing on Frank Graham's complaint. Within a month of receiving that letter, the JIB threw in the towel and asked to be removed from the list of trade unions. It simply was not prepared to appear at any public hearing to defend its status as a registered trade union.

We must remember that only three months previously, the JIB and the certification officer had resolutely defended the JIB's status as a trade union; not any more, under the pressure of a public hearing. In a later letter, the certification officer wrote to Frank Graham:

"I remain of the view that the JIB is not and probably never was a trade union."

Why does any of this matter? Is it not a matter of concern for the Government that between 1967 and 1972, and again between 1974 and 1991, an organisation that was clearly not a trade union was allowed to register as a trade union without challenge from anyone in authority? There was no challenge from the registrar of friendly societies, certification officers or any Minister, despite the fact that Ministers and certification officers had been made aware of Frank Graham's concerns on this issue. Now that we know the JIB to have been illegally registered for so long, will no one in the Government hold it to account for that illegal registration? Is no one in the Government even interested in serious breaches of employment legislation by such important organisations? If they are not interested, they should be.

The JIB gained considerable material benefits from being registered as a trade union. The research division of the Commons Library wrote to me in 1996 and said that

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registration as a trade union with a certification officer is one of the requirements for attaining certain tax exemptions. This year, the Inland Revenue wrote to me admitting that the JIB had set up a provident fund on 1 October 1977 and that payments out of that fund were allowable as a deduction against tax. That concession stopped only when the JIB deregistered as a trade union in 1991. Thus for at least 14 years, the JIB was receiving tax allowances to which it was legally not entitled. If the Government are not interested in investigating that, I suggest that they should be.

There are other serious concerns about the JIB. There has only ever been one instance when a Secretary of State substituted a dismissals procedure agreement between employers and trade unions for the statutory provision of unfair dismissals. That instance was the substitute agreement between the ECA and the EETPU, relating to the electrical contracting industry—the dismissals procedure agreement run by the JIB. That substitute agreement was allowed by the Secretary of State only on the premise that workers in the industry would have the right to independent arbitration.

Frank Graham has produced evidence that, although on paper the JIB dismissals procedure allows for access to independent arbitration, in reality that access is blocked. The JIB's procedure, as set out in its handbook, makes it clear that any appellant must give good reason to the JIB national board to justify reference to independent arbitration. Clearly, if the JIB national board does not accept those reasons, there will be no reference to independent arbitration for that appellant.

Frank Graham's claim is contested by the JIB, but to the best of my knowledge, the dispute between him and the JIB on this issue has never been independently investigated. Given the unique nature of the substitute agreement run by the JIB, should not Ministers mount just such an investigation?

On the current legal status of the JIB, we know that it is no longer a registered trade union. I have correspondence from the certification officer, in which he admits that neither is it an employers' association. The JIB itself now claims to be an unincorporated association. According to the Library, legal controls prevent large organisations from operating as unincorporated corporations of association. Should not those controls apply to the JIB, which, by any standards, is a very large organisation?

I have also seen annual returns from Companies House for a company called JIB Ltd.—a private company limited by shares, which has the same address and the same secretary as the old JIB trade union, but which retains no record of holding any of the old trade union's assets. Who now controls those large assets, which once belonged to the JIB trade union?

This state of affairs is totally unsatisfactory. We simply do not know the current legal status of the JIB. If it is an unincorporated association, it has no legal personality of its own. We do not know who is legally responsible for registering it, to whom it makes returns or who holds it to account. For a large and wealthy organisation that exercises tight control over one of our most important industrial sectors, that is entirely unacceptable.

There are any number of outstanding questions. For example, why was the JIB ever allowed to register as a trade union? Why did those in authority support such registration until such time as the lone campaign by my constituent forced them to do a U-turn? Why have claims about special ministerial dispensation by the JIB never been investigated? Why has no one in the JIB ever been held to account for the misleading statements that they made about it? Why were tax concessions, which are available only to registered trade unions, paid out to an organisation that was never a registered trade union? Has the Inland Revenue attempted to reclaim any of the moneys given out in those tax concessions?

Those and many other questions need to be answered. That is why I am asking the Minister to undertake a comprehensive investigation into the operation of the JIB from its inception in 1967 to the present day. Most importantly, that is why I am asking him, once he has carried out that investigation, to report back to the House on the outcome of his inquiries.

10.45 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (Mr. Alan Johnson): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Dundee, East (Mr. McAllion) on securing a debate on Government policy towards the Joint Industry Board. This is an important issue, and he has pursued it with great vigour and energy on behalf of his constituent. I appreciate the concerns that he has raised.

My hon. Friend has taken an interest in the affairs of the JIB for many years. In July 1997, he met my predecessor as the Department of Trade and Industry Minister responsible for employment relations, my right hon. Friend the Member for Makerfield (Mr. McCartney), to discuss his concerns. He has corresponded with him on several occasions, both before and after this meeting. Moreover, he has tabled a number of parliamentary questions about the JIB, the most recent of which was answered in January this year.

My hon. Friend has built up a great knowledge of the JIB, as his speech has amply shown. As someone with limited previous experience of the JIB, I feel that my knowledge has been significantly enhanced by listening to his contribution.

My hon. Friend has raised a number of issues, and I shall try in the time available to deal with his main concerns and questions. He referred to the history of this organisation, and has raised questions about its past and current legal status. As he said, the JIB has had within its membership both a union—currently the Amalgamated Engineering and Electrical Union—and an employers' organisation, the Electrical Contractors Association. I understand that it also has individual companies and workers employed by those companies in its membership.

The JIB has been in existence for more than 30 years. For much of that period, it was registered as a trade union, first by the chief registrar of friendly societies and subsequently by the certification officer. I shall not go into the convoluted history of the JIB and its on-and-off registration as a union, because there is not time. Suffice it to say that the law on trade unions has changed considerably over the years.

As a former trade union leader, I know only too well how frequently the legal goalposts have been moved. Those changes have probably affected the views of the

public bodies concerned as to whether the JIB met the criteria for registration at the time. They may also have affected the JIB's views on the desirability of being so registered.

The current position is that the JIB is not registered as a trade union. As my hon. Friend said, it removed itself from the list in 1991. It is not the Government's responsibility to say whether the organisation is, or is not, a union. That is a matter for the certification officer and the courts to determine as cases arise. However, it seems likely that it is not a trade union. I believe that that is the view taken by the certification officer, and perhaps by the JIB itself.

I understand that the JIB currently classifies itself as an unincorporated association. As such, it would not have a legal personality of its own. It would, however, have to make returns for tax purposes to the Inland Revenue and Customs and Excise.

Mr. McAllion: As the Minister says, the JIB has to make returns to the Inland Revenue, but the Inland Revenue refuses to give any details of those returns or to put them in the public domain, so no one knows what the nature of this organisation is. Does the Minister think that that is a serious problem for the Government?

Mr. Johnson: That is a matter for the Inland Revenue. Our ministerial responsibility is to address the important point that has been made about the JIB's status as a trade union and its operation under the definition that has applied at various times over the 30 years of its existence.

As for the influence that individual electricians have over the affairs of the organisation, such matters should be laid down in the JIB's rules and constitutional arrangements. In that sense, it is no different from any other unincorporated association. Obviously, trade union law will not apply, unless it can be shown that the JIB is a union; and as I said, that does not seem likely.

However, trade union law applies to the relationship between individual electricians who are members of the AEEU—and who are also members of the JIB—and the AEEU. If individuals are concerned that the AEEU is infringing union law and its rules through its dealings with the JIB, they can always take up the matter with the union. If necessary, they can take their complaints to the courts or to the certification officer. Only yesterday, the provisions of the Employment Relations Act 1999 came into force, extending the certification officer's powers to determine complaints by a union member that his or her union had infringed union law or rules. We believe that the certification officer represents a more accessible and informal way than the courts for individual union members to resolve problems with their unions.

Let me now deal with legislation on dismissal procedure agreements. My hon. Friend pointed out that his constituent had been dismissed outside the employment tribunal system. The normal redress for an employee who believes that he or she has been unfairly dismissed is a complaint to an employment tribunal. Although employment tribunals do a good job of resolving such disputes, the employment rights legislation sensibly enables employers and independent trade unions to opt out of their statutory obligations on unfair dismissal—I stress that this does not cover other jurisdictions—by adopting other procedures in their place.

Of course, there must be safeguards. Such an agreement can have effect only if it has been designated by the Secretary of State, and it will be designated only if it meets certain conditions laid down in the legislation. For example, the agreement must provide remedies for unfair dismissal that are, on the whole, as beneficial as the statutory remedies.

As my hon. Friend rightly said, only one such agreement has been designated—for the JIB, where designated procedures have been operating, with some revisions, since 1979. My hon. Friend said that there was a discrepancy between the wording of the dismissal procedure and the JIB handbook in regard to the right to an independent arbitrator. As I think he knows, that has been taken up with the JIB, and the handbook was amended to bring it into line with the DPA.

The JIB sees itself as an important industrial relations institution for its sector. It is through the JIB that the main collective agreements affecting the industry are voluntarily negotiated between the AEEU and the Electrical Contractors Association. I understand that the JIB also gives cards to individual electricians who join, grading them according to their level of training and occupational attainment.

Generally, electricians with JIB cards will work for companies that are themselves members of the JIB, but as far as I am aware JIB rules do not require member companies to employ only electricians with such cards, so there is no reason to believe that the JIB operates some kind of closed-shop practice under another guise.

The JIB is an organisation with an unusual history. My hon. Friend may imply that "unusual" implies "suspect", but on the evidence presented to me and to my predecessor, we cannot share that judgment. My hon. Friend asked why the Government had not investigated why the JIB was ever registered as a union, and asked whether we could set up an investigation now. I cannot answer for the activities of past Governments, but I see no reason to undertake an investigation now, eight years after the JIB was last registered as a union. There is no reason to believe that any public agency acted improperly in the affair. I understand that the Parliamentary Commissioner for Administration—the Parliamentary Ombudsman—has been asked whether there was any administrative fault in the actions of the certification officer. He found that there was none, and was very clear in his rulings. As I have said, the JIB has an unusual history, but that is not sufficient reason to query its actions.

I will consider the arguments presented to me very carefully, but we are dealing with a case in which the individuals concerned had every right to raise the issues at the time, and which has been referred to the Parliamentary Ombudsman. My predecessor also examined the issue carefully. We are convinced that at every stage in the history of this affair, the JIB has registered properly under the terms of the legislation that existed at the time.

I understand the concern that has been caused to my hon. Friend's constituent. I will look at the issues again, but on the basis of what we know at the moment, we cannot support the holding of an investigation into issues that we believe have been properly dealt with by public bodies.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at five minutes to Eleven o'clock.

House of Commons

Wednesday 27 October 1999

The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

International Criminal Court

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Vaz.]*

9.33 am

Ms Oona King (Bethnal Green and Bow): I am immensely honoured to have the opportunity to initiate this debate on the International Criminal Court, which represents nothing less than mankind's efforts to outlaw gross atrocities: crimes against humanity. It also represents 150 years of evolution in international humanitarian law. Above all, it represents the recognition that having laws alone is just not good enough: we must have the means of enforcing those laws.

So far, 89 countries have signed the statute of the International Criminal Court, which was passed on 17 July 1998 in Rome. As soon as 60 of those countries have ratified the treaty, the ICC will be established. It will be the first permanent institution dedicated to the investigation and prosecution of individuals for breaches of international humanitarian law. However, to understand the ICC's significance, we have to understand the context in which it has developed. I should therefore like briefly to mention some of the milestones preceding its establishment.

The first real codification of war crimes was the 1864 Geneva convention on care of the wounded. From about 1900, international humanitarian law evolved more quickly, especially with the 1899 and 1907 Hague conventions on the laws and customs of war on land. The customs of war have changed, and the Select Committee on International Development, of which I am a member, has published several reports on that. It is increasingly civilians who are wounded, and often in internal, not external, acts of aggression.

The horrors of the first world war led to new treaties on wounded soldiers and on the use of gas and bacteriological weapons. The first attempts to establish an International Criminal Court were also made in that period, but they were stillborn. International humanitarian law began to gain ground after the second world war, when there was a groundswell of opinion favouring prosecution of the leaders of the defeated powers. The charter of the international military tribunal of 1945 represents the establishment of the first temporary international criminal court.

The Nuremberg and Tokyo tribunals tried three classes of crime: war crimes, crimes against peace, and crimes against humanity. The genocide convention, in 1948, was the first of the post-war conventions on international humanitarian law, and defined genocide as an attempt to destroy

"in whole or in part, a national, ethnic, racial or religious group as such".

The genocide convention also gave a name to what Churchill described, in this Chamber, as a "crime with no name".

The 1949 Geneva conventions on conduct of armed conflict, with additional protocols in 1972, codified war crimes and specified that, for the first time, internal as well as international and external conflicts were covered by law. Crimes against humanity were defined under separate conventions, such as the torture convention of 1984.

All those conventions have universal jurisdiction, which is a central point in the argument that has, finally, ensured establishment of the International Criminal Court. Universal jurisdiction acknowledges the fact that such crimes are so grave that their commission may be tried in any country, regardless of where the perpetrator comes from or where the crimes are committed. As the Pinochet case has shown, not even sovereign immunity overrides the principle of universal jurisdiction. There must be no hiding place, no safe haven, for anyone who has committed crimes against humanity.

I have repeated the words "crimes against humanity" several times already in my speech, and hope that hon. Members will consider what they mean when they are translated into action. I shall detain the House with no more than one brief description.

I shall never forget going to El Salvador in 1986, at the height of its civil war, and hearing of one of the crimes against humanity being perpetrated there, involving pregnant women, rats and metal boxes. A rat was place on a pregnant woman's stomach inside a metal box, which was heated from above. When the heat became so intense that the rat was forced to try to burrow out of the box, it did so through the pregnant woman's stomach.

I have described that crime in a little detail because words can be very dry and may not convey the horror of the crimes that they describe. I am certain that there would be no controversy on either side of the House about the need to ensure that we do not allow people responsible for such crimes to escape.

Despite the large body of existing humanitarian law, the 1990s have seen continued breaches, including ethnic cleansing in the former Yugoslavia, genocide in Rwanda and mass murder in East Timor. However, those atrocities have coincided with an unprecedented willingness at international level to bring people to justice and a dawning realisation that it is possible to do so. The first step was the establishment of the International Criminal Tribunal for Yugoslavia in The Hague. Next came the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda in Arusha. Switzerland, which is often ahead of the game, has tried and convicted a Rwandan citizen for crimes committed in Rwanda during the genocide in 1994.

However, the successful prosecutions are the exceptions that prove the rule, which, thus far, has been that international humanitarian law is not enforced. Thousands of crimes have been committed and many of the criminals are now in third countries, including here in Britain. I know of people thought to be guilty of such

[Ms Oona King]

crimes. In my constituency, I have taken an interest in cases involving alleged perpetrators of crimes against humanity in Bangladesh during the war of independence and in Rwanda.

Under universal jurisdiction, third countries, including Britain, should be trying such cases, but that is not happening. There has been only one trial under the War Crimes Act 1991, which refers specifically to crimes committed during the second world war. That has been the only trial in this country for grave breaches of international humanitarian law, although there is little doubt that such criminals have been, and continue to be, in this country.

That failure on our part is reflected throughout the world, but it does not square with an ethical foreign policy. However, under the current Government, Britain has been one of the most proactive states in trying to establish the International Criminal Court. Respect and praise are due for that.

The need for an International Criminal Court remains, because we have to bridge the gap between what a state promises that it will do and what it practises. The law exists, but it is not used. We can see that with the genocide convention, which took almost 50 years to the day to have its first success.

Under the principle of complementarity, which is central to the ICC, the primary responsibility for prosecution of breaches of international humanitarian law remains with the state parties. I must underline that, because some commentators and critics of the concept of an International Criminal Court have said that they worry that it might erode sovereignty. One of the most important points is that the ICC will be able to take on a case only if a state has been unable or unwilling to take it on itself and is already in breach of laws that it has signed up to. The ICC will not be rifling through the files of the Ministry of Defence or demanding the indictment of Cabinet Ministers and senior officers. It is not an international FBI.

By the same token, the ICC will not, unfortunately, be able to catch, try and convict every war criminal, torturer or genocidaire in the world—not even a significant minority of them. Let us be realistic about that. However, it will be able to oversee the development of international humanitarian law, try cases that come its way and add another hurdle in the path of criminals who have all too often felt that they can act with impunity despite—and sometimes because of—the magnitude of their crimes.

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East): Before the hon. Lady leaves this part of her excellent speech, will she agree to add a further item to the list of benefits of an International Criminal Court? Any such trials that have taken place, from Nuremberg onwards, have shown beyond peradventure that the war crimes were carried out, so that subsequent revisionists cannot get away with claiming that the acts never happened.

Ms King: The hon. Gentleman makes an excellent point, which has not been lost on the House, where we recently remembered holocaust day. One reason why we have got to this stage is the Nuremberg trials. I entirely agree with him.

Because we have not yet ratified the ICC treaty, we might be letting slip some of the good progress that we have made. Let us not forget that the United Kingdom was at the forefront of negotiations in Rome and UK negotiators were instrumental in ensuring—this is an important point—that mass rape and other forced sexual crimes were included in the statute's definitions of crimes against humanity. The British Government are also credited with helping to secure compromises on some of the more esoteric but no less important matters of jurisdiction or definition. UK negotiators remain active in the preparatory committees now considering the rules of evidence for the court and the definition of the crime of aggression.

The Government have made several statements to the effect that we intend and hope to be among the first 60 states to sign. Four have already done so, including Italy, and many of our European partners are expected to do so soon. I hope that we shall not miss a chance to show our European partner France that we shall be quicker than them in upholding international law. If we fail to be among the first 60, we will lose influence over the critical early functioning of the administration of the court, including its financial administration. It would also be a poor indication of the seriousness with which we take our obligations under the international humanitarian law conventions that we have already signed.

The international community requires moral leadership on the issue, and I expect our Labour Government to show it. I shall be bitterly disappointed if we do not. I do not expect to be disappointed, because I am sure that my hon. Friend the Minister—I take this opportunity to congratulate him on his elevation—and other Foreign Office Ministers take their obligations seriously. I understand that it is impossible to say exactly when a Bill will reach the House, particularly when it includes such major legal issues. However, I should like two reassurances from my hon. Friend.

First, I hope that the Government will not seek either of the opt-outs available under the statute. Article 124 says that a state can opt out of jurisdiction for seven years and article 98 leaves the door open for bilateral agreements allowing individuals to evade extradition. I would welcome reassurance about those opt-outs.

Secondly, I would welcome an indication of the date by which the Government intend to publish draft legislation and of the manner in which they intend to consult on the issue. If the Government could speed up the process, other countries might be prompted to ratify quickly and hence remove boltholes for today's and tomorrow's criminals.

My penultimate point relates to cost. Of course the court involves cost which, given America's intransigence on the issue, must be taken into account. It will be financed from three sources: assessed contributions by state parties, United Nations contributions approved by the General Assembly and voluntary contributions. Cost represents a reason to ratify sooner rather than later so that an undue burden does not fall upon the states that have ratified. Costs are attached to any legal system because the rule of law always has a price tag, but it is a price that any democrat should be prepared to pay. Ultimately, it is a bargain because we spend more on trying to clear up the mess caused by the people who will be brought into the dock than on ensuring that justice is done.

Finally, I am disappointed that the court will not be functioning in time for the millennium, but I am delighted that the Government have been so proactive. I hope that they continue to take a proactive approach. We should recognise that early ratification by ourselves and others will make sure that the court is the first international institution to be born in the new millennium. What better gift could today's politicians bequeath tomorrow's generation?

9.52 am

Mr. Edward Garnier (Harborough): I congratulate the hon. Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Ms King) on her good fortune in being selected to initiate today's debate on the International Criminal Court. It is a timely debate and I hope that the Minister and the Government were listening carefully. It is more than 51 years since the idea was first discussed in the United Nations Assembly, which passed resolution 260 in December 1948, but we are not very much nearer the establishment of such a court. In the intervening time, there have been various committees and courts of the International Legal Commission, all of which have produced reports and ideas of fine words and sentiments, but until November 1998, no concrete proposals were forthcoming.

From time to time, there have been ad hoc international criminal tribunals. The hon. Lady mentioned the most recent ones, which were set up in The Hague to deal with the problems in the former Yugoslavia and the horrific activities in Rwanda. Those ad hoc bodies are fine as far as they go, but one has only to consider the Rwanda case to see their limitations. The Rwanda tribunal can deal only with offences committed in 1994. Other offences were committed in Rwanda outside that 12-month period, and the court can do nothing about them.

I do not wish to belittle the work of the ad hoc tribunals as they have done a great deal and there is still much to do. I should also praise the work of the Bar of England and Wales, which has sent British barristers to work as prosecutors and to train lawyers in Africa and has trained those appearing in The Hague in the work that is so necessary to achieve justice. However, I urge the Government to get their skates on and do something more than simply signing the statute of Rome, as they did last year.

Throughout history, most perpetrators of war crimes and crimes against humanity have gone unpunished. Despite the military tribunals following the second world war and the two recent ad hoc international criminal tribunals, the same holds true for this century. Most perpetrators of atrocities on a national or international scale clearly believed that their crimes would go unpunished, and they have largely been correct. Very few criminals of that calibre have ever been brought to justice. One has only to think of Cambodia, where Pol Pot died in his bed and not in prison. There are criticisms that the Nuremberg trials that took place after the second world war were selective justice and there will no doubt be similar criticisms of the International Criminal Court in The Hague. To return to my example of Cambodia, unless we have a permanent International Criminal Court, the criticism of selective justice will continue to be made.

I know that criticisms have been made of the stand taken by the United States in relation to signing the statute and its lack of support for the establishment of an International Criminal Court. However, being rude about the United States will not achieve much. Instead of allowing their supporters and others to be rude about the United States, the Government should take the initiative.

I hope that I am establishing for the record what the Conservative party believes by quoting my hon. Friend the Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs. Gillan) when she questioned the Foreign Secretary when he made a statement on the International Criminal Court. She said:

> "By creating an International Criminal Court, we hope that we can move towards a more humane and peaceful world in which there is no sanctuary for the despot, the dictator, or the depraved."—[*Official Report*, 20 July 1998; Vol. 316, c. 806.]

She was right then and the Government would be right now if they did a little more to push for the ratification of the statute.

The Government should not allow themselves to be drawn into a sense of complacency and self-satisfaction. We are one of the first nations to have signed the statute, but only four countries have ratified it. The hon. Lady mentioned Italy. The other three are no doubt worthy nations, but they are not in the first rank of international power. I urge the Government to get on and lead by example. Unless we do, all sorts of other less powerful and influential states that look to the permanent five will also lag behind.

Dr. Nick Palmer (Broxtowe): Does the hon. and learned Gentleman agree that a two-track strategy whereby we speed up ratification but also put polite pressure on larger powers to ratify would be appropriate?

Mr. Garnier: I am sure that it would. I am not suggesting that we should not put diplomatic or other pressure on China, for example, which sent its president here last week. I sincerely hope that our Prime Minister, when he was not entertaining the President of China, found an opportunity to remind him of the need for it to become one of the signatories to—not to mention ratifiers of—the statute of Rome. I trust that we have a sufficiently good relationship with the United States under this and any future presidency for the Government and their successors to be able to put pressure on the US to sign and ratify the statute; but unless we get on and do it ourselves, our arguments will have less force.

Mrs. Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham): I wholeheartedly agree with the points that my hon. and learned Friend is making. Does he agree that it is a great shame that, in the negotiations at Rome, where our team and others bent over backwards to try to assuage the fears of the USA—and the document that was produced consequently contained substantial legal flaws—the USA ultimately felt that it could not join the countries that signed up? Should not the Government make every effort on every occasion to meet US officials and try to persuade them that their fears can be accommodated so that they can be brought within the ambit of the statute? Without the USA, Israel, China and India, the job will not be done.

Mr. Garnier: I wholeheartedly agree with my hon. Friend, as I did when she asked the Foreign Secretary a question in response to his statement in July 1998. I urge the Government to listen carefully to her, as I have done.

There is certainly a general feeling of warmth towards the establishment of an International Criminal Court, but the problem is how to translate that warmth into activity.

[Mr. Garnier]

Only seven of the 127 countries represented in Rome voted against the establishment of the ICC. China and the United States were two among them. The US based its decision on its fears that US service personnel stationed abroad might be subject to malicious prosecution. Our service personnel are often stationed abroad—indeed, about half our armed forces are overseas at any one time—as are those of other NATO countries, but the United States is the only NATO state that failed to sign the statute. Strong diplomatic pressure is required.

My main concern about the statute and the thinking behind it is that, while 60 countries will have to ratify before the court can be established, only four have so far done so, and our Government say that they cannot tell us when the necessary legislation will be introduced because it is terribly complicated. Legislation is frequently complicated but Governments have not always used that as an excuse for not introducing it. Reform of the House of Lords is complicated but that is being pushed through, as other Labour Government legislation has been that could easily be described as complicated. If the Government had the will, the complications could be dealt with.

Mr. Mike Gapes (Ilford, South): May I draw the hon. and learned Gentleman's attention to column *805* in the written answers in yesterday's *Hansard*, where the Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Neath (Mr. Hain) says that the problem is parliamentary time? Perhaps the hon. and learned Gentleman could have a word with his colleagues in the other place so that we get more parliamentary time and can ratify as soon as possible.

Mr. Garnier: If the hon. Gentleman can save the House parliamentary time by not supporting a Bill to ban fox hunting, we will no doubt have plenty of time to deal with more serious matters.

Mrs. Gillan: Has my hon. and learned Friend had a chance to look at some of the papers before the preparatory committee? I came across the disturbing information that for the statute to come into force the number of ratifications required, previously five to 65, had moved to 25 to 90. Has he any comment on that moving of the goalposts and the barriers that are being put in the way of the court at every stage?

Mr. Garnier: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for drawing that to my attention. It underlines the point that, if our Government lead by example, others may follow.

It is not only Conservative Members who are urging the Government to press ahead with the legislation. The Foreign Affairs Committee did so in its first report. The then Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the hon. Member for Manchester, Central (Mr. Lloyd), said:

> "We intend that the UK should be among the first sixty States to ratify the Statute of the International Criminal Court. Legislation will be necessary before we can proceed to ratification. We will introduce such legislation as soon as the Parliamentary timetable allows."—[*Official Report*, 16 November 1998; Vol. 319, c. *418*.]

I was interested to hear from the hon. Member for Ilford, South (Mr. Gapes) that another answer has been published today; one appeared on 20 October from the new Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the hon. Member for Neath (Mr. Hain), saying that legislation would be introduced as soon as time allows. It is for the Government to control their own programme. They know how to make the time. The Queen's Speech is on 17 November, and I sincerely hope that we shall find reference in it to the relevant legislation.

Mr. Douglas Alexander (Paisley, South): Does the hon. and learned Gentleman agree that the challenge of ratification extends beyond this country, as only four other countries plan to ratify within their coming parliamentary years?

Mr. Garnier: I would not disagree with that for a moment. I repeat my mantra: the sooner we do it, the sooner others may do it as well.

I, too, congratulate the Minister on his new position. It is always a joy to see one's parliamentary neighbours getting on in the world. I sincerely hope, in the nicest possible way, that his new job in the Foreign Office keeps him a long way from Leicester and Leicestershire for most of the parliamentary year. No doubt he will receive the typical Leicester welcome when he gets back to his constituency from time to time.

Niceties apart, I urge the Government to introduce legislation to allow us to ratify the statute in order to realise their intention that we should be among the first 60 states to do so, especially as it is more than a year since the Foreign Secretary said that ratification would not be a swift or fast-track process and that the legislation would be complex. All legislation has the capacity to be complex and I wish that we could get on with it more speedily.

The Minister will be aware of the consensus that it is most important that the major states, and especially the permanent members of the Security Council, show their support for the court. Will he comment on the most effective means by which we can put pressure on the United States to participate? There must be some easy way of assuaging its fears about malicious prosecution of its service personnel.

Does the Minister agree that, given that 60 states have to ratify before the court can be set up and that there has been so little progress so far, the likely timetable for establishment is about 50 years? I will be long dead by then, and I—and, I hope, the Minister—would like to be alive when the court is established. I look forward to an encouraging response.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael J. Martin): Before I call the next speaker, I remind the House that this debate is very short and that short speeches would be appreciated. That will allow more Members to speak.

10.10 am

Mr. Tony Colman (Putney): I start by declaring an interest, in that I am a member of the drafting committee of Charter 99, the charter for global democracy that was launched on United Nations day, last Sunday.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Ms King) on obtaining this debate, which is extremely fortuitous in reminding Ministers of the

importance of the ratification of the statute in this coming Session. My hon. Friend said that France is due to ratify the statute this week, and I understand that Germany will ratify it before the end of the year. I heard this morning that, during the past few days, President Clinton has made a positive speech about ratification. I urge all hon. Members with influence in Congress to use it, perhaps through the British-American parliamentary group seeking a meeting with Trent Lott, so that he can take the matter forward on the Republican side in the United States.

My hon. Friend mentioned the antecedents of the work in Rome last year. I wish to refer also to the Commission on Global Governance, which was set up by Willy Brandt and was co-chaired by the ex-Commonwealth Secretary-General Sonny Ramphal. It met between 1992 and 1995 and had wide membership, including, from this country, the right hon. Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (Sir E. Heath), the noble Lord Judd and Brian Urquhart.

"Our Global Neighbourhood" was published in 1995 and contained strong recommendations that supported the International Criminal Court. This September, Patsy Robertson—who is in charge of taking forward the work of the commission—met with Titus Alexander of the Westminster UNA, Peter Luff of the Royal Commonwealth Society and others, including Anthony Barnett, of Charter 88, to take forward the agenda of ratification of the statute.

Last Sunday—UN day—saw the launch of Charter 99. I urge all hon. Members who have not obtained copies nor signed the document to support it. It is an extremely important initiative, and one of the 12 points aimed at taking the agenda forward is the ratification of the statute.

The hon. and learned Member for Harborough (Mr. Garnier) suggested other areas of influence. The Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting takes places in about four weeks' time in Durban. I hope that the Minister will be able to support the idea that, within the discussion of the review of the Harare declaration—which concerns crimes against humanity—ratification of the statute could be taken forward. The work done by our parliamentary counsel and in the preparatory committee could be shared with our Commonwealth partners.

I am proud of the Government's ethical foreign policy, and I believe strongly that ratification in the coming Session is a key part of that policy. I suggest that the millennium United Nations General Assembly next September would be a good point to ensure ratification, so that we can announce to the people of the world that this country has ratified early and has led the way in ensuring that the International Criminal Court can come into existence for the year 2000.

10.14 am

Mr. Martin Bell (Tatton): I am grateful to the hon. Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Ms King) for her initiative in proposing this important debate. She will not like everything I say, but not everyone always does.

I had not expected to be a witness to war crimes and genocide in my time and in my continent. I was, and that left a deep impression on me. From that, I came to the conclusion that there surely had to be just such a jurisdiction and mechanism as we are discussing here.

I know the nature of modern warfare, which is to involve and to target civilians; it is to breach the Geneva conventions almost every day. I know that the leaders of people, armies and paramilitaries have become aware of this final sanction which might be used against them. I know that, in some cases, this has moderated their behaviour.

However, if the new court is to continue on the lines of the existing court at The Hague, I have grave doubts about it. That is from personal experience. I was the only journalist who agreed to testify to the court in the case of Blaskic. Most of the suspects who came before that court dealing with the former Yugoslavia were small fry, but Blaskic was not. He was the commander of the Bosnian Croat forces in the Lasva valley in central Bosnia in the bitter side war between Muslims and Croats, which started in April 1993 and continued to the ceasefire in February 1994.

Blaskic was arrested in the spring of 1996 and brought to The Hague. I believe that he has been subject to certain injustices which give me grave misgivings about the court that is now being proposed.He was held for more than a year before the trial began in June 1997. That trial went on until the end of July 1999—more than 25 months. As we stand here in this Chamber now, there still has been no decision from the judges. That means that, without a conviction, 10 per cent. of that young man's life has been spent in jail. That has to be unjust.

The procedures of the court are extremely dilatory. There were 158 witnesses and 3,000 pages of evidence, and the court sat for three days a week. The judges came in late on Monday and went early on Thursday. I calculated that Blaskic must have spent six days of his life in jail because of the judge's tea breaks. These courts are supposed to bear in mind the facts of the case, and not the comfort and convenience of the judges. If we are to set up a new system, it has to be run on different lines.

I am not sure that I am happy with the idea of a prosecutors court, which would be under political pressure to convict. If five cases come before that court in The Hague, and there are five acquittals, pressure will grow on the court. People will ask, "What is wrong? Why are you not convicting?" It may be because there has been insufficient evidence in those five cases. That is very important.

There is a risk when an individual—usually quite a prominent individual who represents a people—is arrested. He then develops a kind of iconic significance and is held responsible for the actions of some individuals in that group to which he belongs. The English language has a word for that—it is "scapegoat".

By all means, let us have a system of international justice in which there is no refuge for the guilty—however, let us above all have a system in which there is no injustice for the innocent.

10.17 am

Mr. Desmond Browne (Kilmarnock and Loudoun): I join with other hon. Members in congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Ms King) on securing this debate and on generating an opportunity to contribute to this important subject. I congratulate her also on so clearly and succinctly setting out the history and development of the International Criminal Court and on identifying the key issues in the debate.

I congratulate the Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester, East (Mr. Vaz), on his promotion, and I wish him well.

[Mr. Desmond Browne]

It is not possible to overestimate the significance of the adoption in Rome in July 1998 of the statutes of the permanent International Criminal Court. Consequent on that historic decision, for the first time a truly independent international court with an independent prosecutor and with the power to try crimes committed in internal conflicts will have jurisdiction to try those charged with war crimes, acts of genocide and crimes against humanity, and—when the issues of definition are resolved—acts of aggression.

At the ceremony celebrating the adoption in Rome in July of the statute of the International Criminal Court, Kofi Annan said:

"By adopting this statute, participants in the conference have overcome many legal and political problems which kept this question on the United Nations agenda almost throughout the organisation's history. No doubt many of us would have liked the court vested with even more far-reaching powers, but that should not lead us to minimise the breakthrough you have achieved. It is an achievement which, only a few years ago, nobody would have thought possible."

The following day, in a statement to the House, my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary said:

"It has been a paradox of our century that those who murder one person are more likely to be brought to justice than those who plot genocide against millions. The International Criminal Court will put on notice the Pol Pots and Saddam Husseins of the future that they may be held to account personally for their crimes against humanity. It will also offer justice to the victims who have no means at present of bringing their suffering before any court."—[*Official Report*, 20 July 1998; Vol. 316, c. 803.]

However, the political success of the adoption of the statute of the court is only a partial victory, as has already been pointed out. The permanent court will not be established until at least 60 states have ratified the Rome statute. So that as many states as possible will do so by the end of 2000, and so that the court may commence its activities no later than that date, it is necessary to mobilise an international movement towards ratification. The United Kingdom, which played a leading role in brokering a consensus at Rome, must now play a leading role in achieving the necessary number of ratifying states.

Delay is unthinkable. It would deprive the international community of a fundamental instrument in the defence of human rights by allowing the prosecution of those responsible for the most atrocious crimes, and it would have a number of other negative repercussions. While great progress has been made in the past 20 years to foster an effective system of international criminal justice, in particular through the creation of the two international criminal tribunals in the former Yugoslavia and in Rwanda, it cannot be emphasised enough that that effort must be constantly consolidated.

Consolidation is imperative when one considers how many acts of genocide and violations of human rights go unpunished. In the past 50 years, there have been countless instances of crimes against humanity, including war crimes, for which no individual has been held accountable. Cambodia, Mozambique, El Salvador and Liberia have seen horrifying loss of civilian life, including many millions of unarmed women and children. In Algeria and the Great Lakes area of Africa, massacres of civilians continue and, over the past year, one need only contemplate the actions of war criminals in Kosovo and East Timor to see that respect for international law desperately needs reinforcement. We cannot hope to generate that respect for international law unless we establish the principle of individual criminal accountability for all who commit such acts and unless we tackle impunity.

Without justice, many countries have no hope of lasting peace. To neglect or delay ratification of the International Criminal Court would send a negative message to the international community, at precisely the time that we should reinforce the progress made so far. Furthermore, the longer it takes the court to begin its work, the more chance its opponents have to mount a negative campaign against it. Therefore, we must build on the enthusiasm and momentum generated in Rome before it is dissipated. To do that, it is essential that countries in favour of the court, such as the United Kingdom, proceed with ratification immediately.

In the unlikely event that my hon. Friend the Minister has not had his mind concentrated on the important issues raised by this debate, I have several questions for him. Can he provide any information on the progress of ratification in the United Kingdom? Can he tell us in broad terms when the Bill for ratification will be voted on in this Parliament? I accept that the process of ratification is complicated, but can he give us some indication of what adaptation of the criminal law of the United Kingdom will be necessary to facilitate that ratification? In order to speed up the process, will he consider separating the ratification procedure from the adaptation of our legislation? Given that we have two distinct criminal law systems in these islands, can my hon. Friend tell the House what discussions he has had with the Minister for Justice of the Scottish Executive about the adaptation of Scots law in anticipation of ratification?

10.25 am

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East): I shall be brief, so that other hon. Members have a chance to contribute. I congratulate the hon. Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Ms King), although I will probably damn her future political prospects by saying that I agree with almost every word that she said. I intend to refer briefly to two points—verification and enforcement. As I pointed out in the intervention that the hon. Lady kindly allowed me to make, the value of an International Criminal Court is that it allows not only the possibility of retribution and deterrence, but verification that the atrocities have indeed occurred.

The searing experience of the Nuremberg trials set on record more than 20 volumes of evidence of bestial depravity committed by the Nazi regime. I will never forget seeing a short film, "A Painful Reminder", which I commend to hon. Members, made by Sidney Bernstein and Alfred Hitchcock when the concentration camps were opened. They went to the camps and made a filmed record of what they saw. They even anticipated that, one day, people would deny that those horrors had taken place. Shortly before he died, Lord Bernstein gave an interview in which he explained that they had thought ahead and filmed with the widest angle camera shots they could, to make it as difficult as possible for the people who would one day wish to commit those crimes again to deny that their political allies had committed them in the past. That was before we had the obscenity of neo-Nazi historians such as David Irving in this country,

Ernst Zündel in Canada and Fred Leuchter in the United States of America trying to deny the holocaust. Verification is extremely important.

Enforcement is also important. It may cause some problems, but they should not prevent us from proceeding. The first problem is that of the criminal who is so strong that no one dares try him. It was argued at Nuremberg that the trials were "victors' justice". People still ask today how it was fair that the Soviets could sit in judgment when their regime was responsible for as many deaths and murders as the Nazi regime. We have recently had the visit of the Chinese President. One day, when those people are no longer in power, they may find themselves in the dock. My answer to that point is that being unable to bring everyone to justice does not mean that no one should be brought to justice.

The second problem is if the criminal is protected locally. Walter Rauff lived out his days in south America, even though he invented the vans which served as mobile gas chambers. People knew where he was and he was even interviewed for magazines, but he was never brought to justice. Mladic and Karadzic are still in Bosnia and nobody has yet sought to arrest them, presumably for political reasons rather than issues of justice. Aloïs Brunner, whom I have mentioned several times in the Chamber with a nil response from the Foreign Secretary on each occasion, was the man who assisted Eichmann in the holocaust in France—and he is still believed to be living in Syria under his pseudonym of Georg Fischer. Nothing is being done.

Finally, there is the problem that a criminal in government may be deterred from standing down if he does not feel he will get an amnesty if he ceases to be in government. My answer to that is simple: he should stay at home. General Pinochet might have found it useful to follow that advice. If this court is going to be made to work—as it can and must be made to work—it must be even-handed in the application of its practice, and dictators of left and right with blood on their hands must be brought to account impartially.

10.29 am

Dr. Jenny Tonge (Richmond Park): I shall begin by adding my congratulations to the Minister on his new appointment. I am especially delighted as he is a former constituent of mine, and I like to see my boys doing well.

My main interest in terms of human rights has always been to examine the factors that lead to the abuse of those rights, and to crimes against humanity. My aim is to find ways to prevent abuse occurring in the first place. The task is awesome and involves many factors, such as relief of poverty, conflict prevention and fair trade conditions.

In the past two and a half years, I and other members of the Select Committee on International Development have travelled extensively. There is not time for all the stories that I could tell: suffice it to say that the blood-curdling and heart-rending stories from Rwanda, southern Sudan and Kosovo were enough to make me realise that, as well as trying to find ways to prevent such crimes against humanity, we must ensure justice for the victims and make certain that the aggressors are brought to justice.

That is why we Liberal Democrats were delighted that, after much pushing and prodding—and despite rumours that the United States was trying to stop us—the United Kingdom eventually signed up to the ICC in Rome last year. The treaty is probably imperfect, as the hon. Member for Tatton (Mr. Bell) said, but it contains safeguards against malicious prosecution. There is provision for a pre-trial chamber that is independent of the prosecutor, and other safeguards will govern the length of time for which a person can be held. The sooner we ratify the treaty and begin the discussions on how it will work, the sooner we will be able to iron out the problems.

I am reminded very much of the problems that we had with the ratification of the land mine treaty. Many rumours circulated at that time to the effect that the US was trying to prevent us signing. In the end, I suspect that the United Kingdom signed up to that treaty because the French bounced us into it. Perish the thought that that should happen this time.

Must we experience the same delay with the ICC? Many agencies accuse the Government of being influenced by the United States. Other countries are not ratifying the treaty because we have not ratified it. That is a chicken-and-egg problem that we must get to grips with—once Britain ratifies the treaty, other countries will follow.

As the hon. and learned Member for Harborough (Mr. Garnier) said, we must be among the first 60 states to ratify the treaty so that we will belong to the assembly of state parties that will draw up the rules of procedure and evidence about which the hon. Member for Tatton is so worried. As the hon. Member for Putney (Mr. Colman) said, we must ratify the treaty to set an example to next month's Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting.

Will the Minister tell the House what line the Government intend to take with the United States? That country's refusal to sign the treaties on nuclear test bans and land mines shows that it will not sign any international treaty at present. The cold war is over, but the United States does not know how to behave in the new world. Its excuse in this case is that there would be malicious prosecution of its military personnel, but safeguards against that are built into the treaty. For example, the UN Security Council has the power to halt any prosecution indefinitely. Moreover, if the US prosecuted one of its own nationals, the ICC would have no jurisdiction anyway, so what is the problem?

We have received many assurances from the Foreign Secretary that we will ratify this treaty, but the time for such assurances is over. We must ratify the treaty, and I hope that the Minister will tell the House that proposals to that effect will be included in the Queen's Speech.

10.34 am

Mr. Mike Gapes (Ilford, South): I shall be very brief, as I have only one substantive point to make. The hon. and learned Member for Harborough (Mr. Garnier) referred to the dangers of selective justice, and the hon. Member for Tatton (Mr. Bell) mentioned the dangers of creating scapegoats. I believe that another danger exists, to which the hon. Member for New Forest, East (Dr. Lewis) alluded. That is that, in any conflict, there is always the risk that those on the winning side will determine the rules of the continuation of the conflict by other means.

I am worried by what the proceedings in the tribunal in The Hague have revealed. Reference was made to an apparent injustice suffered by a Croat who allegedly carried out war crime against Muslims. However,

[Mr. Mike Gapes]

although leading members of the Bosnian Serb side have been indicted, either in public or in secret, the commander-in-chief of the Croatian forces responsible for atrocities against Serbs and Muslims is lauded around the world.

That commander is Mr. Franjo Tudjman, who visited this country for the VE day celebrations, and other purposes. As far as I know, no country in western Europe has tried to bring a war crimes action against him, even though he is implicated in the atrocities carried out in Bosnia in that period almost as much—or as much—as many of the other senior figures. I am a strong advocate of the International Criminal Court, and I want the Government to ratify the treaty as soon as possible, but we must look with honesty at the way in which the process has been handled over recent years.

It is good that Croatia's courts have now prosecuted Dinko Sadjik, the former commandant of the Jasenovac concentration camp. That came about as a result of international pressure. In order to get into the Council of Europe, among other things, Croatia had to be seen to do something about a man who went back to Croatia and said that it represented the flowering of the Ustasa state that he had supported and worked for in the 1940s.

I believe that we must start asking questions about the atrocities committed by the Bosnian Croats and Bosnian Muslims, as well as by the Bosnian Serbs. We must ask those questions in an even-handed way, or the ICC will be seen—as The Hague tribunal is already seen by some people—to be the plaything of one side in the conflict.

10.34 am

Mrs. Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham): At the instigation of the hon. Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Ms King), we have had an extremely interesting debate on the International Criminal Court, and I am sure that the House, and a wider audience outside, will be grateful to her. Last year, the Foreign Secretary announced with great fanfare that the ICC was going to come into effect soon, but nothing has happened since.

I should also like to welcome the Minister on his first outing in his new post. I wish him great happiness and hope that he will stay a little longer than his predecessors. He is fortunate in that there is clearly a consensus in the Chamber today. There have been interesting and helpful contributions from hon. Members of all parties. I am pleased that the hon. Member for Tatton (Mr. Bell) shared his experiences with us today, and I am grateful for the views expressed by the hon. Members for Ilford, South (Mr. Gapes) and for Putney (Mr. Colman), as well as by my hon. Friend the Member for New Forest, East (Dr. Lewis). My hon. and learned Friend the Member for Harborough (Mr. Garnier) also made a very sound contribution, but I am not sure that the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Dr. Tonge) will be welcomed with open arms in America after her remarks.

I shall be brief, as I am interested to hear what the Minister has to say on this subject. My views about the International Criminal Court can easily be summarised. Only four countries have ratified the court so far, and it has been noted that major countries such as India, Israel, China and the United States have not signed up to it. I believe that compromises in the negotiations have left the treaty with fundamental flaws, and the United Kingdom has made no progress towards ratification. In addition, the efficacy and cost of the final outcome remain to be explored in detail.

The Foreign Secretary promised us ratification, and the will of the House is to seek ratification. The Foreign Secretary said that that would be difficult and complex, and that he did not want to rush it through in a single day as was done with the land mines legislation. We are willing to give the process time, but the Minister must realise that the Government are in charge of business—only they can make the time for this important move. The House expects the Minister to give us good news today; indeed, if he fails to do so, he will show that our greatest fears have been realised and that the Government are merely pandering to soundbite politics by making something look good, but failing to come through on it.

My hon. and learned Friend the Member for Harborough reminded us that the process has been going on for decades. An international tribunal with universal jurisdiction over war crimes and crimes against humanity has been at the top of the agenda since resolution 260 was passed in 1948. Yet there is still no permanent International Criminal Court. The ad hoc tribunals set up to deal with Rwanda and Yugoslavia were set up at the express instruction of the United Nations Security Council and were never intended to be permanent. Indeed, the efficacy of those institutions has been called into question many times.

The establishment of an international court probably remains many years away. The Foreign Secretary's initial enthusiasm was misleading because it is hard to envisage the success of an institution that seven nations opposed and on which 21 nations abstained. The countries that I have mentioned are a massive concentration of people and world power. What have the Government done since Rome to persuade those countries towards the perspective of the countries that ratified the treaty? If the Minister cannot answer now, I hope that he will write to me.

Closer examination of the treaty reveals some serious difficulties. Speakers have alluded to its necessary adoption by 60 states if it is to come into force. I have been told that, on the preparatory commission—PrepCom—that target has moved. Is that so, and what does the Minister propose to do about it? There are plenty of anomalies in the treaty: acts of terrorism will fall outside the court's jurisdiction, as will the use of biological, chemical and nuclear weapons. The use of poisoned weapons will constitute a war crime, so that the court would have jurisdiction if someone killed a single civilian with a poisoned arrow or dumdum bullet, but would not be able to act if the person concerned had killed hundreds of thousands of people with a biological or nuclear weapon. It would be helpful if the Minister would comment on those anomalies.

Costs and efficacy are important matters. The hon. Member for Tatton used his personal experience of the Yugoslavian tribunal to refer to a detainee who is awaiting sentence. However, the facts and figures relating to that tribunal are frightening. What is the Minister doing about the problems highlighted by that tribunal, and what lessons have been learned from it that may be carried over to the International Criminal Court?

The tribunal was established in May 1993. It has 778 members of staff from 63 countries. To date, it has cost more than $279 million. Yet the net result is that just

one person—currently serving a sentence in Norway—has been convicted. Some 91 people have been publicly indicted: six have died; 18 have had the charges dropped; 33 remain at large; 31 are in custody; and two have been released pending appeals. We must query the spending of $279 million on putting one person in custody. What lessons is the Minister learning from the tribunals? What contribution is the UK making towards ensuring that PrepCom meetings and planning meetings on the court will rid us of the worst excesses of tribunals of this type? We must ensure that we achieve an effective vehicle for international justice.

I have mentioned our broad support for the court, a support the Conservative party has offered for decades. We have always supported the principle, and shall continue to do so by helping the Minister in any way that we can. I therefore hope that he will tell us that the Queen's Speech will contain a relevant measure.

Foreign policy today is not conducted as the Conservative party would like. It seems to be based on saying one thing and doing another. It is to be commended that Amnesty International is working within the Foreign Office, but less so that it is left to the President of China rather than our Prime Minister to raise human rights during the President's recent visit. The Foreign Secretary will not even sign a condemnation of China's human rights records, as the Conservatives did successively. I hold out little hope for Labour's ethical and moral foreign policy, which seems to have two faces.

I also have little hope that the Minister will tell me that the ratification of the International Criminal Court will be contained in the Queen's Speech. If he cannot tell us that—I can see from the expression on his face that he cannot—he has already failed. Perhaps instead I could ask for this commitment to the House and to those who wish to see the court's creation: will the Foreign Office give us regular progress reports and details of discussions that Ministers are holding with their opposite numbers in China, the USA, Israel, India and other countries that have not supported the treaty? I want to see letters and correspondence that prove that the Government are putting their money where their mouth is by pursuing a moral and ethical foreign policy.

At present, the Foreign Office tries to sound good and look good, but does nothing. No progress has been made since the Foreign Secretary announced to the House with a great fanfare the signing of the treaty in Rome. The House demands action.

10.47 am

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr. Keith Vaz): I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Ms King) for raising this important matter. Until the final remarks of the hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs. Gillan), an excellent consensus had been found, and I have rarely attended a foreign policy debate in which there have been so many expressions of support for the principle of what the Government propose. I am grateful for that support to the hon. Members for Tatton (Mr. Bell) and for New Forest, East (Dr. Lewis), and my hon. Friends the Members for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Mr. Browne), for Putney (Mr. Colman) and for Ilford, South (Mr. Gapes). I thank, too, the hon. and learned Member for Harborough (Mr. Garnier) for his kind comments, but must add that, although I am the Minister for Europe, Leicester remains in Europe—

Mr. Garnier: But not run by Europe.

Mr. Vaz: Nor, fortunately, is it run by the Conservative party. I shall continue to make my constituency duties a priority.

I was delighted that the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Dr. Tonge) called me one of her boys, and shall refer to her from now on as "Mummy".

The Government are absolutely committed to the establishment of an International Criminal Court. Recent events in Kosovo and East Timor have only served to strengthen our resolve. The court will be able to tackle the culture of impunity, and to put an end to the dreadful paradox of the 20th century that those guilty of killing one man, woman or child are more likely to be brought to justice than those guilty of killing thousands. It will put dictators and potential dictators on notice that crimes against humanity will not be tolerated. We are determined that the International Criminal Court should be an effective means of securing justice for victims of heinous crimes. We hope that the knowledge that those who have committed atrocities will be brought to justice will help their victims and their victims' families to put the past behind them and participate in a process of reconciliation and reconstruction.

As many hon. Members have noted in the debate, the Rome statute was a huge achievement. The United Nations Secretary-General, Kofi Annan, has called it a giant step forward in the march towards universal human rights and the rule of law. I am glad to report that the United Kingdom has played an impressive part in that achievement. We were, and remain, part of the like-minded group of states that formed in Rome to throw their collective weight behind the court.

We are proud of our achievements during the Rome negotiations. The United Kingdom took the lead in introducing important elements such as ensuring that the court covered internal conflicts, the question of child soldiers, reparations for victims, the appropriate qualifications for judges and the important question of court procedures. That work continues at the preparatory commission meetings at which our delegates continue to contribute in preparing rules of procedure and evidence of crimes, and the work is proceeding well. The next meeting of the preparatory commission will be held in New York on 29 November.

As many hon. Members have said, 89 countries have signed the Rome statute and four have ratified it. That level of support proves how seriously the international community views these crimes and demonstrates global revulsion at genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity. However, the work is not over yet. We want many more countries to sign the statute and we have encouraged all Commonwealth members to sign and ratify it. We raise the issue of the court in bilateral contacts with countries around the world as well as in multilateral forums and we have supported activities to promote awareness of the court and ratification.

Mrs. Gillan: Did the Prime Minister or the Foreign Secretary raise the matter of the ICC directly with President Jiang during the Chinese president's visit last week?

Mr. Vaz: We raised many issues with the president of China. It is important that all such questions are raised whenever we meet Prime Ministers and other heads of state.

We have provided funding to the NGO coalition for an International Criminal Court and helped to fund the South African development community conference on ratification. We have offered support to countries that require technical assistance with ratification, and I repeat that offer today. We share the widespread hope that the United States will sign the Rome statute of the court. The Americans are concerned that their service men operating overseas could be subject to unjustified, politically motivated accusations, but we and our other NATO allies disagree.

We believe that the Rome statute contains sufficient safeguards to protect service men, the most important of which is the complementarity principle that allows domestic jurisdictions the right to try their own people. If serious allegations were made in good faith against British citizens, we are confident that we could demonstrate that there was a remedy in British justice. The same argument would apply to the United States of America.

We regularly make the case for the International Criminal Court with the Americans: it is no secret that we want them on board. The court will be much stronger if the United States is a party to it. The Foreign Secretary has urged Mrs. Albright, the American Secretary of State, to support the court—most recently when they met at the United Nations in September. I assure the hon. and learned Member for Harborough that there is no question of our being rude to the United States—that is not the Foreign Secretary's style. My right hon. Friend has taken every opportunity to ensure that the matter is raised constructively.

The Americans have said that they would like to move towards signing the statute, and we hope that a way can be found to address their concerns. I assure the House that we are very clear on one point: any solution to the United States question or any other problem must not undermine the integrity of the statute that was agreed in Rome or reduce the effectiveness of the court. The Government believe in a strong International Criminal Court as negotiated in Rome.

It is too early to predict when the court will come into being. It will happen when 60 states ratify the statute. I must inform the hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham that it is not possible to alter that figure because it is set in statute and the Rules of Procedure and Evidence Committee cannot change it. It is obviously too early to predict when every state will ratify the statute so that we achieve the necessary 60 signatures. Some states can ratify before passing implementing legislation—which is what the four signatories to the treaty have done—but many others, like the United Kingdom, will have to make legislative provisions first and some countries will need to change their constitutions.

In answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun who raised this point, let me say that it is important that we keep in touch with the Scottish Parliament and the Scottish Executive about this issue. Several matters of concern to the ICC are devolved to the Scottish Parliament, which will be clearly consulted before the Bill comes to Westminster. We will have to alter our criminal law before we can introduce implementing legislation, so we will need to make changes before the Bill comes before the House.

Hon. Members on both sides of the House have tried gently to persuade me to reveal the contents of the Queen's Speech, but I do not propose to do so on the Floor of the House because I do not know what is in it and I cannot comment on such matters. Hon. Members are quite passionate about this issue—as are the Government—and they want to know whether legislation will come before the next Session of Parliament. It remains our firm intention to be one of the first 60 states to ratify the statute because that is an important demonstration of our support for the court. I cannot say what will be in the legislative programme but we hope that, if we make our intentions clear, others will take our lead and begin the process of ratification.

It is important for the United Kingdom to ratify early so that we can be a founder member of the court. We want to be part of the decision-making process at the first assembly of states. However, I cannot look into the future and predict accurately how soon the statute will come into force. Officials in my Department are already working hard preparing for a Bill. It will be detailed and complex legislation involving several Government Departments and will be introduced as soon as the parliamentary timetable allows.

The Bill will set out the practical operation of our relationship with the ICC. It will enable our law enforcement authorities to fulfil our obligation to co-operate with the court in matters such as the arrest and transfer of suspects, handing over information and conducting searches and seizures. The legislation will also give effect to the fines and forfeitures ordered by the ICC and incorporate into British law crimes that are within the court's jurisdiction. That will allow British courts to prosecute those crimes when they occur in our jurisdiction, something that we believe is very important. The primary right and responsibility to prosecute such crimes will continue to fall to the states, and the International Criminal Court will act only when states are unable or unwilling to do so. The Security Council will also be able to refer cases to the court in accordance with its responsibilities for international peace and security.

I hope that the very existence of the court will reduce the number of future crimes of this kind. However, we must be realistic: the International Criminal Court will be needed and it will require our support, politically and financially. I was pleased to witness cross-party support for the ICC this morning, and I trust that it will be borne in mind when the Bill passes smoothly through the House.

Climate Change

11 am

Mr. Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington): Climate change has been discussed many times in the House and we are well versed in the arguments, but I make no apology for returning to the subject and what the UK Government's response to it should be.

The global impact of climate change has never been so apparent. The Red Cross said that last year's natural disasters were the most damaging on record and predicted that catastrophes would become more widespread and devastating as climate change takes hold. Unveiling the organisation's 1999 report, the president of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies said:

"Climate change is no longer a doomsday prophecy, it is a reality . . . Changing climate means changing disaster patterns."

According to the report, more natural disasters occurred in 1998 than in any other year on record. The report noted that climate change has made the consequences of disasters more complex.

In 1998, global mean surface temperature was the highest since records began. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change stated that to avert the worst impacts of climate change, cuts of 60 per cent. in carbon dioxide emissions must be achieved by 2050. In the UK, climate change could lead to an increase in the frequency of extreme weather conditions. Average wind speeds could rise, resulting in 30 per cent. more gales in Wales and southern England during the winter, thus increasing the risk of hurricanes.

Global climate change is a reality; its global impact is undeniable. What are we doing about it? We all know that the UK has a legal obligation to reduce by 12.5 per cent. its output of six greenhouse gases between 2008 and 2012—the Kyoto target. However, before the adoption of the Kyoto protocol, the Labour party, in opposition, pledged to reduce domestic carbon dioxide emissions by 20 per cent. from their 1990 levels by 2010. That was a welcome commitment, but it seems as though the Government have lost their momentum on climate change. Perhaps discussion of the climate change levy disguises the real issues and problems that the Government need to address.

The fifth conference of the parties to the climate change convention began this week. The UK must play an important role there, in keeping alive the Kyoto protocol with its binding obligations to reduce greenhouse gases. The Government must act globally. However, action to prevent irreversible change to our climate must also be taken at home, so the Government must act locally.

Mr. Barry Jones (Alyn and Deeside): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this important debate. However, I draw his attention to a problem in my industrial constituency. I led a deputation to the Treasury complaining of the severity of its proposed measures. My constituency is based on steel, and steel workers are concerned that the levy will lead to job losses. Since our deputation to the Treasury, British Steel has merged with a Dutch company and the loss of jobs is one of our worries. In that context, will the hon. Gentleman bear in mind the local consequences if Her Majesty's Government impose too great a tax?

Mr. Brake: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for that intervention. I understand his concern. I welcome the fact that the Government are holding consultations on the climate change levy. However, I hope that, at the end of that process, they will not tear the guts out of the climate change levy so that its environmental impact is reduced to nothing. I am sure that the Minister will respond to that point later.

We need to take action locally to prevent climate change. What the Government achieve at home is a key litmus test. A failure to act nationally will affect the UK's international reputation on environmental matters. The Government must maintain the lead in those matters, and the 20 per cent. target must be achieved.

I am not the only Member who is concerned that the Government might fail to achieve their 20 per cent. target commitment. It is interesting to note how the Government's language on this matter has changed since 1997. In 1997, Labour's election manifesto gave a clear commitment to reduce carbon dioxide emissions by 20 per cent. by 2010. That was stated throughout 1997, and repeated to the House by the Prime Minister. By 1998, the 12.5 per cent. Kyoto figure was described as a target; the 20 per cent. target became a domestic aim.

In their consultation paper on climate change, the Government stated that they intended to move beyond the legally binding target towards a 20 per cent. reduction in carbon dioxide emissions. However, they did not state which policies they would implement to achieve that target. Regrettably, the Chancellor failed to mention the 20 per cent. target in his Budget speech, although he did mention the Kyoto target. More recently, the 20 per cent. target was described as a "domestic goal" in the Government's annual report, but it was not listed as one of their 177 commitments.

Unfortunately, in 1999, the situation has worsened. It seems that the Chancellor and the Prime Minister continue to forget the 20 per cent. reduction pledge in their manifesto; they refer only to the Kyoto target. The 20 per cent. target has now been relegated to something that the Government will "move towards". When the Minister responds, I hope that he will reassure us that the Government still intend to hit that 20 per cent. target and that it is not merely something that they will be moving towards.

Mr. David Chaytor (Bury, North): I too congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this debate. Will he pay tribute to the Government for the work that is already being done towards the objective of reducing carbon dioxide emissions? I am thinking especially of the introduction of the fuel duty escalator. Does his party support the fuel duty escalator in all parts of the United Kingdom? My experience is that the Liberal Democrats are in favour of the escalator in certain parts of the country, because they—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael J. Martin): Order. When the Deputy Speaker stands, the hon. Gentleman should sit down. He must remain seated because his intervention is far too long.

Mr. Brake: I shall respond briefly to the hon. Gentleman's question. The Liberal Democrats support the

[Mr. Brake]

fuel duty escalator, which was introduced by the previous Conservative Government and maintained by the Labour Government. However, the hon. Gentleman will surely agree with me about the importance of a clear link between the revenue that is raised from the escalator and the environment. If there is no clear link and the money is seen merely to be going into the Treasury coffers, problems will arise.

Will the Government attempt to achieve the 20 per cent. target? I hope that they will. The Minister for the Environment said that there will be benefits if we achieve the 20 per cent. target, so what measures are the Government implementing to that end? If they drop one of their key manifesto pledges, their environmental rhetoric will be seen as nothing more than greenwash.

Concern about the Government's changing position was highlighted recently in a letter to the Prime Minister from four organisations—Friends of the Earth, the World Wide Fund for Nature, Greenpeace and the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds—which urged the Government to stick to Labour's manifesto pledge. They feared that the 20 per cent. target is becoming merely "an aspirational aim" and that the Government will not deliver on it. I share their fear.

However, to have a target is not enough; we need a strategy to achieve it. We are now more than halfway through this Parliament, and we have seen no climate change strategy with the necessary framework for action. The Government took 17 months to produce the consultation paper on climate change. Now, a year later, in October 1999, we are arguing the case for the protection of the global climate in Bonn. That is good, but we have failed to take substantive action at home, whereas countries such as Germany, Austria and Denmark have not only produced strategies to fight climate change but have implemented those strategies and review them regularly. The Minister for the Environment told the Select Committee on the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs that he hoped to publish a draft strategy towards the end of this year, but, given the importance of the matter, the Under-Secretary of State should tell us today the deadline for the production of the strategy.

The strategy must list the measures needed to achieve the 12.5 per cent. Kyoto target—

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. Keith Hill) *indicated assent.*

Mr. Brake: I see the Minister nod; I hope he also agrees that the strategy should list the measures needed to achieve the 20 per cent. carbon dioxide reduction target and set out the long-term policies that will set Britain on the path to climate-friendly energy production and use.

We need a huge increase in energy efficiency, a reduction in overall traffic volumes and a substantial shift from fossil fuels to renewables and combined heat and power. Energy efficiency will play a crucial part in our response to climate change. It will reduce fossil fuel use, help to end what the Environmental Audit Committee described as the "continuing national scandal" of fuel poverty and create jobs in employment black spots.

Mr. Adrian Sanders (Torbay): Does my hon. Friend agree that there is a case for putting greater resources into the renovation of the nation's housing stock, to install double glazing and take other measures to improve fuel efficiency, reduce poverty, contribute to energy saving and prevent needless waste of energy?

Mr. Brake: I do agree, as would hon. Members on both sides of the House. It is noticeable that the Government have failed to address the discrepancy between VAT charged on new homes and VAT charged on renovation works. It is high time that they dealt with that issue.

Many excellent ideas on energy efficiency have been proposed to the House, including cutting VAT on energy-saving materials, involving health authorities and local authorities in the fight against fuel poverty and requiring mortgage surveys to include an energy efficiency survey, but the Government's response has been disappointing. The Government have cut VAT but only on materials bought under Government schemes, rather than on private householder purchases of insulation materials. They promised to seek a further reduction in negotiations with our European Union partners, but when the EU gave us the chance to make a reduction such as has been made in France and Italy, the Government decided against it.

The Government opposed the Health Care and Energy Efficiency Bill promoted by my hon. Friend the Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Sir R. Smith), although I am pleased to hear that they have now relented and intend to include my hon. Friend's ideas in their guidance to health authorities. Similarly, the Fuel Poverty and Energy Conservation Bill was opposed, but the Government relented under pressure and will now alter Government advice on that subject. The Government could have done more to ensure that Bills they supported—the Energy Efficiency Bill and the Energy Conservation (Housing) Bill—were enacted. I understand that a requirement for an energy efficiency survey was not referred to in the latest press release on the new system for buying and selling homes; that is an ominous omission.

I am aware of the role played by a small number of Conservative Members in blocking several of those private Members' Bills, but the Government cannot escape all blame. They failed to support amendments to the Local Government Act 1999 which might have implemented some of the proposed energy policies and they failed to accept the Liberal Democrats' offer of a Supply day to consider such matters. The Government must do more than passively support such measures; they must use Government time to force them through. I hope that the Queen's Speech will announce that similar measures are to be included in proposed Government Bills on housing or local government.

Transport policy should form a key part of the Government's strategy to reduce carbon dioxide levels by 20 per cent. by 2010. It is unlikely that that target will be met without reducing the number of car journeys. Both before and after the election, Labour promised to act on that question, but now the Government's commitment appears to be to reduce traffic growth, even though a continuing increase in traffic is likely to lead to higher emissions.

A reduction in the use of fossil fuels and an increase in the energy derived from renewable sources and combined heat and power is also required if the Government are to

hit their target. The Government recognise that and are consulting on a climate change levy. Although a carbon tax would have been preferable on environmental grounds and should still be pursued at EU level, a climate change levy will help to reduce fossil fuel use. However, as I said earlier, the Government's consultation process must not be allowed to lead to the emasculation of the levy.

Mr. John Smith (Vale of Glamorgan): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that those companies that are energy efficient should not be penalised simply because they are high energy users? Dow Corning Ltd. in my constituency has created a heat and power plant and strives to derive maximum energy use from that unit. The company is rightly concerned that the levy will be based on energy use rather than energy efficiency.

Mr. Brake: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention and understand his point. The Government should consider a measure that has been adopted in other countries, whereby if a company can demonstrate that it uses the best possible technology to reduce energy use, the climate change levy might not be applicable to that company. I hope that the Minister will respond to that point.

The Government recognise the importance of renewables and CHP and have ambitious targets for their use: 10 per cent. of UK electricity to be generated using renewable sources and 12 per cent. using CHP to be achieved over the next 10 years. However, Government policies are hurting those sectors. As we know, CHP is not exempt from the climate change levy, nor is electricity generated from renewable sources. Bryan Bateman, the Paper Federation of Great Britain's director of business and environment, says of CHP and the climate change levy:

"The UK paper industry is very energy intensive. CHP is crucial to the process in maintaining cost effectiveness as well the achievement of our climate change targets. It should, in our view, be exempted from the climate change levy."

The Government are not following the lead provided by other Governments in investing in sunrise energies, providing tax breaks and incentives, developing those technologies and creating export opportunities in a growing overseas market. They are missing opportunities to help developing countries. Dr. Leggett, an expert on solar energy who headed up an industry solar task force supported by the Government and including BP, Eastern Electricity and NatWest, is disappointed with Government progress on solar energy. He said today:

"It is bewildering how the DTI can stand by watching the Germans and the Japanese race ahead with the development of a market which many now believe will equal, if not exceed, the micro-technology market."

Mr. Alan W. Williams (East Carmarthen and Dinefwr): The long-term answer to global warming is solar energy, as that is the only infinitely renewable resource. Is it not extremely disappointing that our efforts, both internationally and domestically, over the decades to harness solar energy have been so incredibly feeble?

Mr. Brake: I agree with that helpful intervention, although I would add that wind power is also infinitely renewable. It is true that if we had solar photovoltaic roofs on every house in this country, we would do away with the need for power stations—indeed, an energy surplus would be generated.

Mr. Cynog Dafis (Ceredigion): All renewables except the tides are solar. That is not a correction but a helpful comment. The source of wind is solar. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that one of the great problems in the expansion of renewables is the planning framework, which is leading time and again to objections and obstacles to their development. The Government will have to address this matter. I hope that the hon. Gentleman agrees with me.

Mr. Brake: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. I agree that there is an increasing incidence of wind farms coming up against planning objections. We need to sell much harder the environmental benefits of such projects, and compare them with, for example, the proliferation of electricity pylons across the country. More can be done and we need a Government commitment to renewable wind power, whether or not wind power is solar.

Dr. Leggett and other experts in renewables are extremely concerned about the distinct lack of joined-up government between the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions and the Department of Trade and Industry. The DETR is actively promoting renewables and solar power, and the DTI is actively pouring cold water on them.

To assist the Minister in responding to the debate, I shall summarise my concerns in a series of brief questions of which he has had notice. I hope that he will give the House an informed and detailed response.

Will the Minister confirm that the Government intend keeping to their 20 per cent. CO_2 target? When will the Government be producing the climate change strategy document? Will it contain the measures necessary to hit not only the 12.5 per cent. Kyoto target but the 20 per cent. target? Does the Minister agree with me that the imposition of the climate change levy on electricity from renewables and CHP is completely nonsensical, and what will he do to address that problem?

Will the Minister make it absolutely clear to the Treasury that the climate change levy, in the absence of something like a carbon tax, is key to meeting the Government's CO_2 reduction target? Will the Minister confirm that the Government are committed, as part of their strategy, to reducing the overall level of traffic? Will he try to convince the Government and their partners within the EU to ratify the Kyoto protocol early, regardless of what the Americans decide to do? Will the Minister proactively provide technical advice and assistance to developing countries to help them reduce their CO_2 emissions? Will he be working with his EU partners to consider the possibility of implementing a Europewide carbon tax?

Finally, will the Minister and the Secretary of State be resigning if they fail to hit their 20 per cent. reduction target? I understand that the Secretary of State for Education and Employment has offered to resign if his targets are not hit. I would expect nothing less from the Minister and his Secretary of State.

Mr. Damian Green (Ashford): Not only the Secretary of State for Education and Employment but his entire ministerial team have promised to resign if they do not hit their targets. I feel that this is a good example.

Mr. Brake: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. I am pleased that the whole team will have to resign so that there will be lots of vacancies on the Government Front Bench in a couple of years' time.

The Minister's response will confirm whether the Government are serious about tackling the global impact of climate change or whether they are content to rest on their rhetorical laurels while the earth burns.

11.24 am

Mr. Alan W. Williams (East Carmarthen and Dinefwr): I congratulate the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Mr. Brake) on initiating this debate. The topic is infinitely important. On the issue of whether the entire ministerial team should resign if the 20 per cent. target is not achieved, I would point out that the targets are set for 2010. I am glad that the hon. Gentleman is confident about the return and re-return of this extremely environmentally sensitive and aware Labour Government.

I am a scientist by background and I was formerly a lecturer in environmental science. I have spent the past 20 years reviewing environmental problems. I am delighted that progress has been made in many areas, such as acid rain. I am delighted that nuclear power is being phased out. I am delighted also that on genetically modified foods the Government are steering slightly away from their earlier position. However, the problems of global warming are of a dimension that goes beyond those in other areas. It is the most intractable of all environmental problems. In developing countries and in our own pre-history, the use of timber has produced and continues to produce carbon dioxide. The use of timber leads to deforestation. Britain is the least-forested country in the world—only 5 per cent. of our land is covered by woodland.

The march of civilisation makes us increasingly energy intensive. All our energy has come from timber, coal, oil and gas, which all produce carbon dioxide. There is no sink for that carbon dioxide, and it just increases and increases. The amount of CO_2 in the atmosphere has increased measurably in the past century. From memory, it has increased from about 280 parts to 340 parts per million. If carbon dioxide was inert in the atmosphere, like nitrogen, perhaps there would be no problem. Unfortunately, it absorbs the infra-red or the radiation out into space from the earth. Increasing carbon dioxide levels therefore mean increased temperatures for the earth. That was a scientific theory in the 1960s and the 1970s, but it has become demonstrably the case in the past 10 or 20 years.

One of the great advances stemming from the Kyoto summit in particular, and from the work that led up to it over the previous 10 or 15 years, is that there is now widespread recognition in all the advanced and developing countries that we have a major environmental problem with carbon dioxide that must be tackled. The only ignorant places are parts of the United States and the OPEC countries. Unfortunately, the solution is politically extremely difficult. It requires political will of a dimension that goes beyond any democracy because of the importance of the motor car, our central heating systems and our standard of living. Everything that we aspire to and ask people to vote us into Parliament for depends on carbon dioxide emissions. In tackling the problem, we are attacking the very foundation or style of our society.

The danger has been and still is that politicians say, "The problem is too difficult to solve. It will not give us any returns over a five-year Parliament or even over 10 or 20 years. The less we do about it, the better it is for us politically." However, the problem is with us, and the evidence accumulates. It is very difficult to say that this year the world climate has been warmer, but there is an accumulation of evidence. Almost every week we hear of horrible floods, a hurricane or forest fires. I read in *The Mirror* last week about an iceberg that measures 40 miles across that is drifting towards Argentina. I dare say that icebergs have always drifted from the polar caps, but not icebergs of such a size and not with such frequency. Problems involving the north and south poles illustrate how challenging the overall problem is.

There has been no energy production at the poles—problems have been exported to the poles by the rest of the world. The great problem is that the ice cover is diminishing because huge chunks are being knocked off the ice caps and are melting, and the earth's temperature then rises for two reasons. The first is the amount of carbon dioxide that we put into the atmosphere, and the second is that if polar caps melt at a significant rate, the amount of sunlight that they reflect diminishes.

I remember reading in the 1970s about the runaway effect whereby a certain amount of CO_2 in the atmosphere causes global warming, which then begins to boil carbon dioxide out of the world's oceans. The amount of CO_2 in the oceans is 60 times that in the atmosphere, and as temperatures rise, that carbon dioxide drifts into the atmosphere. The runaway effect will eventually cause our planet to have an atmosphere somewhat like that of Venus, which is shrouded in cloud.

Any damage to the polar caps is even more serious than the weather that afflicts Britain or the United States. The article in *The Mirror* says:

"Temperatures in the Antarctic have been steadily rising and are now 2.5C higher than at the end of World War II."

I do not vouch for the accuracy of our tabloids, although *The Mirror* is one of the best, but a rise of 2.5 deg C at the polar caps in the past 50 years is deeply serious.

As I said earlier, the Kyoto summit is an important part of tackling the problem because it gives it worldwide recognition. Our Government, led by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister at the summits leading up to Kyoto, and by my right hon. Friends the Deputy Prime Minister and the Minister for the Environment at Kyoto, worked towards achieving the first agreement to limit carbon dioxide emissions and cut them by 5.5 per cent. by 2010. That does not solve the problem, but it is an acceptance that there is a big problem, and if we can achieve that target, it will be the first, small step towards a solution. I am proud of the cuts that Britain has achieved. The dash for gas is largely responsible for those—the energy policy that has produced the cuts is not very clever, but we lead the world in limiting carbon dioxide emissions.

The hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington pointed out that those are just the first steps and that we need cuts of 60 per cent. by the middle of the next

century. If we want sustainable development—the key term used by the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Mr. Dafis)—we need carbon dioxide emissions to be in balance with the world's capacity to absorb them. That would require a tenfold cut in present emissions which, politically, we cannot imagine unless we move away from fossil fuels. During the next 50 to 100 years, we must almost completely stop using them, which is why solar energy is so important.

I return now to the present target of a 20 per cent. cut in emissions. The Government have a series of policies, several of which have already been implemented, that will help to tackle the problem. I shall review each of them briefly, but critically. We have made good progress on energy efficiency. An extra £150 million has been allocated to the home energy efficiency scheme, and young, unemployed people are being recruited to the environmental task force to work on the homes of the elderly and the poorest people. The scheme cares for the elderly and provides employment and it is good socialism—*[Interruption.]* Yes, I used the word "socialism". If hon. Members prefer, I will say that it is good social justice. I do not think that they would disagree with that, even if they puff at the term "socialism". I am delighted that we are allocating substantially higher sums to the scheme.

Our combined heat and power targets for 2010 are sensible and, I hope, achievable. We aim for CHP to provide 12 per cent. of our electricity by 2010.

Mr. Brake: How helpful in achieving the 12 per cent. target does the hon. Gentleman think that applying the climate change levy to CHP will be?

Mr. Williams: It will be not at all helpful, but I point out in passing that in Wales the Baglan bay energy park scheme for energy generation will, when it is completed in three to five years, be an outstanding example of the efficient use of CHP energy by industry in this country.

On renewable energy, I said earlier that I am very disappointed by Britain's record over the past 30 years. In the 1970s, we realised that oil prices were a problem and that we needed to develop more sophisticated energy sources, and renewable energy suddenly acquired importance. However, over the past 20 years, we have always had a target of achieving 10 per cent. of power from renewable sources by the end of each decade, so the present target is 10 per cent. by 2010.

The record of achievement on renewable energy in the European Union reveals that we are 15th out of 15—a sorry bottom of the league. Yet our potential to harness wind, wave and tidal energy is greater than that of any European country. It makes no sense that Germany produces three times as much wind electricity as Britain. We have high environmental standards and planning regulations, but we are timid in our work on renewable energy.

Solar energy has to be the long-term answer. Britain is not sunny, compared to California, Italy or Spain, but in 100 years we will have to be producing most of our power from solar energy. The countries that are doing the basic scientific groundwork and adapting technologies to harness those energy sources are those that will have the industries to export that energy in 20 or 30 years. Our efforts to harness solar energy should be dramatically greater than they are.

The fuel duty escalator obviously is a politically difficult policy. Sadly, we need cross-party co-operation on difficult policies for environmentally achievable goals. We are not getting as much support as is needed—certainly not from the Conservative party, which introduced the fuel duty escalator and has now made a complete U-turn and is hostile to that policy.

I turn now to the climate change levy. I support a carbon tax or energy tax, and I always have done. The price of coal, gas and oil has dropped over the past 15 years. The price of oil is now $22 a barrel and has peaked at between $35 and $40. Coal prices have collapsed and gas is getting cheaper, so I cannot understand industry squealing about the introduction of an energy tax.

I attended the debate on the climate change levy last July. The levy should raise £1.7 billion, which will be reimbursed in national insurance contributions, so it is revenue neutral and will create employment. However, it will save only 1.5 million tonnes of carbon a year, which, frankly, is trivial. That works out at £1,000 per tonne of carbon saved, when coal is about £50 a tonne. The punishment does not fit the crime; it is at least 10 times the cost of the energy. Therefore, the levy is very inefficient. Although I support it—the broad-brush approach of any punitive tax will act as a disincentive to use energy and so will surely have some effect—if all that it will save is 1.5 million tonnes, perhaps we should consider it a little further.

Finally, on tree planting, there was some discussion at Kyoto about emissions trading between countries, which has to be a large part of the long-term answer. Australia suggested plantations. It has large areas of land on which it wants to plant trees, which would help to absorb carbon dioxide. If it did, should it not get privileged treatment because it can set off its carbon dioxide emissions against those plantations?

The same goes for Britain. Let us consider the problems in our agricultural industry which, given the price of lamb, beef, milk and so forth, faces a real crisis. We must ask ourselves whether we are making the best use of our land. We want to use it for tourism and for environmental purposes as well as for food production. Originally, the land was covered in trees, which absorbed carbon dioxide. As the going rate—the climate change levy rate—is £1,000 per tonne, if we paid every farmer that sum for all the carbon that his trees can absorb, we would have millionaire farmers throughout Britain.

Tree planting must form a part of our carbon dioxide strategy. The highlands of Scotland and the mountains of north Wales used to be covered by trees. I read yesterday that Sussex was 95 per cent. woodland in Tudor times. We must consider tree planting as part of our rural and agricultural diversification policy.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. Before I call the next speaker, I propose to take the winding-up speeches at 12.10 pm. Four Back Benchers still want to speak, so hon. Members can do their own calculations. I call the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Mr. Dafis).

11.42 am

Mr. Cynog Dafis (Ceredigion): First, there is no more important issue than the impact of climate change, and the fact that we again have time to consider it is welcome.

[Mr. Cynog Dafis]

Secondly, I repeat what I said earlier about the planning framework, which is vital—and not merely for wind generation. There have been planning objections to important biomass proposals. In one case in Wales, the Newbridge-on-Wye combined sawmill and biomass plant was turned down on planning grounds. We must overcome that sort of obstacle to get the growth that we want, and to allow the redistribution of economic activity on a dispersed basis that goes with it. Such redistribution is an important side effect of moving into renewables. We are talking about decentralisation, embedded generation, small-scale power stations and so forth.

Briefly, on the climate change levy, there is no doubt that to reach the sustainability that we need, we have to use economic instruments to create a dynamic towards that goal. There is no doubt that if one uses such a policy, its effects will be far reaching, and there will be winners and losers. Overall, the planet must be the winner, but some sectors will certainly decline and there will be losers in the process.

A fundamental principle of the shift towards sustainable development is what is called the internalisation of external costs—of environmental costs. That process must happen gradually if we are to create the dynamic towards sustainability that is essential, and it implies a shift in the burden of taxation. To their credit, the Government have begun to embark upon the shift from what are popularly called environmental bads to environmental goods. We must tax those things that are harmful and reward those that are beneficial, which implies a significant change in the pattern of taxation.

The climate change levy is one example of that change and, on that basis, there is no way that it can be opposed in principle, although I agree with the spokesman for the Liberal Democrats, the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Mr. Brake), who said that he would have preferred a carbon tax, which would target carbon more effectively. I add one plea: we must be aware when imposing such a levy of its distributional effects. I hope that I do not sound guilty of special pleading, but the reality is that there is a great danger that the levy, if bluntly applied, will redistribute resources in the United Kingdom from areas that are suffering economic decline to those that are enjoying enormous economic growth—I mean the south-east of England, where there are high concentrations of service-based industries with proportionately low energy costs.

Such a redistribution must be a consideration, and we certainly need compensatory mechanisms. Bluntly applied, the levy could damage the economy of large parts of Wales and the rest of the United Kingdom. It could damage manufacturing—steel has been mentioned—and energy-intensive sectors as well as agriculture, which is under enormous pressure and could be further harmed. It should not be beyond the wit of man to design a system to redistribute the revenue from the climate change levy to favour the areas that need support and that are being disadvantaged.

For example, it would be ironic if areas of Wales that have been allocated objective 1 funding, because they are performing badly economically and have very low average gross domestic product with all the associated problems, received European money—we hope that they will receive it—to provide the opportunity for sustainable economic development, but at the same time the climate change levy was sucking resources out of those areas.

I appeal to the Government to bear that in mind. One way to ensure that the effect of the levy is mitigated is to ensure that European funds for objective 1 and other structural fund programmes are additional. At the moment, there is no indication that they are likely to be additional to the existing Welsh block. I appeal for that additionality and sensitivity to the effects of the levy.

11.48 am

Mr. David Chaytor (Bury, North): I congratulate the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Mr. Brake) on securing this debate. He raised several important points and put forward a coherent argument to assist the Government in preparing their climate change programme later this year.

I think that this is the third Adjournment debate on climate change in the past 15 months, which is a measure of the growing interest in the subject among all Members of the House. It should also be a sign that it is time for the Government to arrange a debate on climate change in their time. The launch of the climate change strategy document towards the end of 1999 will, hopefully, be the time for such a debate.

It is interesting to see how the discussion has moved on during those debates—I have been present for all three—from the principle and the broad-brush arguments about climate change, and even whether it exists, to the detail. During the first debate, some Opposition Members made a significant attempt to deny the existence of climate change. During the second debate, they made a slightly less vociferous attempt to do so. Today, I do not hear anyone denying its existence. We are now focusing on what to do about it, and particularly on the details of the climate change levy. There are many details that need to be resolved quickly, if the Government have not already taken decisions on them.

There are serious issues concerning, as the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Mr. Dafis) said, the distributional effects from manufacturing to services, and from the north of the country to the south. It should be within the bounds of possibility to construct a scheme allowing for that. Another issue is the impact on renewables and combined heat and power, and it is critical that they should be exempt. It would be utterly self-defeating if the levy were introduced without such exemptions.

I recently visited two companies in my constituency, which I shall not name for reasons of confidentiality. It is interesting to observe the way in which some companies have responded to the proposed introduction of the levy. These two companies are traditional, well-established and well-managed companies, operating in old premises. They have calculated that they will be between £20,000 and £50,000 a year worse off as a result of the climate levy as currently proposed.

It struck me that the management of the companies accepted the need for the levy, and certainly accepted the existence of climate change. Management's concern was about the immediate impact on the company, and the broader impact on manufacturing. In my discussions with the two companies, it occurred to me, first, that they were the only two companies in my constituency that had contacted me, which is a significant indication that the

principle is broadly established. Three years ago, that was not the case, so opinion within industry seems to have shifted substantially.

I was struck, secondly, by the two companies' apparent lack of appreciation of the extra help that they could get, both from the £50 million allocated under the levy, and through other sources, for energy efficiency. The Government must do a great deal more work to publicise and promote the assistance that is available for energy efficiency, especially to small and medium-sized enterprises. The larger companies know what is available, because they have the specialist staff to do the necessary work, or if they do not have the expertise in-house, they know how to buy it in. For small and medium-sized companies, there is much work to be done to promote the concept of energy efficiency and provide advice to them.

We should not focus entirely on the climate change levy. The Government have a much broader programme for responding to climate change. The fuel duty escalator is part of that, and I hope that the Government will stick by the escalator as the years go by—not necessarily at exactly the same percentage, but as an important principle. It should be emphasised that the fuel duty escalator is a fair and progressive tax, because by and large, distance travelled by car closely equates to level of affluence. The Government have already made major strides in tackling fuel poverty, and have significantly increased the investment in assistance for energy efficiency.

If we focus entirely on the details, we are in danger of missing the big picture. My hon. Friend the Member for East Carmarthen and Dinefwr (Mr. Williams) accurately painted the big picture, which we cannot ignore. In all our efforts to construct a climate change levy that is workable and that does not damage manufacturing industry excessively, we must realise that if we do not act, and if the levy and other policies are not introduced, in 20 or 30 years it will be extremely difficult to sustain any kind of manufacturing industry. The latest information suggests that we should not aim for reductions in CO_2 of only 12.5 per cent. or even 20 per cent., but that within a generation, reductions of 50 per cent. will be necessary.

The strongest argument for the Government to act now is not just that it was a manifesto commitment to move to a 20 per cent. reduction, and not simply that our environmental leadership is part of our international credibility—we cannot over-emphasise the prestige that the United Kingdom has gained on the international stage because of its willingness to lead from the front in the Kyoto negotiations and on environmental policy generally—but that if we do not act now, in 10, 20 or 30 years the challenges facing us will be even greater.

Our future choice is represented by one of two scenarios. Either we must move as quickly as possible to an economy based largely on renewable forms of energy, and a reduction in the burning of hydrocarbon fuels is an essential stage towards that, or in the early years of the next century, we and other western nations will be engaged in an almost permanent series of wars with countries in the middle east that control the last remaining oil reserves. The prospect of permanent war with Iraq over the dwindling oil reserves on the planet is not a viable scenario or one that many people in this country want to envisage.

There is, therefore, an urgent need to tackle climate change and to reduce our dependency on fossil fuels. The climate change levy is an important part of that. I hope that the Government will stick not only to our legally binding target of 12.5 per cent., but to our manifesto commitment of 20 per cent.

11.56 am

Mr. Matthew Taylor (Truro and St. Austell): I echo the closing comments of the hon. Member for Bury, North (Mr. Chaytor) and appeal to the Government to stick to their 20 per cent. target.

I shall not rehearse the arguments for tackling climate change or the evidence for the process of catastrophic climate change that we face. Time is short, so I shall concentrate on practicalities, not least for the reason mentioned by the hon. Member for Bury, North—the reality of climate change is widely accepted, except by a tiny minority in the House and outside.

I shall focus on the process of introducing environmental taxes, and the series of mistakes made by Governments that have brought that process into question politically. The hon. Member for East Carmarthen and Dinefwr (Mr. Williams) highlighted the political difficulties in tackling the issue. We must change ways of life and ways of doing things, though perhaps not as much as people imagine. There are alternative ways that need not make us poorer, but may protect our environment. Nevertheless, these are politically contentious issues.

The way in which Governments have gone about introducing the three significant environmental tax changes that have been introduced during my time in the House has considerably undermined the process. The first was the claim by the previous Conservative Government that VAT on fuel, which they introduced contrary to the promises in their general election manifesto, was an environmental tax measure. That caused serious problems in making the case.

First, the tax was not well directed at the issue, and it was not a carbon tax—it applied to all fuel and was particularly burdensome on the domestic sector. Secondly, it was contrary to a manifesto promise, so no attempt had been made to establish the basis for it. Thirdly and most significantly, it was a means of raising tax, and was never intended as an environmental tax. By dressing up a tax grab as an environmental tax change, the Conservative Government undermined the case for environmental taxes.

To win the case for environmental taxes, there must be a tax shift, not a tax increase. Why should people accept the need to pay ever more tax by the back door, simply because it is dressed up in a green way? That is no more likely to be popular than any other tax increase. However, if there is a tax shift—if there is a clear cut in other taxes—it can be popular.

The second environmental tax that was introduced, the fuel escalator, had greater success in its early life, partly because the need for it was better understood and, more importantly, because it had broad cross-party support in the House. Both the then Labour Opposition and we Liberal Democrats had the opportunity to stir up opposition to it, because it was a tax increase and failed on that score again, but that opportunity was not taken. Of course, we had points of disagreement on the basis on which it was introduced.

[Mr. Matthew Taylor]

We believe that the fuel duty escalator should have been used to cut other taxes directly, most significantly by abolishing vehicle excise duty—the annual car tax—for most car owners. Something should have come back to people, which would have left many poorer drivers, including those in rural areas, better off as a result. Nevertheless, it was introduced as a necessary measure without coming under the sort of attacks that the Conservative party is making in opposition. Those attacks are particularly disreputable, because it is seeking to wipe out history—it introduced the measure in the first place—even though the escalator was introduced for important environmental reasons which have since become more important.

The fuel duty escalator was not an easy tax to introduce, and it had a more direct impact at the petrol pump and became a significant political issue when oil prices rose. I would have understood if Conservative spokespersons had wanted to review it in the circumstances, but they effectively deny their part in the process. However, the fundamental problem has been that people have received nothing in return: taxes have not been cut, at least not explicitly, nor has there been direct investment in improved public transport, which people might have considered to be an alternative.

Mr. Brake: Does my hon. Friend agree that it is incumbent on any political party that proposes abolition of the fuel duty escalator to say where it will get the extra tax take from?

Mr. Taylor: That will certainly come up in the Budget should such a move be made. It could be one use for the election war chest, but I would rather see investment in education and health.

The climate change levy succeeds in one key area in which the other two measures did not: there is an explicit link to a tax cut—national insurance. We will reduce taxes on a good—jobs—and instead put a tax on a bad—pollution. Although the Treasury has accepted that argument, the problem is that the tax is not well tuned to environmental issues because the process has been Treasury rather than environment led. The measure is undermining its own case once again and, therefore, the case for other environmental taxes.

The climate change levy is not a carbon tax and goes across the board on fuels, including renewable energy and combined heat and power schemes. As long as that is the case, it cannot credibly be argued that it is an effective environmental tax because we will be taxing the very things to which we want people to switch. If we simply wanted people to use less energy, that would be correct, but we do not want that. There is nothing wrong with using energy and the goods it provides; the use of carbon fuels is the problem.

The measure is being introduced in one go, but the Liberal Democrats propose that a carbon tax should be introduced gradually at about 1 per cent. per annum to stabilise the fall in fuel prices and to give a clear indication that, in the long term, there will be a gradual pick-up. That would be a signal to business to change its capital investment priorities so that higher priority was given to fuel saving, and it would allow it to engage in a process of change. Introducing the measure in one go simply tells business that it will be paying for its past decisions and that there will be no way out until that process of capital renewal takes place over the longer term. That has fundamentally undermined the tax with industry.

As a result, industry is mounting a campaign effectively to emasculate the tax so that it will have no real impact where it could be of most use in reducing energy consumption and is asking for all sorts of cuts, discounts and exemptions. The measure was badly designed for the purpose it was meant to serve and, if recent newspaper reports are to be believed, the fear is that that may lead to the virtual emasculation of the levy. If that were to happen, for the third time in a row, bad tax design would have undermined the principle of environmental taxes, which I very strongly support.

12.4 pm

Mr. Mark Fisher (Stoke-on-Trent, Central): I congratulate the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Mr. Brake) on initiating a further debate on this important issue. Like other hon. Members, I welcome the general intention behind the climate change levy and what the Government are seeking to achieve, but can my hon. Friend the Minister ensure that the way in which the Government put these proposals into practice does not inadvertently discriminate against manufacturing industry in general and those manufacturers who have invested heavily in recent years in reducing emissions in particular? The Government's stated aim of achieving revenue neutrality across the economy could, I fear, inadvertently lead to precisely such discrimination and imbalance.

The hon. Member for Ceredigion (Mr. Dafis) highlighted exactly that point and considered the measure geographically, from area to area. I agree with what he said, but I am sure that he agrees that we must also consider its impact from sector to sector. It could mean—and, if crudely interpreted, it will mean—that service industries such as banks, insurance companies, shops, hotels and offices in general will benefit in relation to manufacturing industry. That cannot be the Government's intention and is surely the wrong approach. Indeed, it would damage manufacturing industry, and so jobs and exporters, all over the country.

Unlike my hon. Friend the Member for Bury, North (Mr. Chaytor), I have been approached by companies in my constituency—almost every ceramics company, for example, and other large manufacturers such as Michelin. That may not come as a surprise to him, but, like him, I have been impressed that companies have recognised that the overall intention is virtuous. I have also been impressed by the way in which so many companies—famous names such as Wedgwood, Royal Doulton, Spode, Dudsons, Steelite, Portmeirion, H. and R. Johnson and Gerald Tams, which are the cream of our ceramics industry—have made huge efforts to invest in energy-saving techniques over the past 10 years. They have done so for their own benefit and for their own profits, but also to try to save jobs and ensure the continuity of their industry, so it would be perverse if their good work was not taken into account.

However, precisely because those companies invested in the past, the easy pickings of savings over the next few years will not be available to them as they will be to less

responsible manufacturers, who will easily be able to achieve substantial savings when the levy is introduced. I cannot believe that the Government want to introduce a levy that would benefit irresponsible manufacturers over responsible manufacturers who have so invested.

There are further hidden problems. How will companies such as Acme Marls in Stoke-on-Trent, which makes kiln furniture, be treated? It has been developing a new generation of kiln furniture that will conduct energy more efficiently and reduce the energy needs of its customers. Producing that furniture is more energy expensive and, perversely, it will be increasing its energy costs in order to pass on to its customers techniques that will reduce energy consumption considerably. What it is achieving overall is virtuous, but there is a danger that it will be penalised because its energy costs will increase in order for it to save energy for other people.

Those examples show that implementing the measure will be a great deal more difficult than it appears to be at first, and I welcome the discussions that the Government have been having with manufacturing industry in general, in which the British Ceramic Confederation has been taking part. I hope that that suggests that they recognise the importance of manufacturing industry. We are not a service industry economy; manufacturing industry employs more than 4 million people and still accounts for 60 per cent. of our exports. We must listen to its concerns, particularly the concerns of responsible manufacturers.

I hope that the Government will take those points on board when the discussions with manufacturing industry come to fruition and that they find a way of implementing this important levy in a way that benefits manufacturing and encourages it to invest in energy-saving techniques. They should not penalise the most responsible manufacturers.

12.10 pm

Mr. Damian Green (Ashford): I join other hon. Members in congratulating the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Mr. Brake), who deserves our thanks for allowing us to debate the important issue of climate change. I am also happy to assure hon. Members, such as the hon. Member for Bury, North (Mr. Chaytor), that Conservative Members take climate change seriously. Although there is still some scientific controversy about whether climate change is caused entirely by human activity or by a curious cyclical pattern that we do not yet understand, I certainly feel that the precautionary principle should apply, and that we should not take the risk with our planet of not doing something about such change.

The hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington said that the Government have more to do at Bonn, and I entirely agree with him. Moreover, quite apart from Ministers' own activities—which I shall deal with in a moment—one might wish that they would be more persuasive than they have been to date in persuading the United States Government to sign up to the international commitments on climate change, as that would send the most important signal in persuading other countries to fall into line.

Many hon. Members have dealt with the fuel duty escalator. It is absurd for Liberal Democrat Members to advance the proposition that, once a tax has been introduced, it should not only continue for ever, but be increased for ever. That seemed to be the position that they were expressing in this debate. I remind the House that the tax was introduced as an escalator. What does one do when reaching the top of an escalator? One gets off it. One does not say, "We are staying on the escalator, and we shall make it even steeper."

We have all read leaked reports that the Chancellor has listened to focus groups and is planning either to drop the escalator entirely or to modify it. I therefore caution those Labour Members who have spoken so strongly in favour of the escalator that they may be going off message.

Mr. Brake: The hon. Gentleman did not hear me or my hon. Friend the Member for Truro and St. Austell (Mr. Taylor) express the view on taxes that he attributed to Liberal Democrat Members. The fuel duty escalator can, of course, be revisited. The official Opposition should perhaps also revisit their own budgetary figures, which still include the fuel duty escalator.

Mr. Green: I am happy to receive the usual confirmation that the Liberal Democrats are capable of changing policy in the course of a one and a half hour debate.

The hon. Member for East Carmarthen and Dinefwr (Mr. Williams) made a very important point on forestry and the use of trees as a counter-balance to CO_2 emissions. I entirely support him on that important initiative, and urge him and other hon. Members to act strongly against the type of planning proposals made in the past few weeks by planning inspectors, particularly in the south-east of England, which would entail concreting over large green areas and, inevitably, the loss of much tree cover. Giving effect to such proposals would be extremely dangerous.

The hon. Member for East Carmarthen and Dinefwr specifically mentioned various parts of the country that once had many trees. Our remaining areas covered by trees are precisely those that the Department's own planning inspectors are advising should be concreted over. *[Interruption.]* I am fascinated that Labour Members find that amusing, but suspect that their constituents might take a different view on the matter.

At Bonn, Ministers will have to defend their record. Before the general election, they set their sights very high, claiming to be the first truly green Government whom Britain had ever had. Only Labour Members who are very deluded or very desperate for office could believe that that promise is being met. However, those who are most concerned about the environment in the United Kingdom certainly do not believe that it is being met.

The head of policy at the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds has said that the Prime Minister

"is not interested in the environment and he has surrounded himself with advisers who are not interested either."

Friends of the Earth, commenting on the so-called green taxes in the most recent Budget, said that the Chancellor's

"so-called 'green' Budget measures are just tokenistic. They will not combat climate change."

Rebellion is mounting even inside the Labour camp. In the past couple of weeks, the general secretary of the

[Mr. Green]

Fabian Society—which is possibly not often quoted by Conservative spokesmen—has published a pamphlet stating:

"It's evident that new Labour is not comfortable on this territory. Labour does not perceive environmental issues to be major priorities for ordinary voters. In fact they tend to see them as positively anti-voter."

I could not have put that better. The Fabian Society believes that the Government are not interested in environmental measures, but actively hostile to many environmental policies.

Before the general election, the Government not only wished to sign up to the Kyoto commitments, as they eventually emerged, but set themselves an extra, voluntary hurdle. Subsequently, we have seen the Government consistently slithering around on the issue, consistently softening their language, so that a commitment has become an "aim", a "target" and a "goal". One thing that the Minister could do today is to give the House a firm assurance that the Government's commitment on the more stringent target is not being watered down.

I shall not enter a debate on whether and how many Ministers should resign if the commitment has not been met because, as has already been observed today, it is not due to be met until 2010, and, very possibly, we may all be occupying different Benches by then. Nevertheless, the commitment is important, and I hope that the Government will stick to it.

What have Ministers done to combat climate change? The answer is, not much. Their first act was to change the planning system for power generation, to make it easier to build coal-fired power stations and to impose a moratorium on the use of gas, which is much cleaner. Although we all know the political reasons why the Government made the change, it would be hypocritical for any Government to make such a change and still to claim environmental credentials. Such a policy is simply not consonant with good environmental practice.

The Government's record on renewable energy has been equally bad. Solar energy has been mentioned often today, but hon. Members should be aware that solar energy is taken much more seriously in other countries. The German Government, for example, have established an explicit target of fitting 100,000 homes with solar panels. Japan's target is 70,000 homes. However, the British Government—who came to power claiming that they would be the greenest Government in history—have established a target of precisely 100 homes. I hope that the Minister will be able to express some contrition about that.

Environmental groups have noticed the Government's record on renewable energy. The RSPB has said that the Government's renewable electricity generation target is not clear and unambiguous—which, perhaps, it should be.

One thing that the Government can do is to set an example—which, in words, they certainly do. There is a fascinating document, entitled the "DETR Greening Operations Policy Statement", which is available on the DETR website and includes as part of the Department's own targets the reduction

"of greenhouse gas emissions by controlling, where feasible, other gaseous and non-gaseous pollutants which contribute to climate change. For example by switching where possible from HFCs used as refrigerants and in fire extinguishing systems to environmentally preferable substitutes".

In July, in a parliamentary question, I asked a previous DETR Minister what percentage of the Department's refrigerators used hydrofluorocarbons, to which he replied:

"Decisions on the purchase of refrigerators are for the Department's local property centres and details are not recorded centrally."—[*Official Report*, 12 July 1999; Vol. 335, c. *12*.]

The Government have set their Departments a specific target on how to deal with what they acknowledge to be a very important matter, but they do not collect centrally details on achieving that target. Perhaps the Government's target was, appropriately enough, simply hot air. If they will not set themselves targets or collect information on them, they are simply not taking the matter seriously.

I cannot improve on the arguments that have been made against the climate levy by hon. Members on both sides of the House. If the Government think that the levy is an appropriate green tax, they are simply wrong. As the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Mr. Dafis) said, the levy would be perversely redistributive. Subsequently, some hon. Members discussed how to establish new and complex distributive mechanisms, whereby the tax would be taken from companies in one part of the United Kingdom, distributed to companies in another area—where they may not deserve it—but then taken back by the Government, to be redistributed to more deserving areas. The levy will not be an effective brake on carbon emissions and the need to devise elaborate redistribution mechanisms shows that the Government should do more than the softening that one assumes that they will announce next week. They should scrap the levy so that they can start again with something more appropriate.

The Minister should go to Bonn with a deep sense of humility. Britain's contribution to combating global warming under this Government has been profoundly inadequate. Hon. Members on both sides must hope that Ministers will do better on that vital issue in the second half of this Parliament.

12.20 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. Keith Hill): I congratulate the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Mr. Brake) on securing a debate on one of the most important environmental challenges facing the world. He raised several important issues during his interesting speech. I shall deal with them at various points in my reply. I thank him for his courtesy in having given me notice of his main areas of concern.

The debate has been notable for the high level of participation by representatives of the Principality. My right hon. Friend the Member for Alyn and Deeside (Mr. Jones) is always a powerful advocate of the steel industry. He referred to the climate change levy, as did my hon. Friends the Members for Vale of Glamorgan (Mr. Smith) and for Stoke-on-Trent, Central (Mr. Fisher), and the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Mr. Dafis). We have also heard exceptionally well-informed speeches from my hon. Friends the Members for East Carmarthen and Dinefwr (Mr. Williams) and for Bury, North (Mr. Chaytor), as well as a thought-provoking contribution from the hon. Member for Truro and St. Austell (Mr. Taylor). I am also grateful for the highly environmental contribution of the hon. Member for Ashford (Mr. Green), who represents, if I may say so, the green wing of the Conservative Front-Bench environment and transport team. I hope that he is not too isolated there.

The debate is timely, coinciding with the fifth conference of the parties to the UN framework convention of climate change in Bonn. If climate change is allowed to proceed in the absence of policies to limit greenhouse gas emissions, serious damage is expected, threatening global food production, leading to the loss of ecosystems and forcing millions of people to move from our coastal communities. To improve our understanding of such dangerous levels of climate change, last week we published a report on the global impacts of climate change. Compiled by the Hadley centre and other researchers, the report explores the impacts that we might expect if levels of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere were stabilised at 550 parts per million and 750 parts per million—in other words at about twice pre-industrial and present day levels respectively. To reach those levels, global emissions of greenhouse gases would have to be cut significantly. This is the first time that climate predictions from such action have been used to assess global impacts and vulnerability.

The results make worrying reading. Without limits on emissions of greenhouse gases, many parts of the world will suffer severe consequences during the next century. As is often the case, the poorest and least developed countries will be the most vulnerable and the least able to respond. Climate change will add to the problems that many countries already face, such as flooding, hunger and water shortages.

Despite those stark projections, the research shows that there is still time to act. If we can limit emissions, we can slow the rate of change and minimise many of the worst impacts. By stabilising carbon dioxide at 550 parts per million—the level proposed by the European Union to guide emissions reduction efforts—we can limit future temperature rise to an additional 2 deg C, avoid the loss of tropical forests in northern Brazil, prevent 2 billion people experiencing increased water shortages by the 2080s and reduce by about 75 million the number of people flooded each year.

The message from the research is clear: we must take early action if we are to avoid the worst effects of climate change and buy time to adapt. However, without early action to limit emissions of greenhouse gases, the rate of change will increase throughout the next century. Those changes will impact on society in unprecedented ways. Fortunately, the international community has begun to respond to the threats.

The UK has been at the forefront of international negotiations on climate change. We were instrumental in securing the deal at Kyoto in 1997. That was a truly historic step, when, for the first time, developed countries committed themselves to reducing their combined greenhouse gas emissions by an average of 5.2 per cent. below 1990 levels by 2008-12. The European Union agreed to reduce emissions by 8 per cent. and the subsequent redistribution of the Kyoto target in the EU was agreed under the UK's presidency. Under that agreement, the UK's target is a 12.5 per cent. cut. We have gone further by setting ourselves a challenging domestic goal of a 20 per cent. cut in CO_2 emissions by 2010.

Our immediate priority is to make Kyoto work. Last year in Buenos Aires, we agreed an ambitious work programme that set the sixth conference of the parties—COP 6—as the deadline for reaching decisions on many of the outstanding issues including the Kyoto mechanisms. COP 6 is not far away. It will be held at the end of 2000 or early in 2001. There is still a lot of work to be completed if we are to meet the deadline.

Over the next week or so, COP 5 will concentrate on making as much technical progress as possible. My right hon. Friends the Deputy Prime Minister and the Minister for the Environment are attending the ministerial segment in the middle of COP 5, which is intended to review progress and help give a renewed political impetus to negotiations.

The Government remain committed to ensuring that the UK meets its climate change targets. We are developing a new climate change programme that will set out how we plan to meet our Kyoto target and move towards our domestic goal. We aim to publish our draft programme for consultation around the turn of the year and to have a final programme in place by mid-2000. The climate change levy will be one of the key elements of our draft programme. Details of the design of the levy are still under consideration following a period of consultation. My right hon. Friend the Chancellor will make further announcements in the pre-Budget statement on 9 November. However, the House will be aware that the Government made it clear that we intend to negotiate agreements with energy-intensive sectors for reduced rates of the levy. At the same time we have said that an additional £50 million will be recycled from the proceeds of the levy to support renewables and energy efficiency.

Mr. Win Griffiths (Bridgend): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Hill: I regret that I cannot because I am so pressed for time.

I hope that the House agrees that we have adopted a properly balanced approach. We have been keen to stress that action to tackle climate change can bring gain, not pain. A more energy-efficient industry will be more competitive. A better transport system will be good for the economy and for society. Better insulated homes will be more comfortable and cheaper to live in. There are tremendous opportunities for business and for jobs in the traditional and emerging environmental technologies.

Actions speak louder than words. Policies already introduced show that we mean business. Our new integrated transport policy provides a framework for a range of measures that will deliver a better-quality transport system with lower CO_2 emissions. Changes announced by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor to transport taxation will cut emissions. The new climate change levy will encourage businesses to use energy more efficiently. In March this year, we published a consultation paper on "New and Renewable Energy: Prospects for the 21st Century", which outlines the options for providing 10 per cent. of UK electricity supplies from renewable sources as soon as possible. We are working with business to develop a domestic emissions trading scheme which will give UK firms valuable experience in advance of the launch of an international scheme. We are committed to publishing our first report on whether to set a national road traffic reduction programme target by the end of this year.

[Mr. Hill]

Climate change is a multi-disciplinary issue which will impinge on all regions and sectors. It is a global problem which will ultimately require substantial global action to reduce emissions. However, we all have a part to play in raising awareness about climate change and tackling its causes. I thank hon. Members for their contributions to this instructive and interesting debate.

Flu Vaccine (Southern Derbyshire)

12.30 pm

Liz Blackman (Erewash): I am grateful for the opportunity to raise the subject of flu vaccine, with particular reference to southern Derbyshire, especially in flu awareness week.

We have just returned from our summer recess, but October is nearly over and we must start to consider the risk to a certain percentage of the population who may well contact flu and other associated diseases during the coming months.

On an average winter day, family doctors will write more than 100,000 more prescriptions than they do in summer. In December alone, the national health service expects 15 per cent. more emergency hospital admissions than in August and local peaks can be much higher, especially when people stay at home longer and have increased close contact with family and friends over the winter holiday period. This year, the situation could well be compounded by the millennium celebrations.

The Government are to be congratulated on their winter pressures approach and the substantial extra resources they provided last winter. My local health authority received £40,000 to enable primary care groups to use nursing home beds and thus reduce in-patient admissions and care for people in the most appropriate setting. That was most welcome.

The winter pressures initiative has developed considerably since its inception. In southern Derbyshire, which includes my constituency, managers have been incredibly proactive in addressing the issue. The winter pressures plan, requested by the Department of Health, is a collaboration between social services acute trusts, local general practitioners and primary care groups to plan for increased demand over the winter period. Southern Derbyshire, along with every other health authority, has identified the need to be better prepared in light of the millennium. It has linked the millennium planning process with the public sector relations group, bringing together many agencies to combat the projected problems.

Southern Derbyshire health authority, along with the Department of Health, has identified that targeting flu vaccination is a vital strategy in alleviating winter pressures. The virus has the potential of presenting as lethargy, a cold, a sore throat or wheezing, requiring a visit to the GP or chemist. The results can vary from minor disruption at home or work to serious, life-threatening epidemics which can have disastrous effects on the NHS, which attempts to treat sufferers and prevent the disruption of other services. Even in a non-epidemic year, the sector of the population whose resistance is poor can suffer numerous deaths as a direct result of flu and related complications. Rightly, that sector has been divided into high-risk groups: people with heart disease, lung disease, asthma, diabetes and immunosuppression; those in long-stay residential care; and those aged 75 and over, who the Government identified as a risk category in 1998.

Why do we regard the vaccine as effective in reducing flu in those groups? It is designed using the strains of virus closely related to those expected to be circulating in any particular year. The World Health Organisation co-ordinates global surveillance, which means that in

most years there is a good match. The vaccines are 70 to 80 per cent. effective—they are not as effective as some, but they are pretty good.

It is also worth considering the cost of not vaccinating effectively. When I asked a parliamentary question last July, I learned that no figures relating to the cost of the flu epidemic last winter were available centrally. We must try to calculate the expenditure on treatment of this acute disease. We must consider the cost of suffering and lives when complications set in or flu exacerbates an underlying condition, and also the loss of wages and lifetime earnings due to morbidity and mortality.

So what is the cost of targeting groups at risk? Of course, there is the cost of the vaccine. According to the latest figures, it will cost between £5.07 and £5.70 per dose. There are also costs associated with administering the vaccine, treating any adverse effects and implementing the immunisation programme and health promotion. On Monday, at the press conference launching flu awareness week, an initiative sponsored by the Association for Influenza Monitoring, the Public Health Laboratory Service and the Royal College of General Practitioners, the chief medical officer and the Minister agreed that immunisation of high-risk groups is their best defence against flu. So we are all saying that prevention is better than cure.

So is this effective measure a success? Apparently, the take-up is not as good as it could be. In southern Derbyshire, estimated target population figures for those in high-risk groups requiring the influenza vaccine have been set at 140,000, yet last winter just over half that number—73,000—were given or claimed the vaccine. However, it is impossible to say what percentage were in the high-risk group. According to Dr. Van Tam, a senior lecturer in public health medicine at Nottingham medical school, who is regarded as something of an expert, the figure could be as low as 12 per cent. or as high as 25 per cent. That is not particular to my area. An article by the Public Health Laboratory Service in 1997, which gave information on the uptake of the influenza vaccine in high-risk groups, noted that the overall uptake was estimated to be low—about 23 per cent.—and was particularly poor in younger members of the group. About 44 per cent. of those aged over 65 and 13 per cent. of those aged between 34 and 49 were estimated to have received the vaccine.

Since 1998, when those aged 75 and over were identified as a high-risk group, new figures should show a substantial increase in the uptake of the vaccine. However, many are still falling through the safety net of adequate preventive provision by way of a simple flu vaccine. The statistics are estimates as the data count the number of vaccinations given or claimed for. There is no routinely collected or available data showing which people in which risk group have been vaccinated.

Individual practices should keep details of who has been given the vaccine and when, but they are not required to report this information. Does the Minister agree that a more coherent and co-ordinated way of collecting, recording, analysing and reporting data would ensure a better understanding of the national picture. Could such a body as the Public Health Laboratory Service be resourced to monitor coverage and uptake of vaccines in risk groups?

Undoubtedly, however, the uptake of the flu vaccination by the target group could be improved. The Department of Health does not currently set targets for increasing the percentage of people in risk groups receiving influenza vaccinations because of the difficulty of accurately assessing denominators for the risk groups. Will the Minister look again at the issue of target setting and consider whether it is possible to set targets, especially in the 75-plus age group and for those in long-term care?

At the heart of flu awareness week is the crucial role that GPs and other health professionals are expected to play. That is the expectation of the chief medical officer, the Government and local health authorities and the overall message of the flu awareness campaign. They rightly focus on the key role of GPs because patient surveys show that the single most important factor affecting whether an individual is immunised or not is whether the doctor or nurse recommended it. However, practice in my constituency varies, as I am sure it does across the country.

Some GPs target the high-risk groups in a rigorous way, as they would if they were calling in women for smears. Others rely on posters or leaflets, or both. Some practices have the information technology and resources to identify the risk groups, but others appear not to have them. The ability of IT to identify and target risk groups is variable. Sometimes the data may be on the system, but not in a way that they can be used. There are also training needs to be considered.

Does my hon. Friend the Minister see any improvements that could be made to ensure a more consistent approach? There is no national target payment, although I understand that payments are made to GPs in some regions for giving out the flu vaccine. Would she consider incentivising GPs to vaccinate at-risk groups?

I noted that one London practice had a very good take-up rate because of a more co-ordinated approach by all the health professionals: doctors, nurses, health visitors and pharmacists. Is my hon. Friend aware of GP practices or health authorities that have a better success rate and would she consider disseminating their best practice?

Is there an opportunity, as the focus widens in health action zones, to incorporate some of those related issue into their remit? Health promotion is a vital part of increasing uptake, and there needs to be an on-going process. There is a timing factor involved in when the flu vaccine is administered, but the overall message about prevention and year-on-year uptake needs to be continually reinforced, as is done in child immunisation programmes.

I applaud the Government's tremendous efforts to be proactive with their winter pressures policy and their endorsement of flu awareness week. The local public health co-ordinator for southern Derbyshire has been publicly very positive about the campaign and the progress being made with the Government's support. I accept that much of the framework for monitoring, targeting and co-ordinating the flu vaccine is historic: we have inherited it.

Given the known effectiveness of the vaccine in the target groups, will my hon. Friend consider the issues that I have raised and whether there is any scope for reconsidering the rationale behind the 75-year-plus group? Will she consider the many countries that target people

[Liz Blackman]

over 65 on the basis that that broader group contains the majority of at-risk people? Risk groups overlap, especially in the higher age range. Perhaps she could consider the percentage of deaths attributed to influenza in that category.

The World Bank has described targeted immunisation as one of the most cost-effective public health interventions. Is there scope for further improvement in our approach in the United Kingdom? I look forward to hearing my hon. Friend's views and thoughts.

12.42 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Yvette Cooper): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Erewash (Liz Blackman) for her excellent timing in raising the topic of flu immunisation during flu awareness week and for her interesting speech and informed points. She is certainly right to say that there is scope for improvement.

This is the time of year, ahead of the winter, when those patients for whom flu can be a serious illness should be getting their jabs from GPs. For most people—those who are otherwise fit and healthy—flu is unpleasant but not serious. The doctor's advice is usually to stay home, stay warm, drink plenty of fluids and look after oneself. For others, however, it can be very serious. As many as 3,000 to 4,000 people, mainly elderly, are estimated to die from flu each year, even in years when flu has been relatively mild.

In the last severe epidemic, in 1989-90, as many as 26,000 deaths over and above those expected were recorded during the epidemic period. Flu is not a subject that we take lightly and it is important that we do everything that we can to prevent flu among those likely to suffer most.

The Joint Committee on Vaccinations and Immunisation identifies the risk groups as people with underlying diseases such as chronic respiratory disease, chronic heart or kidney disease or diabetes; and people whose immune systems are impaired by disease or through treatments such as cancer therapy or steroids. They have a higher risk that a bout of flu will lead to serious illness such as bronchitis or pneumonia.

Although the elderly are more at risk, people of any age with those conditions are at increased risk and that risk increases further when an individual has more than one of the underlying problems. The Department of Health recommends, on the basis of the committee's recommendations, that people in those circumstances should get a flu jab before the winter begins. The Department also recommends that people in long-stay residential accommodation should also be vaccinated, because flu, once introduced there, can spread very rapidly. From last year, everyone aged 75 or more has also been recommended to be immunised.

My hon. Friend asks whether we will consider extending that to everyone over 65. Further investigation and analysis are taking place. The Joint Committee on Vaccinations and Immunisation is examining the question and will make recommendations according to the evidence of what impact there will be on different groups.

As my hon. Friend says, we have increased the number of vaccinations in the past few years. Last year, more than 7 million doses were given, compared with only 6 million doses three years ago. This year, we have more vaccine than ever available—more than 8.5 million doses; but she is absolutely right, we could do better. The most recent national data point to low uptake rates, especially among younger people in the risk groups. Ultimately, it is up to patients to decide for themselves whether they want to be vaccinated but we must ensure that they are fully aware of the options and the risks when they make that decision.

My hon. Friend is also right to say that the data that we have are not adequate to tell us exactly what is going on and what we should be doing about it. I want to explain in some detail the data that we have at the moment and the direction in which I believe we should be moving. For a start, we know from the manufacturers how much vaccine will be available in advance of the flu immunisation programme. Manufacturers also give the Department of Health a weekly update at this time of year on the number of doses distributed and what is still available should there be additional need.

We have some idea of the use of vaccines by GPs. Like the analysis given by my hon. Friend today, we can use prescription data to show the number of vaccine doses that GPs are delivering, but she is absolutely right to say that they do not tell us whether an individual GP is targeting the vaccine to those most in need—those identified as belonging to high-risk groups.

Before last year, reliable national estimates of flu vaccine uptake in our targeted groups were not available. Last year, that gap was partly plugged. The Public Health Laboratory Service calculated the national uptake rates using the general practice research database: records from a representative sample of general practitioners throughout the country. That analysis has allowed us, for the first time, to make an assessment of the recent performance of the NHS in delivering flu vaccine policy, as it enables us to track the health condition of those who are vaccinated.

Only by using such analysis can accurate figures be produced for uptake of flu vaccine in the recommended groups. The latest figures from the database show that in the winter of 1996-97, 23 per cent. of the high-risk population were vaccinated and 44 per cent. of those over 75 with high-risk conditions. That was before the aim to include all people over 75 was introduced.

The figures also show that half the total vaccinations given went to people not considered to be at high risk. We plan to use that system from now on to monitor uptake regularly and as a basis for reviewing the implementation of the programme in future and determining what further improvements can be made. That is a major step forward, but we still lack any information on how individual GPs, rather than a sample of GPs throughout the country, are managing to reach their target groups.

The flu immunisation programme is delivered largely by general practitioners and practice nurses. GPs should identify their targeted population through whatever methods are available to them: most can do it through their computer systems; others have chronic disease registers or can identify patients through repeat prescriptions for particular medicines. GPs then need to order their vaccine early in the year so that supply can be assured.

Vaccine is delivered to practices in September to October, when patients need to be contacted to attend an immunisation session or other arrangements are made.

My hon. Friend is right to say that we have very limited information on how far individual GPs are achieving that and how wide the variations are across practices in different parts of the country.

Given the Department's commitment to reducing health inequalities and to making sure that people's treatment from the NHS is not dependent on where they live, we consider this matter to be important. However, we are putting in place changes which should make the process easier in future. We are developing standards for electronic patient records and we plan to have comprehensive coverage by the year 2002. This, together with new systems, should enable us to tie together the information available and to examine individual practice level data. It should give us considerable scope to identify best practice across the country, and give us the opportunity to spread that further in future.

The second important strand in my hon. Friend's argument concerns how we spread best practice. First, the Government are promoting immunisation policy at a national level. Tips on how to run a successful programme are published in the Department of Health's memorandum "Immunisation against infectious disease"—the GPs immunisation bible. In that advice—entitled "Increasing the uptake of influenza vaccine"—the memorandum points out clearly that

"the single most important factor in patients accepting influenza vaccine is that their doctor recommended it".

Doctors and nurses are encouraged to maintain registers of their patients who should be immunised. On top of this, the chief medical officer writes to GPs each year, reminding them further of the need to target the risk groups.

The Department of Health works closely with the Association for Influenza Monitoring and Surveillance in the build-up to flu awareness week. The purpose of the week is to get the message to the public that if they think that they may be in a risk group, they should see their doctor and arrange to be immunised. Flu awareness week is a highly successful campaign. It is launched through a press conference—chaired by the chief medical officer—to which my hon. Friend referred. Hon. Members may have heard the chief medical officer on "Today", ITN and other media on Friday promoting the message that flu vaccine can save the lives of those at risk.

Flu awareness week is supported by Help the Aged, the British Diabetic Association, the British Lung Foundation, the National Asthma Campaign, the Royal College of General Practitioners and the Royal College of Nursing. Both Help the Aged and the British Lung Foundation have produced flu leaflets to help promote the uptake of immunisation in the risk groups.

Separately, the Department of Health and the NHS have this year run extra activities to raise public awareness of flu vaccine. In September this year—for the first time—as part of the winter planning round, health authorities were provided with a briefing pack, including a press release suitable for local use to support local activity around flu awareness week. The Department of Health has produced leaflets and posters which are available free.

Health authorities should be able to see whether an individual GP is prescribing broadly too little or too much vaccine, given the number of patients he has on his list. GPs should be able to identify best practice locally. Using these data, health authorities should support those GPs who are not giving sufficient priority to the immunisation needs of their patients. They should encourage them up to the levels of the better GPs.

All practices should be able to identify risk groups and should be able to identify their own level of performance. Health authorities should be promoting good practice across their GPs. Prescribing advisers are employed by health authorities to help promote good prescribing practice, including flu immunisation.

The introduction of primary care groups should increase the peer pressure to follow better prescribing practices, and make the best use of resources to support the health needs of their populations. Clinical governance offers a framework within which primary care groups can work to improve and assure the quality of clinical services for all patients. In addition, we are currently looking at broader accountability and service issues within the GP contract, as is the General Medical Council. The GMC is looking to revalidate GPs and all doctors on the basis of the quality of service that they provide. Together, these new structures should provide a series of routes by which we should be able to increase the uptake of flu vaccine in recommended groups. However, we will continually monitor and examine this matter as progress is made.

Finally, my hon. Friend asked if we would consider introducing targets. I can tell her that I will certainly look closely at the points she makes. It is true that the Department does not at present set national targets for the uptake of flu vaccine. We have aimed at year-on-year increases. This has reflected the historical lack of good estimates of vaccine uptake. As I have mentioned, it is difficult to introduce targets when we do not have adequate information about who exactly is receiving the vaccine in the first place. However, we do now have estimates of flu vaccine uptake on a national level, and the equivalent data at a local level should be a matter for local planning.

Due to the difficulty in accurately estimating flu vaccine uptake, those health authorities which have looked at setting local targets on flu vaccination have focused on the percentage of over-75s being immunised. That is easier to quantify. Nevertheless, age on its own is not the most important risk factor. We must ensure that we do not divert attention from the need to maximise the uptake among everyone with these underlying risk conditions, whatever age they happen to be.

I can assure my hon. Friend that we will now be looking carefully at how targets could be used in the future to ensure that we achieve higher uptake without distorting the priority groups. We will review the latest data in the light of additional information from the general practice research database, and we will look at the direction in which the figures are moving in the future.

I would like to thank my hon. Friend once more for raising this timely and important subject, and I commend her on providing the information on what southern Derbyshire is doing to improve flu vaccination and preventive measures. Obviously, the more we can do to prevent the serious nature of the disease, the better it would be, rather than to place additional burdens on the NHS. Delivering flu vaccine in such wide numbers is something that the NHS must plan around—it cannot be

[Yvette Cooper]

delivered easily and quickly. Individual GP practices and health authorities should make adequate plans to make sure that they reach the target groups.

This is a vital public health measure. I will be looking to see what improvements we can make before next year's winter flu awareness week.

Pig Industry

12.58 pm

Mr. David Prior (North Norfolk): I am delighted to introduce this debate on the crisis facing the pig industry. Many producers have left the industry, and many more are staring ruin in the face. Desperate farmers have remortgaged their houses, borrowed from their pension funds and built up unsustainable levels of overdraft.

Pig farmers are not subsidised; they do not receive one penny from Westminster or from Brussels. They tend to be small, specialist family concerns. They work 365 days and nights a year, often in conditions that many would find unacceptable. Above all, perhaps, farmers experience intense loneliness, and it is probably for that reason that suicide is so prevalent.

Robert Steven, one of my constituents, is the chairman of the Norfolk section of the National Farmers Union. He said recently:

"the position has been getting quite diabolical. While the countryside looks fresh and green, it hides an awful lot of troubles in the industry."

My constituent, Mr. Taylor from Ludham, writes that he has kept pigs since 1944. He says:

"I am sorry and sad that my son now has only 20 sows left and these will be gone in a few weeks."

Janet Mutimer—who is down here from Norfolk today—lives close to me in Norfolk. She writes:

"Thousands of breeding stock are being slaughtered, jobs on farms and in allied industries lost, our industry is being exported by the Government."

Ian Campbell, the regional chairman of the British Pig Industry Support Group, says that

"the industry is dying on its feet with the industry facing melt down."

My local newspaper, the *Eastern Daily Press*, is leading a campaign

"to rescue an industry which is bleeding to death."

The paper says that

"if Nick Brown persists in the policy of delay and quietly doing nothing, there will be no trace left of the pig industry."

It is that serious.

Between 1998 and 1999, pig farmers' incomes have fallen by 174 per cent. and they will be in loss for 1999. The UK pig herd has contracted by 12 per cent., and the weekly kill rate has fallen from 330,000 to 260,000, which is the lowest level for 33 years, according to the Meat and Livestock Commission. The average all pig price is stuck at 75p per kilogram, which is 15p below break-even point for most farmers. Imports of pigmeat from the EU increased by nearly a third in the first half of 1999.

What more evidence do the Government need before they decide to take some action? One gets the impression that their policies are more informed by "The Archers" and "Cold Comfort Farm" than by real life, and that they have no concern about, knowledge of or interest in the British pig industry. It is almost as if the Government regard it as a virtual crisis, not a real one. At the MLC breakfast yesterday at which pig awards were given out, there was not a single Minister from the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food present.

The Government must and can take the following actions. First, they must stipulate that all local authorities and public bodies must buy meat that complies with the

British standard. The Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food promised to do that a year ago, but a survey to be published next week shows that more than half of all local authorities have made no change to their purchasing policies. It would seem that the Minister and MAFF do not even have the energy to ensure that bodies under their direct control support British farmers.

The chairman of the British Pig Association wrote to me in the following terms:

"The Minister should take a much more vigorous line with retailers and caterers in the private and public sector who undermine the UK pig industry by importing substandard foreign pigmeat and who do not specify the UK's high welfare and food production standards."

I hope today that the Minister will state categorically what she has done in that respect.

Secondly, labelling must be honest. I know that my hon. Friends the Members for Beverley and Holderness (Mr. Cran), for Bury St. Edmunds (Mr. Ruffley) and for Mid-Sussex (Mr. Soames) have taken an especial interest in that point. Every consumer must know the origin of the meat that they purchase and the regime under which that meat is reared, fed, slaughtered and processed. Currently, under EU regulations, foreign-reared pigmeat that does not comply with UK welfare and safety standards can be imported, processed and then labelled as British bacon or ham. That is an outrageous situation.

Mr. Keith Simpson (Mid-Norfolk): Does my hon. Friend agree that one of the tragedies for the British pig industry is that it has met the highest standards, but ironically it is now being penalised for doing so? As far as its members can see, nothing has been done to address the situation for the past year, since the present Minister of Agriculture took office.

Mr. Prior: I agree entirely with my hon. Friend, and it is one of the tragedies of the situation that this country has led the world in animal welfare. The British farmer, at a capital cost of more than £200 million and on-going operating costs of £2 per finished pig, has rightly abolished sow stalls and tethers. In Europe, sows are still tethered and still spend 275 days a year in a sow stall measuring less than 8 ft long and 2 ft wide. Some are even smaller. Those pigs cannot move or turn around. We have rightly outlawed that barbarous practice in this country.

The Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals has said:

"The sharp rise in pigmeat imports into the UK this year is very bad news for animal welfare, since most of it will have been produced under conditions which are illegal in the UK. If retailers, caterers and the public fail to consider production methods and buy on price alone, they will undermine the advances in farm animal welfare the UK has achieved."

The campaign director of Compassion in World Farming has written to the Minister to say:

"I am concerned to learn that, according to recent Eurostat figures, the volume of pigmeat imports into the UK from the EU rose by 34 per cent. in the first five months of this year. Much of this imported pigmeat may have been produced using stall or tether systems in which sows cannot exercise or even turn round throughout their 16-week pregnancies."

The consumer must be given the opportunity to make an informed choice to support high welfare standards by buying home-grown and reared production. Many consumers are buying pigmeat unwittingly, unaware that it has been produced in conditions rightly banned in this country.

Mr. Anthony Steen (Totnes): How is that pigmeat coming into this country? I thought that the European Union set certain standards and if the meat is coming in from outside the EU, should not the Commission do something about that?

Mr. Prior: My hon. Friend makes a valid point.

Thirdly, the Minister should invoke article 36 of the treaty of Rome to ban meat imports that do not comply with our public health specifications. As long ago as April 1999—nearly six months—a French Government report, which has only just been released in public in the UK, stated:

"Residues from toilets, septic tanks and sludge from waste treatment factories are routinely used in the making of European animal feed."

It also reported cases in which meat and bonemeal had not been heated to the obligatory temperature for long enough and in which engine oil and heavy metal residues had been added to feedstuffs.

Mr. Christopher Gill (Ludlow): My hon. Friend mentioned the use of meat and bonemeal in feedstuff production, which is prohibited in British meat production. In my capacity as president of the British Pig Association, I remind the House that the Government were called upon 15 months ago to investigate the possibility of putting some value back into pig offals, but no progress has yet been made. Does my hon. Friend agree that that shows a cavalier approach to the practical suggestions that have been made by the industry?

Mr. Prior: I agree that the Government have taken a wholly complacent and cavalier approach. If the recent revelations about EU feedstuffs are not a major public health issue, I do not know what is. Even the Minister of Agriculture has described the practice as

"horrible, revolting, unacceptable and illegal".

If the French can ban British beef, surely we have every right to protect our industry when faced with a flood of imports that pose a risk to public health and consumer confidence.

Mrs. Gillian Shephard (South-West Norfolk): My hon. Friend has mentioned the recent revelations, but does he have any information about how long the Minister and MAFF have known about the addition of sludge to French animal feed? My investigations tell me that they knew as long ago as May last year, yet it was only last week that the British public were told.

Mr. Prior: I have seen in Reuters copies of the French Government report which was published as long ago as April this year. I was also horrified to hear on "Today" that the Minister of Agriculture has not been in touch with his French counterpart at all in the past week. One wonders whether the Minister realises that there is a crisis in public health in this country.

The Government have still not learned that it is possible to be pro-British without being anti-European and that respect is won by being tough, not by being weak.

[Mr. Prior]

This country is increasingly regarded as a bunch of patsies. It is time that we stopped being embarrassed about standing up for British interests. It is time that the Minister of Agriculture stood up for British farmers, not French farmers. It is ludicrous to say that it is safe to eat foreign meat fed on sewage sludge and engine oil, but not safe to eat British beef on the bone.

Fourthly, as the *Eastern Daily Press* put it,

"Mr Brown must remove the shackles of BSE controls from the pig sector."

The Meat and Livestock Commission, which is a statutory body, estimates that the cost of the controls amounts to some £5.26 per pig. That is mainly the direct result of not feeding meat and bonemeal to pigs and the ban on offal disposal, mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Ludlow (Mr. Gill). The fact is that in single-species, dedicated pig abattoirs, porcine meat and bonemeal can be kept separate and its market value could be realised. The risk of cross-contamination can be eliminated, but the Minister has made no determined effort with the Spongiform Encephalopathy Advisory Committee to achieve a exemption for dedicated abattoirs. The Minister does not seem to recognise the importance of getting value back into pig by-products.

More importantly, the Minister should note that as a result of the dioxin contamination in Belgium, Belgian pig farmers have received 80 per cent. grants from their Government as compensation towards their costs of production. That was agreed by the European Commission on the grounds that dioxin contamination was an extraordinary occurrence. Ironically, the Belgian Government cited BSE as an example of an extraordinary occurrence.

Mr. Robert Jackson (Wantage): Does my hon. Friend agree that it is unfair that the costs of dealing with a public health problem should fall entirely on the producers? I hope that the Minister agrees that it is. A public health problem is a matter of public interest, and the Government should take account of that.

Mr. Prior: I agree completely with my hon. Friend, and that was the approach adopted in connection with beef and, to some extent, with lamb. For some reason, the pig industry has not received similar treatment.

There is a compelling case for compensating pig farmers for the consequences of BSE. That disease was not of their making, but the Government continue to sit on their hands. It is hard not to agree with the chairman of the British Pig Association who has stated:

"The industry cannot understand why it has taken so long for the Minister to act more decisively to protect pig producers and pig industry jobs and to stop consumers from being misled by supermarkets and caterers about the production methods of the imported pork that they are eating . . . It is immoral for the Government to do so little to promote high welfare and food safety standards in the retail and catering sectors."

This is a story of complacency, incompetence, ignorance, misunderstanding and inaction. The Minister of Agriculture has shown himself to be a poodle with two masters—the Treasury and the European Commission. All he offers to British pig farmers is snake oil, sympathy and promises. The export of the British pig industry to countries with inferior husbandry, welfare, hygiene, health and traceability standards is a national disgrace, and a personal tragedy for many pig farmers.

The Minister of Agriculture is supposed to be the Minister of British agriculture, not foreign agriculture. If he wishes to hand over to his successor any pig industry in this country, he has days—not weeks, or months—in which to act.

1.12 pm

Mr. Anthony Steen (Totnes): I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for North Norfolk (Mr. Prior) for the way in which he has introduced this debate. He has a clear passion for pigs, and I thank him for allowing me to say a few words, as I too want to stick up for the British pig industry.

The Government and public authorities could play a major part in helping our pig industry when it draws up food procurement contracts. I am advised that they could insert in those contracts an animal welfare clause that would mean that they were not legally obliged to accept the lowest tender. It would be helpful if the Minister of State could deal with that when she replies to the debate. Such a provision would mean that whenever local authorities and the Government take out food procurement contracts they could insist on high welfare standards and therefore specify the expected and required standard of animal welfare.

Inevitably, therefore, the lowest-priced contract would not include that higher welfare standard. Such an approach would ensure that the food contracted for would reach the required standard and would come from animals reared to the necessary welfare standards. Local authorities could implement such a clause in their contracts for school food and other food, and as a direct result ensure that British pork—and other British meat—was favoured. As my hon. Friend the Member for North Norfolk said, the standard of our pigs is the highest in Europe, if not in the world. It is wrong that our farmers should be penalised and discriminated against for setting that standard.

Public authorities in Britain could ensure that we support our own industry, because the welfare clause in food contracts would enable them to select British meat, rather than go on importing meat from other countries, let alone from mainland Europe. They could therefore help people to enjoy the delights of the pork, bacon and ham produced in this country.

I shall turn briefly to the matter of labelling. This afternoon and over the next few days, trading standards officers could be directed by the Minister to go out in force and visit supermarkets throughout the country. They could check that the pork labelled as British was indeed produced in Britain, rather than merely packed here.

The supermarkets could play a major part in putting the fun back into British pork. Misrepresentation through inaccurate labelling is widespread, and supermarkets should be marketing the higher welfare standards of the British pig industry. I am sure that the vast majority of people in my constituency would wish to buy British pork, especially if they knew that it came from happy pigs that had been reared properly and safely.

We can distinguish between battery range eggs and free range eggs, and that distinction is widely made throughout the country. Supermarkets could do the same for pork.

British consumers should be able to differentiate between foreign pigs—fed on heaven knows what and kept tethered to stalls in mainland Europe—and British pigs that enjoy a healthy diet and good living accommodation.

1.15 pm

The Minister of State, Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Ms Joyce Quin): I congratulate the hon. Member for North Norfolk (Mr. Prior) on securing this debate. The current crisis in the pig sector is an extremely important issue. He introduced the debate with much feeling, with which I totally associate myself. I have recently had discussions with some of the people to whom he referred. For example, I met Ian Campbell only a week or so ago to talk about those matters.

I also welcome the brief contribution from the hon. Member for Totnes (Mr. Steen), who made some constructive comments in a short time.

I reject the claim by the hon. Member for North Norfolk that the Government have been complacent and cavalier in their approach to the problem. I have been in my post for only a little time, but even my short experience of the great energy that the Ministry has devoted to this issue tells me that the hon. Gentleman gave a false caricature of the Government's attitude to this important industry.

Mr. Gill: I appreciate that the Minister is new to her job, but I assure her that the problems of the British pig industry have been flagged up in this House for a long time now. In my intervention earlier, I referred to a debate that took place 15 months ago, when various problems associated with the British pig industry—with which the Government could have dealt were they so minded—were raised. The fact is that those problems have not been dealt with. The Minister must understand that by the time she gets around to doing something about them, it will be too late for lots of pig farmers. They are going out of business as we speak. I have listened this morning—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): Order. That is rather a long intervention.

Ms Quin: Given the length of that intervention, it is perhaps worth pointing out that, although this debate is important, there will be another opportunity to raise these and other matters in the House tomorrow, when there will be a debate on agriculture. I am sure that many of the points raised so far today will be picked up then.

It is true that I am new to the role of Minister of State in the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, but I assure the House that I have read the report on the pig industry prepared by the Select Committee on Agriculture. I am also aware of the Government's response and the action taken in various sectors at that time. Therefore, I maintain my strongly held view that charges of complacency and indifference are completely misplaced. It does no service to the hard-pressed people in the sector to distort the Government's attitude, or to misrepresent the action taken in the past and in hand at present.

Mr. Keith Simpson *rose—*

Mr. Paul Tyler (North Cornwall) *rose—*

Ms Quin: Given that this is a short debate, I simply cannot take many interventions.

Mr. Steen: The Minister should give way.

Ms Quin: The hon. Gentleman has had the chance to speak, so he should allow me to choose which interventions to take. I give way to the hon. Member for North Cornwall (Mr. Tyler).

Mr. Tyler: I am grateful to the Minister, who referred to the Select Committee report. She will recall that that report suggested that complacency was also evident in the previous Conservative Government. I have spent much time in this House trying to persuade Conservative Members to make the points that they are making now.

However, I have a practical point to make. At the meeting with representatives of the pig sector on 5 October, there was a real attempt to identify whether a new set of support systems, within the context of the EU, could be put in place to deal with the public health issue referred to by the hon. Member for North Norfolk (Mr. Prior). Will the Minister give the House a specific assurance that that matter is being examined urgently?

Ms Quin: I shall refer later to that meeting and some of the initiatives agreed at it. It is, of course, true that the problems did not appear as if by magic on 2 May 1997. The previous Government presided over the BSE crisis, so they should not advise us on how to handle agricultural issues. Nor am I prepared to take the advice offered by the hon. Member for North Norfolk when he said that being pro-British does not mean being anti-European; I have understood that point throughout my political life, and it is a strange message from someone in today's Conservative party.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Ms Quin: I shall take only one more intervention.

Mr. Keith Simpson: Putting aside party politics, the Minister must appreciate the desperation of pig farmers all over the country. Whether or not she thinks that they are wrong, she must accept that farmers perceive deep complacency in the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food. They do not want sympathy, but action.

Ms Quin: The hon. Gentleman should listen both to me today and my right hon. Friend the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food in tomorrow's agriculture debate. It is a little odd of him to suggest that we should put party politics to one side following the highly partisan approach that has been taken today. I accept that we have had accusations of many kinds levelled at us, including complacency, but Ministers have met many pig producers—our main concern today—who understand the complexities of the situation and who realise that, far from trying to run away from the issue, we are addressing it continuously and constantly. *[Interruption.]* May I be allowed to make my points? There are at least two former

[Ms Quin]

Agriculture Ministers in the Chamber and the right hon. Members for South Norfolk (Mr. MacGregor) and for South-West Norfolk (Mrs. Shephard) ought to know that some suggestions made by the hon. Member for North Norfolk are either impossible or illegal.

In 1995 and 1996, pig prices were exceptionally high, well above the costs of production. Prices were boosted by strong third-country demand and a shortage of pigmeat from the Netherlands because of an outbreak of classical swine fever. When BSE had its first impact, the initial effects on the pig sector were positive as people bought pork and pigmeat instead of beef. That stimulated a particularly big upswing in pigmeat production.

That was followed by a welcome return to confidence in the beef sector, but unfortunately there were also international events that had a negative impact on the pig industry. In particular, there was a sharp fall in third-country demand from Russia, south-east Asia and elsewhere. The result has been a sharp reduction in pigmeat prices in the UK, elsewhere in the European Union and in other countries. UK pig prices have been below the costs of production for more than 16 months. I do not disguise from the House the fact that there is a deep and sustained crisis. The pig cycle, with alternating high and low prices, is well known from the past, but the UK pig breeding herd continues to reduce because of the current serious crisis.

During the past two or three weeks my right hon. Friend the Minister of Agriculture has had at least three long meetings with representatives of the UK pig industry to discuss in detail how best to tackle the problem. On Monday, I walked the pig chain in Yorkshire, meeting and talking with pig farmers and processors and visiting supermarkets to discuss the labelling issues mentioned by the hon. Member for Totnes (Mr. Steen). I emphasised the importance that we attach to the industry and the ways in which we are considering issues of concern. I know that Conservative Members do not like the fact that there are no easy, instant solutions. If there were, we should wish to adopt them.

Pigmeat is covered by a relatively light regime under the common agricultural policy. Few market management measures can therefore be taken. It is not true to say that the package announced by my right hon. Friend the Minister of Agriculture a month ago contained nothing for pig producers. Areas of particular concern, such as red tape, the efficiency of the Meat Hygiene Service and the reduction of veterinary cover at low-throughput slaughterhouses, impact on all meat sectors, including the pig sector. However, money has been earmarked to improve marketing, collaboration and competitiveness, which we wish to direct in particular towards the pig sector.

The UK supported the European Commission over last year's major increase in export refunds and the introduction of a private storage aid scheme. We regretted the Commission's withdrawal in September of the private storage aid scheme and the special export refunds to Russia. Last week, as a result, my right hon. Friend the Minister of Agriculture wrote to Commissioner Fischler to press for reintroduction of the private storage aid scheme and for the restoration of the special export refunds to Russia.

Some points raised by Conservative Members—*[Interruption.]* They seem disinclined to listen to the response, but issues have been raised about the identity of British pigmeat and the high welfare and hygiene standards that it meets. Those standards—particularly on welfare—were introduced with substantial cross-party support. A private Member's initiative that had originated with the previous Government was supported strongly on both sides. A lengthy transition period was stipulated for the new regulations.

We want British consumers to understand those standards and benefit from the premium identity for British pork that they may create. The Meat and Livestock Commission's pork mark is an important unifying badge that offers assurances on methods of production and quality of product. We have been active on labelling, on which my right hon. Friend the Minister of Agriculture made some statements at Question Time only last week. We have checked on the accuracy of labels in our shops. I raised the point at the event I attended on Monday, and was told by producers and supermarket representatives that the accuracy of labels has improved. However, we will not be content until loopholes have been properly closed to prevent consumers from being misled—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. We must end the debate and turn to the next one.

Landfill (Cornwall)

1.30 pm

Ms Candy Atherton (Falmouth and Camborne): I am pleased to have secured this debate today. I understand that this is the first time that the Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, my hon. Friend the Member for Sunderland, South (Mr. Mullin), has responded to an Adjournment debate since his elevation to high office, which I am sure we all celebrate. I know that my hon. Friend is keen to ensure that justice is done and, importantly, is seen to be done.

Sadly, I fear that, in this case, the demands of clearing up Cornwall's rubbish have ridden roughshod over my constituents' needs. The county of Cornwall has run out of landfill sites and my constituents are expected to pay the price.

One case that I shall bring to the Minister's attention concerns a company set up by a local authority that has persistently sought planning permission to extend a landfill site. The case suggests that the relationship between the company and the council is too cosy and that councillors are putting expediency before local needs. The councillors say that there is no alternative, but that is rubbish.

Much of my speech will reflect the anger and distress that my constituents feel about high-profile and much-opposed proposals for landfill sites in the area. I hope that their voices will be heard and that they will not be, literally, dumped upon by local authorities in Cornwall, which have a history of failure and questionable practice.

Two landfill developments are proposed for my constituency. The first, by Cornwall Environmental Services, CES, proposes to extend an existing site at United Downs that borders the villages of Carharrack, Gwennap and St. Day. The company has submitted repeated applications, which the local community has fought for nearly a decade. The latest application is a modified version of an application that was rejected last year following an intense campaign and is currently the subject of an appeal. The second development is the proposal for a landfill site at Carnsew quarry by the village of Mabe. Each proposal has prompted vociferous and informed local opposition and each has highlighted an alarming and unimaginative continuation of landfill as the primary method of waste management in Cornwall.

Furthermore, the way in which Cornwall county council has dealt with the applications raises questions about its methods of decision making. A shady and conspiratorial impression has been created that is undermining local people's faith in some of those elected to represent them on the councils that are responsible for the decisions. In the interests of brevity, I will not detail all the reasons why I have asked the Secretary of State to call in the proposal at United Downs, but I take this opportunity to repeat that request and to state that, if and when it is granted, I will make the same plea about the proposal at Carnsew quarry.

The objections fall into three familiar categories: the potential threats to the environment and to health and a seeming ignorance of local conditions. When considering the previous application at United Mines, the waste planning authority—Cornwall county council—ruled that health risks were not deemed legitimate reasons for refusing planning permission. I am sure that hon. Members will agree that that is an unbelievable assertion and I shall be interested to hear my hon. Friend's views on the matter. It is hard to believe that health considerations are not deemed important enough to merit attention in this sensitive area and, if necessary, to cause the refusal of the applications.

Many local people live in properties close to the borders of the proposed site and the extension. One constituent at United Downs lives a mere 10 m from the site—for those who still struggle with metric measurements, that is less than the length of one cricket pitch. Given the recent suggestions of a link between birth defects and landfill sites, I defy anyone to say that he or she would not be worried, nay terrified, about the prospect of waste being dumped so close to his or her home.

Mr. David Taylor (North-West Leicestershire): My hon. Friend refers to the Dolk report of last summer, which revealed that, on the basis of a good deal of epidemiological evidence, there is cause for concern. Does my hon. Friend share my pleasure that the Government have asked Imperial college to review the matter in more detail? Does she agree that Cornwall county council and other planning authorities should stay their hand until hard evidence is produced? It is a real cause for concern.

Ms Atherton: I agree with my hon. Friend, who has one of the best track records in the House for campaigning on the issue of landfill sites. I congratulate him on his good work.

A proposal for a council directive from the European Commission states that there should be a minimum distance of 500 m between dwellings and site boundaries. Given such guidelines, a distance of 10 m cannot fail to cause more than a little anxiety.

There are major environmental objections to the proposed United Downs site. A 1998 study conducted by Cornwall county council of an area only 200 m from the site states that it is home to protected breeds of butterflies and reptiles and provides possible homes for birds, badgers and protected species of bats. The applicant, CES, has not conducted a survey to assess the existence of, or the threat to, birds, bats or badgers. A request by a local parish council to initiate such a study was refused by the landowner. In addition, to my knowledge, there has been no detailed land instability study of the site. That is especially important in the light of the fact that, when walking in this area of Cornwall, one is never quite sure how many mine shafts are under one's feet.

Water pollution has caused the most alarm at Carnsew quarry. It is feared that landfill material may pollute the water table by seeping through "fractuated" granite rock and into a local reservoir that serves the nearby town of Falmouth. An alleged contravention of water resources legislation at the quarry is currently the subject of a prosecution by the Environment Agency and further contamination would significantly harm the local environment. Incredibly, the application states that the quarry will continue blasting while the landfill site is in operation—which, I suggest, might threaten the stability of that site.

The developers at Carnsew have possibly done more than their counterparts at United Downs to appear willing to answer local residents' questions. However, their

[Ms Atherton]

answers are not good enough for residents or for me. Further objections at United Downs concern the area's landscape and the lorries that will move to and from the site. The area is a unique and beautiful part of the county: a mix of countryside and striking examples of Cornwall's mining heritage. Some £8 million has been spent on reclaiming derelict land and on conservation initiatives in the area.

Work on the mines at United Downs has only just begun. The whole area is part of the Government's bid to make this part of Cornwall a world heritage site. Would we plan landfill at other world heritage sites such as the pyramids or the centre of Bath? I think not. I am glad to report that the bid is now with UNESCO and has the Government's support. It is sad that some in Cornwall apparently have so little regard for this unique heritage and plan instead to dump on it.

The fears about an increase in transport, especially heavy transport, are easy to justify in this landscape. Road is the only viable method of access, and I am sure that hon. Members can visualise with horror an increasing procession of HGVs winding through Cornish lanes, many of which are single track only and do not meet planning policy guidance issued by my hon. Friend's Department.

I applaud the Government's wish to make waste management strategy more sustainable and integrated by encouraging alternatives to road and by locating facilities appropriately—I just wish that that approach would be adopted in Cornwall. The parish councils and people from communities adjoining United Downs were under the impression that the current landfill would last for 10 years. People purchased their houses believing that there would come a time when the monster would stop. However, the company changed the ground rules every few years and people woke to find that yet another extension was planned and another fight had to be fought. The balance is always tipped in favour of the company: it can appeal if it does not like the decision, but the local community cannot.

My constituents have been told that the site will be active for another 10 years, which will consume more land, woodland and countryside. It seems that, after the planning applications are approved, everyone goes away and no one thinks about the problem until there is another application to extend the site. It is the lack of a renewable alternative strategy that has so infuriated my constituents and me.

A draft waste local plan is expected, but is on ice at present because a series of reports is being produced. One of those reports—commissioned by the county council—states how desirable it would be to have co-ordinated facilities that were sensibly located so as to ensure efficiency and minimal impact on the environment. I agree with that point, but unfortunately it is a little too late for my constituents. Such a strategy should have been in place many years ago.

Mr. Andrew George (St. Ives): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Ms Atherton: No. I regret that, as I have already given way once, I cannot do so again. I am anxious that there should be time to hear the Minister's speech.

That strategy void is the reason for only 5 per cent. of Cornwall's waste being recycled; that figure is lower than the national average and is the lowest in the south-west. There is an alternative. Having won objective 1 funding, we are now able to explore waste-to-energy programmes close to local transport links. That will be good for the economy and for the environment. I am aware that the hon. Member for St. Ives (Mr. George) is extremely keen on the Hayle proposal, which I certainly supported. Unfortunately, that thinking is taking some time to pervade minds within the halls of the county council—despite the fact that the people of the county highlighted the importance of the environment during our massive objective 1 consultation earlier this year.

Throughout the various processes, the relevant local authorities' lack of forward thinking has not helped them in their appeal to local people. Public consultation has been minimal, so nothing has been done to build public confidence. We all know that such confidence is the key to proposals such as these; that confidence does not exist at present.

This dismal situation is made all the worse by serious questions about procedure. The applicant for the United Downs proposals—CES—is an arm's length company, set up by the county council to organise waste management in Cornwall. The company was formed in the early 1990s without competitive tendering. Senior council officers and councillors sit on its management body. Throughout its existence, CES has fought long, protracted planning battles with the local community—sometimes, I understand, receiving funding from the county council itself.

I am most concerned about when county councillors decide issues for which they have a statutory responsibility. To put it simply, the council has a responsibility for waste, and few ideas other than landfill to solve the problem; and the council makes the decisions. "Arm's length" CES may be, but is it not time for clear guidelines on how such bodies should work, and be worked with, in those circumstances?

Of further alarm is the fact that such applications seem, when before the relevant committees, to provide an occasion for the use of "substitutes", giving an extremely dubious impression to the local community. Members of the county planning committee leave the committee and are replaced—often at the eleventh hour—by colleagues who vote in their stead. It is not hard to guess what conversations might go on behind the scenes. That impression will always cause alarm to those affected by proposals—especially on matters as sensitive as those that we are discussing.

There is little case law on substitutes and councils organise such matters largely as they want, using their standing orders. I find that most disturbing; a system must be introduced that is transparent enough to restore people's faith in those whom they elect. Anyone who has served on a planning committee will know that it takes some time to understand the complexity of the structure plans with which they work. How can a substitute understand all the complexities in only a short time? It has also been suggested to me that different councillors trade votes on different applications. I allege that that is unhealthy.

In addition, there seems to be no small amount of inter-council power games. The two sites lie in different district councils, each of which is a statutory consultant

in the planning process. At the time of the previous application at United Downs, both district councils voted against the proposals. However, on another occasion, Kerrier district council, whose administrative area includes Carnsew quarry, approved the plans for United Mines. It has been suggested that that was to get the problem off its patch. A more serious allegation is that it was a ploy, hatched by the various parties—an implied threat—to push Kerrier district council towards supporting the United Downs application.

I am sure that hon. Members will agree that that makes a mockery of local democracy, and leaves a very bad taste in the mouths of the people affected by those decisions. Obviously, those working at the United Downs site are keen to ensure that their work continues—as are waste hauliers, who currently face severe restrictions in coping with reduced access to United Downs. I want a comprehensive waste-to-energy programme that will provide employment for those affected.

I welcome the comments of my hon. Friend the Minister on the various issues that I have raised. I hope that what I have recounted today will lead to a re-think on the way in which issues affecting so many people are handled by local authorities. This saga is one of inaction and, consequently, an ill-thought-out panicked reaction that leaves my constituents picking up the pieces—and messy pieces they are too.

1.46 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. Chris Mullin): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Falmouth and Camborne (Ms Atherton) on securing this debate on a topic of fundamental and increasing national importance and of particular concern in Cornwall. It is good to see so many Members who represent Cornish constituencies in the Chamber.

My hon. Friend made a robust speech in which she raised some serious issues. I shall attempt to address them in the short time available, but we might also need to correspond on some matters.

Before replying to my hon. Friend, I should inform the House that, on Monday, Cornwall county council issued planning permission for one of the proposals that she mentioned—the United Mines extension. That was unexpected. The Government office for the south-west understood that the council had not intended to issue permission before today's debate, without prior notice. I am disappointed that it has gone ahead without waiting for today's debate to take place.

The Government knew of the application. However, as far as we were aware, it did not raise issues that justified the Secretary of State calling it in for his determination. None the less, I was prepared to come to this debate with an open mind—ready to respond to any important new issues. Unexpectedly, the county council has now taken the application out of our hands by exercising its responsibility to make the decision.

Cornwall faces a common problem—especially in the south of England. Existing landfill sites, on which we are currently heavily reliant, are filling up quickly, and better alternatives are needed. In England, we currently landfill more than 80 per cent. of our municipal waste, and about half our industrial and commercial waste. That has been a favoured waste management option for rural and urban communities because of its low cost and the ready availability of old mines and quarries.

Before commenting on the problem in Cornwall, I shall make some points on the Government's draft waste strategy. Landfill is the least desirable means of managing waste; re-use of materials, recycling, composting and energy recovery from waste are usually preferable because landfill makes the least use of waste. We realise that landfill will continue to play a role in waste management in this country, but we must work together to reduce our traditional reliance on it. Those policies and aims are set out in the draft waste strategy, "A Way with Waste", which we published earlier this year.

My hon. Friend referred to the EC landfill directive. The Government are strongly committed to the safe management of waste facilities, including landfill sites. Waste management activities have been tightly regulated since a licensing system was introduced under the Control of Pollution Act 1974. That system was replaced by the waste management licensing system now in force under the Environmental Protection Act 1990. The purpose of the licensing system is to ensure that waste is managed in ways that protect the environment and human health.

The controls will be reinforced by the introduction of the EC landfill directive, which was adopted earlier this year. It will bring in much more rigorous controls for landfill across the EU, most of which are similar to those already in place in this country, and other member states will be brought up to our high standards.

Planning policy guidance note 10 was published in September. It provides advice on how the planning system should contribute to sustainable development through the provision of the required waste management facilities and on how that provision is regulated under the statutory planning and waste management systems. It sets out the general policy context and the criteria for siting facilities and advises waste planning authorities on the factors to be considered in relation to the range of waste management options available. The guidance should help in the preparation of local waste plans and in the determination of planning applications. However, it does not suggest which waste management options might be appropriate to any particular set of circumstances. That will be a matter for individual local authorities, informed by the national waste strategy.

One of the key aims of PPG10 is to strengthen the regional role in planning for waste management: therefore, it proposes the establishment of regional technical advisory bodies in each region. Those are important because local authorities should not consider the needs of their own area in isolation—waste management solutions may sometimes cross local or regional boundaries. The regional technical advisory bodies will assemble data and provide advice to the regional planning bodies on suitable options and strategies for dealing with waste in each region.

PPG10 also draws attention to factors that may be material to the consideration of proposed waste management facilities. For example, landfill operations can deal with a wide range of wastes and fluctuating amounts for disposal, and can provide a relatively clean source of fuel—methane—for heat and power generation. Landfill may also be the only practical way of finally disposing of some materials, such as incineration residues

[Mr. Chris Mullin]

and other inert materials that cannot be recycled or treated further. However, landfill does require large areas of land and, if degradable materials are involved, can lead to landfill gas and other hazards.

Many factors influence the location of new waste management facilities. Landfill is commonly used in quarry restoration, but there may be opportunities for other sorts of waste management facilities at some quarried sites. All locations and the choice between different options will be for the waste planning authority to decide. Such decisions should be based primarily on a consideration of the best practicable environmental option for a particular type of waste involved.

My hon. Friend the Member for Falmouth and Camborne suggested that the local authority had said that health risks were not deemed to be a reason for refusing an application. In fact, the position is slightly different from the one that she set out. It is true that where proper management of the site can eliminate the health risk—that is, where the health risk arises from the management of the site—that health risk is not a factor that must be taken into account when considering the application. It is a matter for the Environment Agency to investigate. However, if the location of the site makes it impossible to operate without health risks, that would be a planning ground to be taken into account.

My hon. Friend said that the EC landfill directive recommended that dwellings should be at least 500 m from a landfill site. Apparently, that provision was contained in an early draft, but was eliminated from later drafts. Therefore, the landfill directive makes no specific recommendation on distance. The proximity of dwellings is a factor to be taken into account by planning authorities, but there is no set distance to be observed.

My hon. Friends the Members for Falmouth and Camborne and for North-West Leicestershire (Mr. Taylor) referred to a possible link between birth defects and landfill sites that accept hazardous waste. A study reported in *The Lancet*, which formed the basis of media reports, did not establish cause and effect, but concluded only that there was a need for further study. The Government have commissioned a small programme of research into the subject, the initial findings of which should be available next summer.

Planning policies for waste development in Cornwall will be set out in the Cornwall waste local plan. Cornwall county council published a draft plan for consultation in March 1998. The key issues in west Cornwall were: the main landfill facility, at United Mines near St. Day, which was projected to be filled in 2002; the suggestion that recycling rates could be raised from 6 per cent. to 15 per cent. during the period of the plan, which runs to 2011; and the creation of a waste-to-energy plant, which would create new waste management capacity, but which could not hope to be commissioned before 2005.

The draft plan identified a gap between the filling of United Mines' facility and the commissioning of a long-term replacement. The draft plan suggested overcoming that gap, either by transporting waste to east Cornwall or beyond, which would add to heavy traffic and would be contrary to the proximity principle, which states that waste should be disposed of as close as possible to its place of generation; or by finding additional landfill capacity in west Cornwall. The Government office for the south-west responded to the draft plan on the Secretary of State's behalf. The main points were that: the plan should embody national objectives for waste management set out in "Making Waste Work", now replaced by "A Way with Waste"; and, in particular, that it should reflect the proximity principle.

The plan seemed to treat landfill as a favoured option, rather than a last resort. The Government office suggested that, instead, the council should work towards the principles established in the national strategy, including reducing dependence on landfill. The plan should also outline the practical steps needed to put those principles into practice: for example, it did not state what mix of waste management methods was favoured for the long term, nor did it contain any specific development proposals or locational guidance.

Mr. Andrew George: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Mullin: I hope that the hon. Gentleman will forgive me for not doing so, but I have only three minutes left and I think that he will want to hear what I have to say about Cornwall.

It is important that the council confronts the issues quickly, especially as the plan showed that important choices will have to be implemented by about 2005. The plan should make those choices and propose the key investments to put them into practice. I understand that the county council intends to deposit its local waste plan formally in the spring. I also understand that the council now—perhaps belatedly—accepts that Cornwall's heavy dependence on landfill will have to change and that waste-to-energy technology will have to be developed. I welcome the county council's adoption of that forward-looking approach and I expect it to be reflected in the deposit draft of the local plan, both in the overall strategy and in the identification of actual sites. My officials will continue to work with the council, to encourage it positively to plan the necessary facilities.

Several planning applications related to the disposal of waste in Cornwall have come to my Department's attention in recent months. They include applications at Hernis farm landfill site for a weighbridge and recycling centre with a wood-burning unit; two applications by County Environmental Services Ltd. to extend the United Mines landfill site at St. Day, for which permission has just been issued; and an application by Aram Resources plc for the restoration of an existing quarry by landfill at Carnsew quarry near Mabe. I cannot comment on the merits of those proposals, since to do so could prejudice the Secretary of State's impartial role within the planning system. However, I can advise the House that the Hernis farm applications did not warrant our intervention. Local residents expressed concerns about the possibility of landfill development there in future, but any further proposals will have to be determined on their merits.

I have already said that permission for the United Mines extension has just been issued. We received several late representations asking that the application be called in by the Secretary of State. I should explain that the Government's policy is to leave planning decisions as far as possible in the hands of locally accountable planning authorities, so the Secretary of State is highly selective about calling in applications. In general, he will take that step only in cases where issues of more than local importance are raised, so only a small proportion of applications are called in each year. The Carnsew quarry application is in its early stages—

It being Two o'clock, the motion for the Adjournment of the House lapsed, without Question put.

Sitting suspended, pursuant to Standing Order No. 10 (Wednesday sittings), till half-past Two o'clock.

PRIVATE BUSINESS

LONDON LOCAL AUTHORITIES BILL [*Lords*]

Ordered,

That the Promoters of the London Local Authorities Bill *[Lords]* shall have leave to suspend proceedings thereon in order to proceed with the Bill, if they think fit, in the next Session of Parliament, provided that the Agents for the Bill give notice to the Clerks in the Private Bill Office of their intention to suspend further proceedings not later than the day before the close of the present Session and that all Fees due on the Bill up to that date be paid;

Ordered,

That, if the Bill is brought from the Lords in the next Session, the Agents for the Bill shall deposit in the Private Bill Office a declaration signed by them, stating that the Bill is the same, in every respect, as the Bill which was brought from the Lords in the present Session;

Ordered,

That, as soon as a certificate by one of the Clerks in the Private Bill Office, that such a declaration has been so deposited, has been laid upon the Table of the House, the Bill shall be read the first and second time and committed (and shall be recorded in the Journal of this House as having been so read and committed);

Ordered,

That all Petitions relating to the Bill presented in the present Session which stand referred to the Committee on the Bill, shall stand referred to the Committee on the Bill in the next Session;

Ordered,

That no Petitioners shall be heard before the Committee on the Bill, unless their Petition has been presented within the time limited, or has been the subject of a Resolution of this House to dispense with Standing Order 171A within the present Session, or has been deposited pursuant to paragraph (*b*) of Standing Order 126 relating to Private Business;

Ordered,

That, in relation to the Bill, Standing Order 127 relating to Private Business shall have effect as if the words "under Standing Order 126 (Reference to committee of petitions against Bill)" were omitted;

Ordered,

That no further Fees shall be charged in respect of any proceedings on the Bill in respect of which Fees have already been incurred during the present Session;

Ordered,

That these Orders be Standing Orders of the House.—*[The Chairman of Ways and Means.]*

Message to the Lords to acquaint them forthwith.

Oral Answers to Questions

WALES

The Secretary of State was asked—

Ministerial Liaison

1. **Sir Sydney Chapman** (Chipping Barnet): If he will make a statement on the arrangements for liaison and co-ordination between the First Secretary and himself. [94073]

The Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. Paul Murphy): I have a formal meeting with the First Secretary every week and we often speak informally.

Sir Sydney Chapman: I congratulate the right hon. Gentleman on his promotion and wish him well. As this is his first question, I shall lob him a full toss. Can he confirm to the House what will happen when the Assembly takes a decision that will involve additional public expenditure? Will it be met by the Treasury, will it come out of the Welsh Office budget—in which case, there would obviously have to be adjustments with a cut made elsewhere—or does the Assembly have no power, being only a talking shop?

Mr. Murphy: I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman's remarks on my promotion, but less grateful for his other comments. Of course the Assembly is not a talking shop: it deals with £7.5 billion of expenditure. That has to be contained within the block that comes from this House.

Mr. Denzil Davies (Llanelli): On co-ordination between this House and the Assembly, does my right hon. Friend agree that there could be confusion on health matters? We have a national health service, but we have devolved power to the Assembly. A few weeks ago, the Secretary of State for Health announced that the new flu vaccine would not be available on the health service. A few days ago, there was an announcement appointing a national cancer director. There was some confusion about whether those initiatives apply to Wales; in the latter case, it is still not clear. Will my right hon. Friend consider the overlap between the two jurisdictions?

Mr. Murphy: I shall be delighted to respond to my right hon. Friend's request. When I meet the First Secretary tomorrow, I shall put that point to him. On my hon. Friend's general point about announcements made by the United Kingdom Government, if additional expenditure is involved, consequential additional block grant is given to Wales. I take his general point and will be back in touch with him.

Mr. Ieuan Wyn Jones (Ynys Môn): May I be the first from the Plaid Cymru party officially to congratulate the right hon. Gentleman on his appointment? What assurances can he, as the person responsible in the Cabinet for arguing the case for Wales, give the First Secretary that European funding for Wales will be additional to the block grant and will not be distributed to us under the Barnett formula?

Mr. Murphy: I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman's remarks and thank him and his colleagues. He was obviously referring to objective 1 funding. He knows that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister said in very strong terms in this Chamber a week ago that he would not let Wales down. That is the general situation as regards the Government's view. The hon. Gentleman also knows that, in the first year of the scheme, it is for the Assembly itself to decide how to deal with any match funding. The Assembly has addressed that, and I am assured that it can cope. The three years following are for the comprehensive spending review, and I shall play my part in ensuring that the case for Wales is made in the negotiations.

Mr. Donald Anderson (Swansea, East): Should there not be a little humility among the nationalists about objective 1 status? They said that we could not change the map or alter the statistics for the valleys and west Wales, but we have done so. There should be no triumphalism about that, because objective 1 status merely reflects the comparative poverty of the valleys and west Wales. That is in part due to the pouring of funds by the Conservative Welsh Office into Cardiff bay at the expense of the rest of Wales.

Mr. Murphy: I agree with my hon. Friend about the need for objective 1 status, which we would not have achieved in Wales if there had not been a need for it. That did not come from the moon; it resulted from the Prime Minister and the Chancellor of the Exchequer negotiating through the night in Berlin to get those funds. No one should suggest that, having successfully negotiated an objective 1 deal, they will let Wales down—they will not.

Mr. Owen Paterson (North Shropshire): In the Welsh Affairs Committee yesterday, the Secretary of State said that the primary role for himself, the 32 people in his office and the £1 million that they cost each year is to ensure that the devolution process beds down and to liaise with the First Secretary. Would it be appropriate for that to be reviewed in two years, and who should carry out that review?

Mr. Murphy: The most important review stems from the mandate that the people give us. In 1997, the people of Wales gave the House a mandate and a majority voted in the referendum for an Assembly in Cardiff that fitted in with the rest of the United Kingdom. That is the devolution settlement; that is what I have to protect and that is what will be done. It is vital that hon. Members understand that Assembly Members are charged with the great responsibility of seeking jobs for the people of Wales and looking after their health and education. It is important also to understand that the mandate came from the people, and decisions must be made with the people.

Mr. Alan Williams (Swansea, West): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on the difficult job that he is undertaking in providing an interface between the Assembly and the Cabinet of which he is a member. However, he will have to be able to speak to Westminster

Departments on equal terms. Is he satisfied that he has been given enough policy-level, analytical officials in his Department to enable him to carry out that responsibility?

Mr. Murphy: Yes, I am. I have extremely assiduous, hard-working and eager people in my office who deal with the advice for which my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary and I are responsible. Between us, we sit on 21 Cabinet Committees, in which it is of course important that we have sound advice. Obviously, I shall keep the situation under review, but I have no immediate plans to change the number of people who work in the Department. We shall have to wait and see.

Mr. Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley): May I be the third person on this side of the House to congratulate the Secretary of State for Wales on his new role? The saying "three times for a Welshman" is true in this case. We shall certainly monitor the Secretary of State to ensure that he has a role. One of his responsibilities is to liaise with the First Secretary. What discussions will he have with the First Secretary about the dreadful plight of farming in Wales? Will not extra resources be necessary to assist Welsh farmers at this difficult time?

Mr. Murphy: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his remarks. Over the past few weeks and months, I have of course been discussing the plight of Welsh farming with the First Secretary and my right hon. Friend the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food. The hon. Gentleman will understand that it was only at the end of September that the Minister of Agriculture said that there would be a substantial increase in the funds to help hill farmers in Wales, which amounted to between £15 million and £16 million for Welsh farming. In addition, during the past few weeks, I have met the National Farmers Union and the Farmers Union of Wales, and I shall continue to do so.

Mr. Evans: I am grateful for that answer. Does the Secretary of State feel at all hampered in his discussions about extra funding for agriculture in Wales by the fact that the Agriculture and Rural Development Secretary, Christine Gwyther, lost a vote of confidence in the Assembly but refuses to resign? Will the Secretary of State use his influence with the First Secretary to ensure that, if she will not resign, she will be sacked? It is either her job or those of farmers in Wales. Whose job is more important to the Secretary of State?

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): Answer that one.

Mr. Murphy: I have not started yet. The Agriculture Secretary in Cardiff did exactly what anyone else would have done: she explored every possible avenue by which funds could be obtained to help Welsh farmers. The vote of confidence is not a matter for me; it is a matter for the Assembly and the First Secretary. The hon. Gentleman will understand that obviously I have discussed those issues, but I think that the Agriculture Secretary did her best.

Mr. Llew Smith (Blaenau Gwent): I declare a non-financial interest in this question. When my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State next meets the First Secretary, will he share with him the disgust felt by the people of Gwent—and, I assume, by him—at the decision of the Welsh Arts Council to treat the opinions and support of the people of Gwent with disdain in refusing to allow Gwent theatre in education the resources to carry on the work that it has done for 23 years and instead to give it to a company in Cardiff that has no experience, no support and no excellence in the field? Will my right hon. Friend inform the First Secretary that, if the Welsh Arts Council refuses to reverse that decision, the people involved must resign?

Mr. Murphy: I completely understand my hon. Friend's point. I have had representations from other Members who represent Gwent, and I am a Gwent Member of Parliament. I understand the good work that has been done by the group and I will certainly inform the First Secretary when I meet him tomorrow about the concerns expressed by my hon. Friend and others.

New Deal (Young People)

2. **Mr. John Bercow** (Buckingham): What discussions he has had with his colleagues at the Department for Education and Employment about the impact on Wales of the new deal for young people. [94074]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. David Hanson): I have held several discussions with a range of organisations involved in the Government's welfare to work agenda in Wales and plan to meet my right hon. Friend, the Minister for Employment, Welfare to Work and Equal Opportunities shortly.

Mr. Bercow: I congratulate the Minister on his appointment, wish him well in fulfilling his responsibilities and thank him for his initial answer. Given that the new deal for young people costs £11,333 per job, making it 25 times as expensive as previous job schemes, that three quarters of those who have joined the scheme in Wales since January 1998 have so far failed to find jobs and that unemployment in Wales has just risen by 10,000, what discussions does the hon. Gentleman intend to have about securing the better value for the money that the Secretary of State has begged his Cabinet colleagues to provide?

Mr. Hanson: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his welcome. This is a great opportunity for me to come back from the silence of the Whips Office to speak in the House. The hon. Gentleman is really saying that he does not approve of the new deal. I hope that he will come with me at the next opportunity to meet the 13,000 people in Wales who have received employment under the new deal to tell them that he intends to scrap that scheme. Some 9,400 people under 24 have secured jobs and there has been a 51 per cent. fall in 18-to-24-year-old unemployment since the new deal began. If he intends to scrap the scheme, he should be honest and say so. We believe in the scheme, and it is valuable for the people of Wales.

Mr. Ted Rowlands (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney): I also congratulate my hon. Friend on leaving the Whips Office. One modest pleasure at the moment is that Labour Welsh Members are Whipless. I support my hon. Friend

in his remarks about the new deal in our area. It has offered real opportunities in skills training and for jobs. The new deal should be supported by targeting directed money from objective 1 funding. Does my hon. Friend agree that objective 1 needs to be used to create sustainable employment and real training opportunities rather than, as we fear, being scattered to the four winds and chopped into little pieces? If that happens, the funding will not have the impact that we need it to have on the Welsh economy and our gross domestic product per capita.

Mr. Hanson: My hon. Friend made two valuable points. First, the new deal is about training and skill development, as well as job creation. It is valuable for people to have new skills and new development. The people whom I have seen on the new deal have benefited tremendously from those opportunities. The second point about objective 1 is that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and I want the maximum use of that funding. We need to produce top-quality schemes that integrate Government programmes to ensure that we have wide-ranging skill development, long-term jobs and sustainable development for the valleys and for west Wales as a whole.

Welsh Assembly Decisions

3. **Mr. Simon Hughes** (Southwark, North and Bermondsey): What arrangements are in place for the reporting of the decisions and resolutions of the Welsh Assembly to the United Kingdom *(a)* Government and *(b)* Parliament. [94075]

The Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. Paul Murphy): No such arrangements are required by the Government of Wales Act 1998. However, the memorandum of understanding between the United Kingdom Government and the devolved Administrations provides for the exchange of information generally, and in particular for the devolved Administrations to notify legislative measures to the UK Government when they are proposed and when they are adopted.

Mr. Hughes: The London Welsh team is happy to congratulate the new Government team, at the same time as it commiserates with the team on the pitch on Saturday.

If the Welsh Assembly or any of its Committees made a decision or passed a resolution that the Government's failure to allocate British money to match objective 1 money was hindering private investment and therefore not achieving the best deal for the valleys and west Wales, what could Members of this House do to make sure that the Government deliver for Wales and its Assembly?

Mr. Murphy: I begin my thanking the hon. Gentleman for his reference to the Welsh rugby team. The House understands what a tremendous task it faced and how well the team did over the past few weeks.

I assume that the hon. Gentleman's question is as much about objective 1 funding as about the arrangements in the House. I told the House a few minutes ago that the Prime Minister's statement was extremely important in setting the scene. There are opportunities in the House to discuss those matters as we go forward. With regard to the private sector, I have met the Confederation of British Industry in Wales, which is anxious to ensure that it takes part in the schemes that will start flowing next year, when the plan is approved by Brussels. As on many previous occasions, the private sector can start planning for that. The CBI has told me that it will do so, and I am sure that it will.

Mr. Chris Ruane (Vale of Clwyd): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the key issues in Wales are jobs, objective 1, health and education, and that that agenda is being marginalised by the schoolboy antics of the Opposition parties in Wales, which tabled two censure motions in a four-week period, one of them dealing with what the Agriculture Minister in Wales puts into her digestive tract? Can my right hon. Friend tell me what steps he is taking, in co-operation with the First Secretary, to get back to the real agenda in Wales?

Mr. Murphy: I agree with my hon. Friend about the priorities in Wales. In my discussions with the First Secretary, we shall emphasise them. I also agree with my hon. Friend that, in a fledgling democracy, it is important to get people's confidence in the Assembly. I am not convinced that events over the past few weeks have succeeded in doing that.

Mr. Crispin Blunt (Reigate): The Select Committee on Defence has just come back from Washington, where it is much easier to obtain information about the British Ministry of Defence than it is in London. That illustrates the point of my question. How can there be a satisfactory exchange of information between the Welsh Executive and the United Kingdom Government if there is no legal underpinning to the requirement of each for confidentiality?

Mr. Murphy: There is plenty of opportunity for liaison between the UK Government and the Assembly. I said earlier that I regularly meet the First Secretary. There are provisions in the memorandum of understanding, which sets the scene, and in the accompanying concordats, to ensure that there are proper arrangements between the Assembly and the UK Government.

Dental Services

4. **Mr. Martyn Jones** (Clwyd, South): What discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Health about the pay, recruitment and retention of NHS dentists in Wales. [94076]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. David Hanson): I have had no discussions with the Secretary of State for Health on those issues. When considering the annual pay settlements for NHS staff, the pay review bodies will take evidence from the Assembly, along with the Department of Health and other devolved Administrations.

Mr. Jones: I welcome the Prime Minister's statement that everyone in the UK will have access to NHS dentistry. Will my hon. Friend therefore meet his

colleagues in the Department of Health and the Assembly, in order that my constituents can get access to NHS dental services as soon as possible?

Mr. Hanson: Like my hon. Friend, I welcome the Prime Minister's announcement of greater access to dentists throughout the United Kingdom. I have had discussions with my colleagues in the Assembly, who are keen to take forward plans for improved dental services in Wales. That is in marked contrast to the failure of the previous Tory Government to provide adequate dental services throughout Wales and the United Kingdom. People in Wales will have access to NHS services, thanks to the Assembly and the support of central Government.

Mr. Nicholas Soames (Mid-Sussex): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that one of the principal problems with dentistry is the number of new dentists entering the service? Will he tell the House what steps he is taking in Wales, and what steps the Government are taking elsewhere, to encourage more people to enter the dental profession, and thus to serve the large number of people who do not have access to dentists?

Mr. Hanson: The UK Government are taking steps to encourage the provision of additional dentists for the community at large. The Assembly is responsible for that matter in Wales and it has earmarked additional funds of £10 million to ensure that there is greater access to dental services. Under devolution, the situation is complicated: the Assembly is responsible for the day-to-day executive decisions and will take forward its own policies, and the UK Government seek to improve access to dental services as a matter of priority.

Block Grant

5. **Mr. Win Griffiths** (Bridgend): When he next plans to meet the Assembly First Secretary to discuss the block grant for 2000–02. [94077]

The Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. Paul Murphy): I meet the Assembly First Secretary on a weekly basis to discuss a range of issues.

Mr. Griffiths: Will my right hon. Friend make one of his first acts in office the achievement of the triple crown by Wales? We secured the first part by brilliant negotiations in Brussels to achieve objective 1 status in Wales and the second part with the provision of money in the first year to ensure that objective 1 status gets fully under way. The sooner the Opposition stop carping about that, the more the private sector in Wales can be confident of what we want to do. In carrying out the block grant negotiations, can he achieve the third part of the triple crown by ensuring that we have the additional funding necessary for objective 1 to continue right through its course to success in terms of jobs and prosperity for people in Wales?

Mr. Murphy: I agree with everything that my hon. Friend has said. I recently met my right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary to the Treasury to discuss objective 1 and he is fully aware of the significance of such funding for Wales. He has instructed his officials to meet those of the National Assembly to start negotiations on those important issues.

Mr. Dafydd Wigley (Caernarfon): I wish the Secretary of State well in his work, but I must return to the question of the adequacy of matched funding for 2000-01. Does he accept that the budget for the coming year was set before there was any suggestion of European strategic funds becoming available? Therefore, if the matched funding of up to £180 million has to be met from within the Welsh block, there will be correspondingly less money available for health, education and the other services. He cannot have it both ways. If the money has to come from within the block, is he telling us that the people of Wales will have to pay in terms of health and education for taking up the money available from Europe?

Mr. Murphy: I am grateful for the right hon. Gentleman's opening remark. No, I am not saying that. As he is a Member of the National Assembly, he will understand that it is for the Assembly to determine its budget, but it has assured me that the £75 million to which I referred earlier is made up of former European regional development fund moneys, overhang from those and end-of-year flexibility, and in other ways as well, and that it will not affect those services to which he referred.

Mr. Gareth Thomas (Clwyd, West): Does my right hon. Friend agree that, although the UK Treasury has a crucial role in relation to objective 1 funding, it is equally important at the moment to ensure that we have good-quality private-public partnerships in place to take full advantage of this excellent opportunity? Does he further agree that the constant and negative carping by opposition parties about the role of the UK Treasury can serve only to undermine the whole project?

Mr. Murphy: I agree with my hon. Friend that it is important to emphasise the positive aspects of obtaining objective 1 funding. We must ensure that it is used for jobs, to change the economy of Wales and to help our rural areas. It is important that we pull together as a team in Wales to ensure that we benefit from good, high-quality schemes. The more we concentrate on the positive aspects, the more important it will be for us to obtain that money.

Mr. Richard Livsey (Brecon and Radnorshire): When the Secretary of State meets the First Secretary, will he discuss the funding of the arts in Wales? He will have heard the hon. Member for Blaenau Gwent (Mr. Smith) complaining about the treatment of Theatr Gwent. The same thing has happened to Theatr Powys and the result is underfunding of the arts in Wales. Will he please try to do something about that when he discusses block grant with the First Secretary?

Mr. Murphy: Yes, I will.

Ann Clwyd (Cynon Valley): Will my right hon. Friend discuss with the First Secretary the Government's major research report on disability in Great Britain? Will he

particularly draw to the First Secretary's attention the finding that Wales has the highest incidence of disability in all of Great Britain? Will he also discuss with him the possibility of using objective 1 status for high-quality projects involving the disabled, both in the private and the public sectors?

Mr. Murphy: Yes, I will—I assure my hon. Friend that I will do precisely that. After today's events in the House, I shall have a very long discussion with the First Secretary. Like me, my hon. Friend represents a valley constituency that has been scheduled as an objective 1 area for precisely the reasons to which she referred, such as the number of disabled people and the deprivation levels that we face. That is why we have objective 1, and that is why we must not waste the opportunity of a lifetime.

Mr. Robert Walter (North Dorset): I must continue to press the Secretary of State on the issue of objective 1 funding and the block grant. Although any discussions that he will have with the First Secretary will be dominated by the requirement to provide £885 million of Government money in the next seven years, objective 1 starts in Wales next year, whereas the block grant negotiated under the comprehensive spending review takes us through to 2002. The CSR does not contain any provision for objective 1 funding.

Yesterday, the Secretary of State told the Welsh Affairs Committee that he was having discussions with the Chief Secretary. However, we do not know the outcome of those discussions. In the Assembly election campaign, the Prime Minister said that he would not let Wales down. The Secretary of State is committed to providing £374 million in the next two years. Where will the money come from?

Mr. Murphy: The last people from whom I want lectures on public spending are Conservative Members. Almost everyone has mentioned the fact that no one expected us to obtain objective 1 status, but we did obtain it. We did so because of the negotiating skills of my right hon. Friends the Chancellor of the Exchequer and the Prime Minister. Now that we have objective 1 status, it is very important for us to be able to use it properly. We have the money to ensure that the scheme flows next year. In the comprehensive spending review, we have the assurance of my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister that he will not let Wales down.

Welsh Assembly (Responsibilities)

6. **Mr. Andrew Mackinlay** (Thurrock): What discussions he has had with other Ministers on the appropriate response to be made to representations from Members of the Welsh Assembly on matters for which the Assembly has no responsibility. [94080]

The Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. Paul Murphy): Under section 33 of the Government of Wales Act 1998, the Assembly may consider and make representations on any matter affecting Wales. That covers a very large number of matters for which the Assembly has no responsibility. Such representations will be fully considered.

Mr. Mackinlay: May we have an assurance that, in dealing with central Government, matters that are the competence of Members of the House of Commons—such as immigration and asylum—will be jealously guarded as matters exclusively for Members of the House of Commons, and not for Members of the Welsh Assembly?

Mr. Murphy: Obviously, the House of Commons will guard its rights very jealously, and Madam Speaker will ensure that that is the case. However, I tell my hon. Friend that the whole purpose of devolution is to create a partnership between the United Kingdom Government and Parliament and the Assembly. By working together, we shall be able to ensure that the people of Wales will benefit from both.

New Deal

7. **Mr. Michael Fabricant** (Lichfield): What discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Education and Employment about the efficacy of the new deal in Wales. [94081]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. David Hanson): I have held several discussions with a range of organisations involved in the Government's welfare to work agenda in Wales, and plan soon to meet my right hon. Friend the Minister for Employment, Welfare to Work and Equal Opportunities.

Mr. Fabricant: Further to the question asked by my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow), will the Minister apologise to the various people with whom he has had meetings? Is it not the case that, of the 7,000 people who have gone on the new deal, less than 46 per cent. have consequently found jobs? Is that not both a Welsh national disgrace and a disgrace for the Department?

Mr. Hanson: I take it from that question that Conservative Members are opposed to the new deal. I also take it that they are opposed to the 4,500 employers who have signed up to the new deal, and to the 13,000 people who have benefited from it in Wales, including 9,400 under-25s. I take it that, the next time I go to Wales to meet those young people, the hon. Gentleman will accompany me and tell them that they will have no opportunities or jobs under the Conservative party.

Mr. John Smith (Vale of Glamorgan): Since the new deal was introduced, unemployment in my constituency has fallen to its lowest level for 20 years. When my hon. Friend talks to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Employment, will he stress how important it is that objective 3 funding for skills and training should come to constituencies such as mine?

Mr. Hanson: Since the introduction of the new deal in Wales, there has been a 51 per cent. fall in unemployment for the under-24s. I take on board my hon. Friend's points and I shall make representations accordingly.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [94103] **Dr. George Turner** (North-West Norfolk): If he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 27 October.

The Prime Minister (Mr. Tony Blair): This morning, I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in the House, I shall be having further meetings later today.

Dr. Turner: When it comes to dealing with the beef row, will the Prime Minister heed the advice of the National Farmers Union, which is strongly opposed to a tit-for-tat ban on French meat? Will he take advice from the UK scientists who are responsible for public health issues? Will the Government act with reason and within the law and ignore the Conservatives, who would have us sacrifice the true interests of agriculture for narrow party advantage—the party that gave us BSE?

The Prime Minister: I assure my hon. Friend that we shall certainly not engage in a tit-for-tat war. There is a £10 billion food and drink market for Britain in Europe, more than £1 billion of which is in France. The right approach is this:

"We do not want a tit-for-tat war. We have right on our side; we have quality on our side; we have the law on our side. I think it is for the French to get their house in order and for us to promote what is best of our products."

Those are not my words, but the words of the director general of the National Farmers Union. That is a better approach than the immature nonsense from the Opposition, who are advocating a trade war without the faintest clue as to its consequences.

Mr. William Hague (Richmond, Yorks): Can the Prime Minister confirm that Ministers were aware on 10 June of the contamination of French animal feed and that the Government's food safety group concluded at the time

"that the practice of using sewage sludge is both unacceptable from the consumer's point of view and illegal under European law"?

That was four months ago. Does he not regret that the Government did nothing about that at the time?

The Prime Minister: I am informed that it was in the newspapers at the time. The British Government made representations, as did the European Commission. The advice that we got from our scientists yesterday was:

"There is no immediate health risk and therefore no basis for seeking a ban of French products at either a community level or unilaterally."

The ban on French products that the right hon. Gentleman is calling for would be illegal. He is calling for an illegal ban on French products. That would start precisely the type of trade war that any sensible person would want to avoid.

Mr. Hague: The Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food has launched a personal boycott of all French products and the Prime Minister lectures other people about a trade war. Does he support the Minister of Agriculture's boycott?

The Prime Minister: Of course we want people to eat good British beef, good British pork and good British lamb. That is a choice which British consumers are making. We do not want an illegal trade war. That is what the right hon. Gentleman is suggesting. Do not take my word for it; look at what the leader of the NFU in Scotland says:

"I am not in favour of a tit-for-tat trade war. If this dispute escalates and other measures are taken it could spell absolute disaster for the sheep industry."

Those are sensible words. They are the words of people with the interests of British farming at heart—unlike the Opposition, who want to whip up their normal anti-Europeanism. They have locked themselves into a stupid policy that would do enormous damage to this country. This country will never forget who gave us BSE in the first place.

Mr. Hague: What all that waffle means is that the Prime Minister does not support the boycott by the Agriculture Minister, who presumably will be running for Mayor of London very soon. Does he recall on 16 June my hon. Friend the Member for Ryedale (Mr. Greenway) asking him about the cross-contamination of animal feed in France and urging him to ban the use of bonemeal throughout Europe and imports of meat and poultry produced by that method? Does he recall replying:

"Of course we are trying to do something about it"?—[*Official Report*, 16 June 1999; Vol. 333, c. 392.]

Was that not one of those meaningless and empty answers that the Prime Minister gives and then goes on to do nothing whatsoever about? What effective action did the Government take after he said that?

The Prime Minister: The very action that I described to the right hon. Gentleman earlier. The issue is how best to deal with the French action that is itself unlawful. What is the best way to deal with it? We say that the best way is to play it straight by the rules to make sure that we have the law, quality and science on our side. That is the sensible way to approach it. The right hon. Gentleman's approach, which I notice he has not repeated today, is a ban on all French products. It is now clear that such a ban would be unlawful. Is that the right hon. Gentleman's position or not?

Mr. Hague: For months it has been known to the Government that French animal feeds are contaminated with waste from septic tanks, water from washing lorries, and human sewage. How safe does that sound to the Prime Minister? Professor Pennington, who headed a Government inquiry on meat hygiene, says:

"there is a potentially grave danger in eating animals that have been fed on treated sewage"

and that he will not be eating French beef in future. Is that not common sense? Is it not time to introduce under article 36 a precautionary ban on French imports?

The Prime Minister: As the right hon. Gentleman well knows, under article 36 that can be done only in circumstances where there is a serious and demonstrable threat to human or animal health, and on the advice of the

relevant scientific committee which advises us that there is no such risk. So there is no doubt—the right hon. Gentleman cannot escape from it—that he is asking us to impose an illegal ban.

Let me point out that £320 million worth of British goods go into the European market every day—that is £100 billion worth of trade every year, £10 billion of which is in food and drink. That is why it would be stupid to impose an unlawful, unilateral trade ban. The sensible approach is not to revisit the old beef war which some of us remember under the Tories, but having got the beef ban lifted by playing by the rules, to carry on doing so.

Mr. Hague: No one would think that this was the Government whose Ministers have launched a boycott of all French products. No one would think that this was the Government whose chairman of the Advisory Committee on Animal Feeding Stuffs says that one does not have to have a scientific interpretation to know that it is not good to put material contaminated by human sewage back into the food chain. That is what the Prime Minister's own advisory committee says.

We now have the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food boycotting French food and the Prime Minister not supporting him; we have the Government saying that they are doing all they can, but no one has even spoken to the French Minister on the telephone; we have the Prime Minister saying that meat fed on human sewage is safe, but that British T-bone steaks are lethal; we have British lorries being broken into and barricades on fire and no effective action being taken. Is it not clear when we look at Ministers that it is not just the dead cows that have had their spines taken out?

The Prime Minister: So that is the right hon. Gentleman's policy. Let us get it right: he would ban all French beef, poultry, pork and lamb. To start such a trade war is a foolish, irresponsible [illegible]. Perhaps he should learn the difference between an easy headline and a good policy. He wants to start a trade war. Having given us BSE and the beef war, the Conservatives now want a trade war. That is not a sensible policy. Listen to the words of the National Farmers Union today. Ben Gill said:

"I actually feel let down by those politicians who seek to make . . . cheap political gain at my and my members' expenses."

[Interruption.] Just listen to this. Conservative Members do not want to hear it. Mr. Gill went on to say:

"I want to resolve this issue in a positive way without a full blown trade war."

The right hon. Gentleman must decide whether he wants to carry on advocating a policy that would be suicidal for British commercial interests in Europe or to adopt a sensible policy that—*[Interruption.]* Conservative Members keep going on about my right hon. Friend the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food. I hope that British consumers buy British beef and pork and other British products. That is wholly different from the right hon. Gentleman's policy, which is to suggest that we ban French products coming into this country. That would not be the right policy. He and his party can whip up as much anti-European feeling as they like—and get support in parts of the media for it—but I will ensure that we do the right thing by this country, as we are doing.

Q2. [94104] **Mr. Bill O'Brien** (Normanton): May I draw my right hon. Friend's attention to what can only be described as a bitter injustice? I refer to the situation of the widows and families of soldiers who serve in the Gurkha regiments and the fact that they receive much less in benefit than those of British soldiers in our Army. Does he agree that the Gurkhas are well respected throughout the United Kingdom and the world? They are currently serving as a peace force in Kosovo and East Timor.

A few months ago, we heard the report about two soldiers who were killed in Kosovo: one a Gurkha and one a British soldier. The Gurkha's widow will receive much less than the other widow. Will my right hon. Friend ensure that justice is done to Gurkhas' widows? My question is heightened by the fact that the British Inter-Parliamentary Union is welcoming a delegation from Nepal. The Speaker and representatives of both Houses in Nepal are visiting. It is their sons who are recruited to the Gurkhas.

Will my right hon. Friend and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence ensure that the injustice is corrected?

The Prime Minister: For nearly 200 years, Gurkhas have served Britain loyally in conflicts throughout the world. They are a unique fighting force with a real place in the hearts and affections of all people in this country. I am pleased to announce that the first stage in the examination of the arrangements for death in service and pensions has now been completed and that gratuities payable in respect of death attributable to service for Gurkhas will be brought into line with those for their British counterparts. These new payments will take effect from 26 May this year, and so will apply to the widow of Staff Sergeant Balaram Rai.

Mr. Charles Kennedy (Ross, Skye and Inverness, West): The entire House and the entire country agree that the French authorities are acting unlawfully on beef importation, but will the Prime Minister none the less acknowledge that if history teaches this country, and others, anything, it is that a trade war—a descent into protectionism—is counterproductive, self-defeating and, frankly, the height of political and parliamentary irresponsibility?

The Prime Minister: That is of course right, and it is the Conservative party's position. That party's position is driven because it has become a single-issue pressure group on Europe, and its anti-Europeanism governs the entirety of its policy. That policy is not in the interests of this country, and I shall not follow it.

Mr. Kennedy: Will the Prime Minister also acknowledge that, given the extent of the crisis in British agriculture generally, it is unfortunate that, apart from one illegal suggestion, the leader of the Conservative party does not have one positive proposal to make? That is what the farming community wants—solutions and proposals.

Also, at a time when farm incomes are plummeting, farmers are receiving a pittance in terms of their prices, and yet the supermarkets are not reflecting that. Is it not high time that the Government got serious and urgent with the supermarkets, as well as with France?

The Prime Minister: We have been in discussion with the supermarkets, which are making their own

arrangements. What the farming industry needs at the moment is tiding over this period of extreme difficulty. That is why we have put together three special aid packages worth more than £700 million. Some £5 billion of support is going to farmers. However, we understand that their industry is in severe difficulty and crisis. That is why we are discussing with farmers union leaders and others exactly how we can ameliorate the situation.

To those Conservative Members who have been shouting out, I have to say there is no doubt as to why the farming industry is in this position—it is because of the BSE crisis, which was a result of the previous Government ignoring proper scientific evidence. We do not intend to do the same ourselves.

Q3. [94105] **Shona McIsaac** (Cleethorpes): What is the Government's view on the rather noble antics of Charles Francis Topham de Vere Beauclerk, the Earl of Burford, who seems to think that he has a divine right to rule simply because he is descended from Nell Gwynne? Does my right hon. Friend believe, like the Earl of Burford, that abolishing the voting rights of hereditary peers is an act of treason; or was it a great day for democracy and another manifesto pledge fulfilled?

The Prime Minister: There are two simple reasons for removing hereditary peers from the House of Lords. First, it is wrong in this day and age—whatever the Conservatives think—that, by birth, people can make laws. Secondly, it gave the Conservatives an in-built majority of three or four to one in perpetuity, no matter who won the general election. I hope that everyone saw those antics yesterday. They showed exactly why we were right to pursue this policy. We should never expect the Tories to be ready for the 21st century, but I thought at least that they might have left the 17th.

Q4. [94106] **Mr. Norman Baker** (Lewes): Is the Prime Minister aware of the disastrous recommendations of the regional planning guidance panel for 1 million more houses in the south-east? Does he accept that building on that scale would cause immense damage to the local environment, and major infrastructure problems? Will he now publicly disown those recommendations, undertake that they will not be implemented and make sure that he has a regional policy in place to stop overheating in the south-east?

The Prime Minister: There is a specified process and time for such reports to be considered, and we should go through that process in the normal way. This was not, of course, a Government report. The hon. Gentleman will be aware that we have increased the amount of building that has to be on brown-field sites from the poor figure under the previous Government to 60 per cent. now. We are trying to address the issues.

Obviously, there is a lot more to do, and we will do our best to reflect on the plan that has been put to us. We will publish our deliberations in due course. We are well aware that we must balance properly the need for people to live in decent housing with the needs of the environment—which is why, since we came to power, we have increased the amount of green-belt land.

Dr. Ashok Kumar (Middlesbrough, South and Cleveland, East): Will my right hon. Friend delay any plans he has to visit my constituency until June next year, when he will be able to see the results of a £1 million lottery grant, every penny of which has been spent on the refurbishment of our magnificent Saltburn pier?

The Prime Minister: The refurbishment of Saltburn pier is a marvellous project and I wish it the best of luck. I also look forward to visiting it in due course with my hon. Friend.

Q5. [94107] **Mr. Paul Burstow** (Sutton and Cheam): I have already written to the Prime Minister about the matter that I wish to raise with him today.

Last Friday, the board of my NHS trust considered a report by its director of finance which forecast a £3 million deficit at the end of this year. The report proposed ways to balance the budget that would have severe a impact on patient care. Indeed, it became apparent that the measures would inflict severe pressure on the accident and emergency department this winter. Can the Prime Minister tell us what the Government's priority is? Is it to bring down financial deficits that are a result of the underfunding of the NHS, or is it to protect front-line services that my constituents require, such as A and E?

The Prime Minister: Deficits have been coming down. As the hon. Gentleman kindly gave me notice of the point he wished to raise, I can tell him that there are no plans to close the accident and emergency department at either hospital within the Epsom and St. Helier NHS trust, and £3 million has already been invested in upgrading the accident and emergency department at St. Helier. Phase one will be open for Christmas, and funding of £1.4 million has now been agreed from the accident and emergency modernisation fund for new facilities at Epsom. I can also tell him that no medical or elderly beds will be closed during the winter period.

The deficits will come down over time and have already come down from the levels we inherited, but it is important at the same time to get more money into accident and emergency departments. The hon. Gentleman will find as a result that the acute beds situation at his hospital is better, not worse.

Ms Jackie Lawrence (Preseli Pembrokeshire): May I thank the Prime Minister for the outline he has given of the Government's efforts on behalf of UK farmers, which will be very important for farmers in my constituency of Preseli Pembrokeshire? Will he join me in congratulating the French rugby team who, at a recent world cup dinner, demanded British beef? It is nice to know that the French rugby team at least is prepared to play by the rules, even if its Government are not.

The Prime Minister: Those are good sentiments because our quarrel is not with the French people. We have a dispute with the French Government and we should resolve it in a sensible, mature and adult way. That is what we intend to do and, whatever the Conservatives think, that is in the interests of both countries. I repeat that with £10 billion worth of food and drink going from this country to Europe, an illegal trade war would not be sensible.

Q6. [94108] **Mr. Bob Russell** (Colchester): When will the Government return to the people of St. Helena the British citizenship that was so wickedly taken from them in 1981 by the Thatcher Government?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that the issue of British citizenship for citizens of overseas territories was addressed in our White Paper on overseas territories, published in March. We will bring forward measures to award British citizenship to holders of British dependent territories citizenship. The withdrawal of British citizenship from the people of St. Helena caused great unhappiness at the time, and when we make our proposals after the consultation period in the White Paper has ended I hope very much that he finds the results that he wishes to see. I know of his interest in this matter, with the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, and I know also of the great concern in St. Helena.

Q7. [94109] **Mr. Martin Caton** (Gower): Although older women are more likely to suffer from breast cancer, many women over 65 are not aware of their right to screening under the NHS. Will the Prime Minister join me in congratulating Age Concern and the UK National Breast Cancer Coalition on the work that they are doing to make women aware of their right to self-referral? Will he also say whether the Government are considering extending automatic invitations to women over 65 for screening in the future?

The Prime Minister: At the moment, we are conducting pilots covering people under 65. Based on the results of those schemes, we hope very much to extend the provision to those over 65. As a result of the new cancer proposals announced by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health, there is a new target to cut death rates from cancer by one fifth, which will mean 100,000 fewer deaths over 10 years. A total of £70 million extra is going into improving treatment for breast, lung and colorectal services, and about £93 million from the national lottery will be used to purchase more than 400 necessary items of modern equipment.

In addition, we will in time roll out across the country a complete overhaul of the delivery of cancer care so that there can be on-the-spot booking—at first for 14 million people, but we hope to extend that opportunity even further. The result will be that people will get fast diagnosis and treatment. If surgery is needed, that will be done quickly as well. That is an excellent example of the type of new service that we are trying to introduce in the health service today.

Q8. [94110] **Mr. Michael Fabricant** (Lichfield): May I draw to the attention of the Prime Minister a letter from the chief constable of Staffordshire police? In his final paragraph, he states:

"I do think it is outrageous for Ministers to say in Parliament that police officer numbers are a matter for Chief Constables alone . . . I do object when they seek to shift the blame onto me."

The Staffordshire force has announced that the number of officers is to be reduced by 240. Will the Prime Minister intervene personally to prevent that decimation of the Staffordshire police force?

The Prime Minister: As a result of what has been announced in the comprehensive spending review, police numbers are going to rise. However, it is correct that there was a fall in the first two years, in Staffordshire and elsewhere, because the review was based on the Conservative spending plans that this Government inherited. Conservative Members may not like to remember the fact, but police numbers fell in the five years of the previous, Conservative Government.

However, the hon. Gentleman is right to say that it is not a matter for chief constables alone. It also depends on Government spending, which is why we are committed to spending more money. That spending is opposed by the Conservative party. In case anyone thinks that I am talking about a position that the Opposition adopted last year and have since changed, let me remind the House of what the shadow Chancellor said only last week. He said:

"Gordon Brown must not start on another spending spree."

He also called the spending plans "reckless and irresponsible". The Conservatives are therefore not entitled to complain about schools, hospitals, police numbers or anything else because they are committed to cutting spending in all those areas. Having said that, however, I must tell the hon. Gentleman that as a result of the extra money being made available, in Staffordshire and elsewhere, we are able to recruit more police officers.

Q9. [94111] **Mr. Alan Simpson** (Nottingham, South): Will my right hon. Friend accept my congratulations on the negotiations in which he has been involved to secure a three-year moratorium on the commercial growing of genetically modified crops? I hope that the whole House realises that this is an important step in delivering Labour's conference commitment to set our people free from the foods that they do not wish to eat.

However, will my right hon. Friend pay attention to two specific points? First, will he ensure that the moratorium does not allow commercial approvals issued in the EU to bypass the UK moratorium and scrutiny process? Secondly, if he feels the need for extra legislative powers to hold producers liable for the genetic pollution that they create, will he feel free to draw on my Genetically Modified Food and Producer Liability Bill for inclusion in the Queen's Speech?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for his congratulations, which are all the more welcome for being somewhat unusual.

Before we came to office, there were no proper rules in relation to labelling and genetically modified foods. We have tightened the whole regulatory framework. On commercial approvals, European Union single market rules apply. We have made it clear in the agreements that we have entered into that we will not have products on the market until there has been proper testing and rigorous trials. Contrary to the Conservatives, our view is that as a country at the leading edge of the science of genetics and biotechnology, we should take a responsible and sensible position. We must not send an anti-science or anti-biotechnology signal and we must proceed on the basis of the science, albeit with great care and a tight regulatory system. We will not act in a foolish way.

Building Regulation

Madam Speaker: Would hon. Members please leave the Chamber quietly and quickly so that we can get on with the business? Please hurry along, as a Member is waiting to move his Bill.

3.30 pm

Mr. Tony Baldry (Banbury): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to regulate the building industry; and to provide for adjudication in disputes involving domestic building contracts.

The Register of Members' Interests shows that I have a number of interests relating to the construction industry and that I undertake construction law at the Bar. The Bill, however, is not for the benefit of lawyers or the construction industry, as it would benefit consumers. The Bill is intended to tackle cowboy builders and to give statutory strength to measures to outlaw them.

The latest annual figures from the Office of Fair Trading, compiled from the case loads of trading standards officers, show that complaints relating to home repair and maintenance have become the fastest growing source of consumer complaint. All hon. Members could give instances from their surgeries or postbags of people who have been ripped off by cowboy builders. Sadly, those people are often among the most vulnerable in the community who can least afford to be cheated.

Some time ago, the Government established a working group to consider the problem of cowboy builders. The group recommended the establishment of a nationwide register of quality marked builders, backed by a mandatory warranty to cover all building work. The Government accepted the recommendation on the quality mark scheme for construction. But the major drawback to the initiative is that the scheme will be voluntary.

Voluntary schemes, not backed by the force of law, present several difficulties. Consumers will have to come to terms with yet another identification mark, of which a plethora already exist in the construction industry. It will take some time before a voluntary quality mark achieves the sort of recognition necessary among consumers to ensure that those who have become sufficiently competent to acquire it are seen as such by consumers.

When people take a package holiday or book airline tickets, they almost certainly do so through agents that have an air travel organisers' licence, which is a legal requirement. Every gas installer is obliged by law to be registered by CORGI—the Confederation of Registered Gas Installers. The Health and Safety Executive is responsible for maintaining a register of approved and qualified gas installers. What logic can underlie giving consumers legal protection against travel agents or statutory protection against a gas fitter but offering no protection when they get involved with builders or repairs on their homes?

In survey after survey, consumers have made it clear that they want a Government-sponsored approach to cowboy builders. The Bill seeks to build on the Government's existing proposals, combating cowboy builders through statutory regulation. It would use the Building Act 1984 to extend the building regulations and establish a new category of minor works. That would provide a framework for the regulation of builders and would be linked to membership of a professional body or trade association and third party inspection.

The approach is amazingly simple and straightforward. Work currently controlled in the construction of new buildings would also be controlled when carried out for repair, maintenance or improvement to existing homes. There would be no need or requirement for work carried out by quality mark registered builders to be notified. There would likewise be no requirement for notification of work carried out by the owner of the house, so those involved in DIY would not be caught out. However, work carried out by anyone who did not have a quality mark would require notification under the building regulations, and would be subject to building control either by the local authority or by approved inspectors.

That approach gives clear statutory underpinning to any quality mark scheme and provides a clear incentive to those within the construction industry to achieve quality mark status. It also places the onus on local authorities to police the activities of unqualified builders more effectively. It sends the clearest possible signal to the consumer as to who are and who are not quality mark registered builders and will ensure that any building repairs undertaken by those who have not obtained quality mark status are checked by the local authority or another party.

The final report of the working group on combating cowboy builders recommended:

"that DETR continue to consider how amendments to the building regulations including their extension to the repair and maintenance sector could be effected to reflect and complement the objectives of the quality mark.

It is understood that following the earlier consultation on a proposed new system of Competent Persons in 1997, DETR now expects to consult further on the proposals to develop classes of competent enterprises and individuals authorised to certify that work of defined types carried out by them comprise of relevant parts of the Building Regulations."

That is what the Bill seeks to do: it takes forward precisely that recommendation.

The Government published this month a consultation paper on the Building Act 1984, which acknowledges that central to the effort to tackle cowboy builders should be the development of a quality mark scheme identifying competent building firms. The DETR's new consultation document acknowledges that there are parallels with the competent enterprise proposals presented in relation to the building regulations and that, where possible, the construction quality mark and the building regulations should complement each other. That is exactly what my Bill seeks to do, and the DETR's latest consultation paper states:

"by having such powers at its disposal, the department may be able to introduce new regulations in response to changing national requirements without these becoming an onerous burden either on business, the householder or third party building control."

In other words, the DETR readily acknowledges that it would be possible to give statutory underpinning to a quality mark scheme for construction to protect consumers without that statutory underpinning placing any particular burden on the construction business, the consumer or local authorities. Moreover, the consultation document that was published this month—after I had served notice of my intention to introduce this Bill—makes clear the exact statutory provisions under which

[Mr. Tony Baldry]

there could be legal underpinning of a quality mark scheme: the Department could use the powers given to it in paragraph 4(a) of schedule 1 to the Building Act 1984.

It may be that this Bill, which enjoys all-party support, is pushing at an open door. I note that the editor of *Building* magazine, when commenting on the Labour party conference, said that the Government are considering changes to the building regulations in order to give reputable builders an edge over the cowboys. The Minister for Housing and Planning disclosed last week that he is examining proposals to relax the regulations, to allow registered contractors to self-certify when they carry out home improvements. Those without a quality mark will need local authority approval—which is exactly what the Bill seeks to introduce. I hope that the Government will support the Bill and that, if their voluntary scheme does not succeed, they will take up this simple statutory proposal.

The second part of the Bill deals with adjudication. By seeking to extend the statutory right to adjudication as provided for by the Housing Grants, Construction and Regeneration Act 1996, the Bill will include the domestic sector. That would offer consumers a quicker and less expensive method of resolving disputes than having to go to the county court. If the Government's voluntary scheme for beating cowboy builders does not work, I hope that they will feel able to pick up this simple statutory measure—not least because it is on all fours with existing Government policy.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill ordered to be brought in by Mr. Tony Baldry, Mr. Gerald Bermingham, Mrs. Helen Brinton, Mr. John Butterfill, Sir Sydney Chapman, Mr. Christopher Chope, Mr. Bill O'Brien and Mr. Bill Olner.

BUILDING REGULATION

Mr. Baldry accordingly presented a Bill to regulate the building industry; and to provide for adjudication in disputes involving domestic building contracts: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time on Friday 5 November, and to be printed [Bill 155].

Parliamentary Privilege

[Relevant document: The Report from the Joint Committee on Parliamentary Privilege, Session 1998–99 (HC 214-I, II and III).]

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Dowd.]*

3.40 pm

The President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons (Mrs. Margaret Beckett): We are taking this opportunity to debate the work of the Joint Committee on Parliamentary Privilege. That Committee was established by both Houses, and the proposal to set it up was sufficiently uncontroversial that it was agreed to, without debate, in July 1997.

The purpose of the Committee was to identify—separately from the continuing work of the Select Committee on Modernisation, but, in the context of privilege—the rights and duties that we need as a modern Parliament. The Joint Committee reported on 30 March this year. Today, the Government thought it right that the House should have the opportunity to give its views on the report.

First, I thank the members of the Joint Committee for all their endeavours. The Chairman, Lord Nicholls of Birkenhead, is a distinguished Law Lord, who devoted considerable time and effort to producing a most thorough report. Most of the Lords who were members of the Committee are respected and experienced former Members of this House—although we do not recognise them so readily from their new titles. They included two former Law Officers, one from each side of the House: Lord Archer of Sandwell and Lord Mayhew of Twysden. There were two former Home Secretaries: Lord Merlyn Rees and Lord Waddington, one from each side of the House. Furthermore, Lord Wigoder played an important part; he is a lawyer of great distinction, and helped to chair the Committee.

Distinguished Members of the House of Commons served on the Committee: my right hon. Friend the Member for Swansea, West (Mr. Williams), my hon. Friends the hon. Members for Bootle (Mr. Benton) and for Sheffield, Heeley (Mr. Michie), and the hon. Members for South Staffordshire (Sir P. Cormack) and for North Cornwall (Mr. Tyler). The Parliamentary Secretary to the Treasury, my right hon. Friend the Member for Dewsbury (Mrs. Taylor), who apologises for being unable to attend the debate this afternoon, was a member of the Committee in her then capacity as Leader of the House.

That collection of experience and wisdom produced the most extensive survey of parliamentary privilege in more than 30 years. The Committee distilled evidence from lawyers and parliamentarians from throughout the Commonwealth. The report is thorough; it was pursued diligently and is well produced. Apart from our focus on the report, it is also receiving much attention in Commonwealth Parliaments—especially in those of the southern hemisphere.

One of the problems that the Committee was unable to resolve related to the term "privilege" itself. The word has connotations of benefit or advantage which are not related to public need or duty. In 1967, when that subject was previously examined, it was recommended that the term be changed to "rights and immunities"—a term which

is currently more familiar. However, although the recommendation was made in 1967, it was not pursued and the Joint Committee advises us—correctly—that to use a different term, rather than one that has been used for such a long time, would have little benefit and might cause more confusion. It would seem as though we were making a fundamental change, whereas in fact we are not. However, if anyone feels moved by the spirit of imagination to come up with a different phrase, they can use this opportunity to do so.

The Committee tried to examine what legal protection a modern Parliament really needs. The bottom line of the approach that is needed in these Houses of Parliament is freedom of speech. The great merit of the report is that it focuses attention on that key requirement, and clarifies what it ought to be, but gets rid of much unnecessary extra baggage.

Mr. Robert Sheldon (Ashton-under-Lyne): My right hon. Friend rightly points out that the Committee had to examine what a modern Parliament really needs. Was it, therefore, sensible that a Law Lord should have been the Chairman of such a Committee? I have nothing against the noble Lord; he is a most able and distinguished person, but was he a suitable choice?

Mrs. Beckett: I can say, with hand on heart, that I had no connection with that matter at the time. I am sure that my right hon. Friend has no intention of impugning the capacity and the work of Lord Nicholls. His question is a legitimate one, but not one which I am in a position to answer.

Mr. Alan Williams (Swansea, West): I was a member of the Joint Committee. I fully understand the concerns raised by my right hon. Friend the Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Mr. Sheldon), with whom I have served on the Public Accounts Committee and the Select Committee on Standards and Privileges. I have to tell him that, during the 15 months of the Committee's deliberations, we could not have got through the legalistic maze that faced us, or dealt with the matter in an appropriate and logical fashion, had it not been for the work put in by Lord Nicholls. I have great admiration for him and think that he did a great job—indeed, the Committee would still be sitting and floundering had he not been there to guide us. He did not influence our decision, but helped us to see our way through.

Mrs. Beckett: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend and take his point that the combination of someone with legal expertise and experienced parliamentarians gave us the best of both worlds.

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): Before the Leader of the House leaves it, may I pursue the point raised by the right hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Mr. Sheldon)? The report states:

> "Parliament needs the right to regulate its own affairs, free from intervention by the government or the courts."

The cause of concern is that an over-legalistic approach—one driven by legal niceties rather than a profound appreciation of the broader role of Parliament—might have given rise to some difficulties, and, to that extent, I can understand the point raised by the right hon. Gentleman. Does the Leader of the House have any sympathy with the argument that that might have biased the approach expressed in the report?

Mrs. Beckett: It is not a question whether I have sympathy with that point, which is a perfectly legitimate theoretical point. However, I think that that argument would arise only if one were dissatisfied to a significant extent with the terms of the report. I am not dissatisfied with it; if the right hon. Gentleman is, I am sure it will emerge during our debate.

Mr. Nick Hawkins (Surrey Heath): Will the Leader of the House give way?

Mr. Alan Williams: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mrs. Beckett: If the hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Mr. Hawkins) will forgive me, I shall give way to my right hon. Friend the Member for Swansea, West first.

Mr. Williams: Even had the Joint Committee not been set up when it was, it would soon have had to be set up because of the European convention on human rights. The so-called legal niceties have to be observed if we are to conform with that convention, so it was a dominant element in our discussion and Lord Nicholls' guidance helped us in that respect.

Mr. Hawkins: I am grateful—

Madam Speaker: Order. I must ask the Leader of the House to respond to the right hon. Member for Swansea, West (Mr. Williams) before taking another intervention.

Mrs. Beckett: I apologise, Madam Speaker—I was trying to help the hon. Member for Surrey Heath. My right hon. Friend makes a powerful point and I do not dissent from it.

Mr. Hawkins: Without wanting to overelaborate, does the Leader of the House agree that the balance in the Joint Committee's work mentioned by the right hon. Member for Swansea, West is between the sanctity of parliamentary privilege and Parliament's governance of its own affairs and the fact that parliamentary privilege is, of itself, a legal concept? It is because of the legal protection that all of us have as Members of Parliament that the experienced chairmanship of Lord Nicholls was needed.

Mrs. Beckett: The hon. Gentleman makes a sensible point. However, I should add that, although the understanding and expectations of parliamentary privilege of those outside this place tend, perfectly naturally, to focus on the freedom of speech that it affords to Members of Parliament, it also gives protection to witnesses who come to give evidence to Parliament—for example, to Select Committees—and enables them to give their evidence without fear or intimidation from those who might dislike what they have to say. The freedom of speech that lies at the heart of parliamentary privilege is not for Members of Parliament alone, but extends to those who inform our discussions.

[Mrs. Beckett]

The principle that underlies that is enshrined in article 9 of the Bill of Rights 1689, which states:

"freedom of speech and debates or proceedings in Parliament ought not to be impeached or questioned in any court or place out of Parliament".

The Joint Committee has recommended that that article, which is a powerful protection, should be confined to activities that justify so high a degree of protection and that the boundaries within which it can be exercised should be made clear. That would involve new statutory definitions of "proceedings in Parliament" and "place out of Parliament". It also recommended that section 13 of the Defamation Act 1996, which enables an individual Member of Parliament to waive privilege, should be repealed so that it can be replaced by a provision for the House to waive privilege in cases where there is no risk of legal liability for someone who makes a statement in Parliament.

Mr. Graham Brady (Altrincham and Sale, West): That point troubled me when I looked at the report. If the House chose to waive privilege in respect of something that a Member had said which, at that point, would not give rise to any legal liability, does it remain possible that the material to which the removed privilege applied could subsequently become subject to a court action?

Mrs. Beckett: That is certainly not impossible. The hon. Gentleman may later wish to discuss the issues raised with some of those, of whom sadly I was not one, who served on the Committee. I understand that the issues were exhaustively thrashed out and that the Committee tried to come to the right balance and achieve a proper degree of protection.

Sir Patrick Cormack (South Staffordshire) *indicated assent.*

Mrs. Beckett: I see that the hon. Gentleman, who was on the Committee, is nodding. The Committee wanted proper protection, but wanted it to be exercised by the House as a whole.

The second core principle underlying the principle of privilege has been the right of Parliament to control its own affairs. The Joint Committee has proposed—and I think that all hon. Members will agree—that the right of each House to administer its own affairs within its own precincts should be confined to activities that are directly and closely related to proceedings in Parliament. The corollary is that Parliament should not, as has been the case in the past, be a statute-free zone on matters such as health and safety. That will be recognised and welcomed by many hon. Members. The Committee also recommends that while the House should retain its jurisdiction over its own Members, its power to punish non-Members for contempt should be transferred to the courts.

Among the privileges that we have all, at least in theory, enjoyed for several years, although mostly without exercising them, are freedom from arrest in civil cases and protection from the service of civil writs by post. In the Lords, there has been similar provision under privilege of peerage. There has also been a lack of clarity about whether peers unfortunate enough to be detained under mental health legislation are thereby disqualified from sitting and voting. The Joint Committee has done us all a useful service in identifying the fact that many of those provisions have fallen into desuetude, are no longer necessary and need not be preserved in our rules and proceedings.

I am on slightly delicate territory because I was not a member of the Committee and because it reported to Parliament, rather than to the Government. I hope that it will not be thought presumptuous of me to give an idea of the approach that the Government are minded to take to the report before I have had the opportunity to listen to the debate. Because it is addressed to Parliament rather than the Government, I propose not to go into detailed, line by line comment, but to summarise the Government's approach to the report with which, I am happy to say, we broadly agree.

The report's 39 recommendations cover a range of issues, including freedom of speech, bribery, control of Parliament's own affairs, disciplinary powers and the handling of parliamentary papers. The Government broadly concur with the vast majority of the recommendations.

There are just two small proposals by the proposals of the Joint Committee that might need a little closer examination and to which we hope that the House will give further thought. The Joint Committee's logic on both issues is clear; I do not quarrel with that. The issue is whether it is necessary in practice to go quite as far as it suggests.

The first proposal is that the power to imprison Members, which has been long unused, should be replaced by a power to fine. That is set out in paragraphs 276 to 279 of the report. The House is well aware that the suspension of a Member now carries an automatic loss of salary for the period concerned. That was not, I think, the case and was not so fresh in Members' minds when the Joint Committee undertook its consideration. Of course, the punishments of admonishment or, ultimately, even of expulsion remain. I admit that I am not certain that we also need, in those circumstances, a power to fine Members of Parliament for misconduct over and above the financial penalty that suspension carries.

Mr. Alan Williams: May I explain our thinking? It is not correct to suggest that the Joint Committee was not aware of that point, because we considered the existing position in detail. However, we felt that the suspension of a Member also punished his constituents, who would be deprived of his or her services in the House. On other occasions, suspension may not be relevant. We have a limited range of penalties available to us. As the current Chairman and other members—myself included—of the Joint Committee will, I hope, tell my right hon. Friend, we find it difficult to find appropriate gradations for the penalties. We are trying to be fairer, not more draconian.

Mrs. Beckett: I entirely accept my right hon. Friend's point. I apologise, because I did not think that the Committee had considered the matter so recently that it would be, as I said, fresh in its members' minds. I understand that there are a variety of circumstances; no doubt other Members may touch on this issue during the debate.

I take my right hon. Friend's point that there is a distinction between the financial penalty to Members and their opportunity to serve their constituents. However, I find it a little hard to envisage the circumstances in which the House might wish to fine a Member without considering the option of suspension. I flag up that point, because the Committee has done a thorough job of clearing away powers that are thought to be no longer necessary. Although I accept that the Joint Committee considered this issue at some length, the question is whether the power is needed. That is a matter for the House to consider.

The second issue that I wish to flag up is the recommendation in paragraph 267, which suggests that the breach of an embargo on the publication of a Committee report should be treated as a contempt. Again, we have seen Standards and Privileges Committee reports directed precisely at such matters in the recent past, and I am sure that such an approach will have a strong deterrent effect. I am not entirely sure that much more can be achieved by seeking further to punish those who publish leaks. Indeed, I would be a little nervous of venturing into this territory, but, again, it is a matter that may be raised in the debate.

Mr. Alan Williams: I am sorry to intervene again, but I would like to clarify the matter. We spent 15 months considering the issues, so my memory may be at fault. However, the hon. Member for South Staffordshire (Sir P. Cormack) may recollect what happened. I believe that this particular provision was imported from the Scotland Act 1998.

Mrs. Beckett: I freely confess to my right hon. Friend that not every word of the Scotland Act is etched on my memory. [HON. MEMBERS: "Shame."] It is a shameful thing to admit, but I thought that I had better do so.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): It is not a sackable offence.

Mrs. Beckett: That is just as well. However, my right hon. Friend may be right. If he is, that will emerge in the course of this or other discussions.

One of the main reasons for setting up the Joint Committee was for Parliament to produce a response to proposals by the Home Office for a new law dealing with corruption. The issue there was how the rare cases—they are rare indeed—of bribery involving Members of Parliament or peers should be dealt with because of the unsatisfactory state of the current law. The Joint Committee recommended—the Government entirely agree—that Members of Parliament and peers should be treated in the same way as other citizens and should be subject to a new corruption statute. The Law Commission has produced a draft Bill on the matter and the Government will obviously look to introduce it when legislative time permits.

The Joint Committee acknowledged—it is right and important that it did—the difficulties that are faced by people involved in public life and the fact that they are more vulnerable to mistaken or malicious allegation. It was against the background of that recognition that the Joint Committee nevertheless recommended that Members be brought within the scope of the statute law on bribery. That has to be the correct judgment.

I welcome, however, the further safeguard that the Joint Committee recommended that consent for prosecutions under the new legislation should require the consent of the Attorney-General. The Government accept that recommendation. Obviously, we all expect and hope that such cases will be few and far between. Indeed, let us hope that, in the years to come, that is another aspect of our safeguards and provisions which will wither away and will no longer be needed. When corruption legislation can be introduced, we anticipate that it will contain such a safeguard.

The report recommends that we have a parliamentary privileges Act. Some of the recommendations made could be implemented in other legislation or, indeed, not necessarily in primary legislation but by resolutions of the House or by administrative action. However, it seems to the Government that the bulk of the reforms proposed could not be put in place fully without a new Bill.

Equally, however, such a Bill has to compete with other priorities for legislative time, and I cannot at this stage promise the House early action. Obviously, the Government will consider how such legislation might be introduced. Perhaps this is just such an issue on which a draft Bill might well be prepared. It is exactly the sort of matter that might well benefit from pre-legislative scrutiny.

This is a further good example of recognising the importance to the smooth working of Parliament of ensuring that our fundamental rules on rights and duties, as well as other aspects of our work, are kept up to date to meet modern needs. The Joint Committee has given us a thorough and incisive report. This is the first opportunity for the House to express its views. Although I have given a preliminary indication of the Government's reaction to the report and what it proposes, I obviously undertake that we will take into account what is said in this debate before work continues to implement it.

4.2 pm

Sir Patrick Cormack (South Staffordshire): I thank the President of the Council and Leader of the House for what she said and for the tone of her remarks. I also thank her for finding this opportunity to debate this important report before the end of the Session and for responding positively to the Joint Committee on Parliamentary Privilege.

It would be very wrong not to pay a tribute at the outset to the right hon. Lady's predecessor, the right hon. Member for Dewsbury (Mrs. Taylor), who is now the Patronage Secretary. The Joint Committee was set up on her initiative. She was a most diligent attender at our meetings and she played a full part in our discussions not as Leader of the House, or subsequently as Patronage Secretary, but as a parliamentarian. Everyone who was present on the Committee appreciated that.

As the President of the Council and Leader of the House said, the Joint Committee first met on 20 November 1997. We had about 33 formal meetings and various informal meetings. We met for the last time on 23 February. To take up a point made in an intervention by the right hon. Member for Swansea, West (Mr. Williams), all of us on the Joint Committee, without

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exception, felt that we were fortunate to serve under the chairmanship of Lord Nicholls, who chaired our deliberations with good humour.

It would be dishonest to pretend that there was not, on occasion, a degree of creative tension between the parliamentarians and the Law Lords, but, nevertheless, it was a constructive tension and we came up with a report to which we were all glad to sign our names. It would be wrong not to thank Lord Nicholls, not only for the manner in which he chaired the Joint Committee, but for the enormous amount of time that he put into it, both at meetings and between meetings.

As the Leader of the House said, this is, first and last, a parliamentary matter. When the House finally comes to decide on the Committee's recommendations, it will do so on the basis of free votes. I am sure that the right hon. Lady would agree with that. It was therefore right that party politics should play no part in the Committee's deliberations, and they certainly did not. I should be surprised if they did in this debate.

Although I am speaking from the Opposition Front Bench, I was also a member of the Committee, I have a personal interest in the implementation of the report, and I hope that a report that was agreed to unanimously by a Committee of both Houses will commend itself to the majority of colleagues in this House.

The Leader of the House implied a positive response. It would have been rather embarrassing for the current Patronage Secretary had she said otherwise. I am delighted that the Leader of the House said what she said, and I welcome in particular her suggestion that we should have a draft Bill. If any subject lends itself to consideration in that way, it is this one. Her reservations seemed to be mainly on points of detail. I understand that, and I shall deal with some of them.

It is good to have a positive response from the Government, especially as so many of the changes require legislation. Other changes do not, and I shall touch on some of them.

The right hon. Lady said that the subject aroused interest far beyond this Parliament. Apart from our 14 sessions of oral evidence, when we had some Commonwealth witnesses, we received a great deal of written material, much of it from Commonwealth Parliaments, mainly in Australia. Their wealth of experience was valuable to us as we came to formulate our recommendations, because a number of those Parliaments have a system similar to our own. The Australian Federal Parliament has already enacted a modern Parliamentary Privileges Act, which we considered, and two Australian states—Western Australia and Queensland—still derive their privileges directly from the privileges of this Parliament.

Mr. Sheldon: With reference to Western Australia, I had the advantage of meeting not only the officers of the Western Australian Parliament, but some of the Members. There were grave misgivings about the work that has been done so far by Lord Nicholls's Committee.

Sir Patrick Cormack: I am sure that the right hon. Gentleman, for whom I have a high regard, will acquaint us with some of those misgivings during the debate. I shall listen, as I know the right hon. Lady and others will, with particular care to what he says. No one would pretend that the report is perfect; no report ever is. However, for reasons that I shall explain, I believe that it is a good and positive report. It makes proposals that the House would do well to consider carefully.

There has been great interest throughout the Commonwealth since the report was published. It is slightly disappointing that not much attention has been focused on it in the House or among those who comment on the affairs of this place and who study our proceedings.

The report deals with some of the fundamental constitutional issues that concern, or ought to concern, every hon. Member: the proper relationship between Parliament and the courts; the extent to which Members of Parliament need immunity from the law to fulfil their duties to their constituents; and the reconciling of the rights of the individual citizen with the collective interest of the nation in having a free and effective Parliament. Perhaps as we begin our debate on these issues, those who are truly interested in a vigorous and free Parliament and a free nation will comment on these matters.

At the beginning of the Committee's inquiry, there might have been some who were tempted to throw away a system so dependent on ancient statute and practice, and to start again. However, the moment one looks at the matter closely, the more clearly one realises that the core privileges of Parliament are as central to our constitution today as they ever were. An attempt to invent a new set of powers would create much constitutional and legal uncertainty. I agree with those who say that there is some dead wood to be got rid of, but the essentials of what we have are vital to democracy and to parliamentary sovereignty. As the report says:

> "Parliamentary privilege is founded on the principle that the proper conduct of Parliamentary business without fear or favour, let of hindrance, requires that Parliament shall be answerable for the conduct of its affairs to the public as a whole, and specifically in the case of the House of Commons, to the electorate. It must be free from, and protected from, outside intervention. Parliament is sovereign over its own business."

The Committee strongly endorses that view. Tradition is important. We should take what is tried and tested and build from there. That is what the Committee sought to do.

The Leader of the House quoted article 9 of the Bill of Rights 1689, which encapsulates the privilege of freedom of speech—our fundamental freedom. Many Members have long supported a new statutory definition that would give both Parliament and the courts detailed guidance on what is included in the term "proceedings in Parliament". That was a recommendation of the 1967 House of Commons Select Committee on Parliamentary Privilege, and several other Select Committees have since made similar recommendations, but the traditional parliamentary view has been that broader legislation would ossify privilege and involve the courts increasingly in dealing with privilege matters. I am bound to say that listening to the evidence caused us to modify that view.

The courts are constantly reinterpreting privilege in one context or another and the development of judicial review over the past decade has been rapid. Rightly or wrongly, Ministers no longer simply have to answer to this place for their decisions, but are subject to judicial review. Appreciable inroads have been made into the traditional interpretation of article 9, which tells the courts not to

impeach or question what is done in Parliament. Sometimes judicial interpretation of ancient statute might be a good thing. It is easy to contend, for instance, that the Lords decision in Pepper *v.* Hart, which permitted the courts to look at our debates when interpreting statute, furthers Parliament's intentions. It may be that, to give justice to the individual, the courts need to use parliamentary proceedings more, but, crucially, those developments should not undermine parliamentary sovereignty.

Mr. John M. Taylor (Solihull): Will my hon. Friend perhaps reserve his judgment in the case of Pepper *v.* Hart, which leads a number of disputed issues into the long grass of legal research? As two litigants shape up to each other, each has to comb through every parliamentary stage of every relevant statute to see what Ministers said in aid of the interpretation of that statute. Is not Pepper *v.* Hart a burden on the public good will?

Sir Patrick Cormack: That is a valid point of view, but we have had the Pepper *v.* Hart decision in which Lord Browne-Wilkinson made the point that what they were seeking to do would not in any sense erode parliamentary privilege. Rather, they were trying to establish what Parliament intended and whether it had been carried out. I made my remarks in that context alone. Perhaps many people wish that Pepper *v.* Hart had never happened.

Mr. Taylor: I may be entirely on my own in the House in wishing that that result had not come about, but I happen to think that English statute should be interpreted at face value—on what the words mean rather than what Parliament intended. The pursuit of what Parliament intended could be endless—it is labyrinthine. Would it not be simpler for our citizens, particularly our litigating citizens, to look at the statute and say, "What do these words mean?" instead of, "What on earth was Parliament thinking of?"

Sir Patrick Cormack: As I said, my hon. Friend has a point. However, we cannot put the clock back: we have had Pepper *v.* Hart, and we are where we are. The Committee had to recognise that fact.

Mr. Bill Michie (Sheffield, Heeley): I think that the judgment was right. In future, Ministers will have to do their homework correctly and ensure that what they are saying in the Chamber is what will appear in statute. Surely that is a good thing.

Sir Patrick Cormack: I think that we could all say amen to that.

Mr. Sheldon: Before the hon. Gentleman says amen to that, I should tell him that I was involved in the beginning of Pepper *v.* Hart, as one of my interventions, in a debate on a Finance Bill, led to the case. The then Opposition had perhaps the most talented Front-Bench line-up that we have ever known—most of them were subsequently appointed to Cabinet—and by whom I was being pursued for my interpretation. Being a reasonable person—happy to help in any way that I could—I gave them my interpretation. The matter was pursued again and again, and, finally, led to Pepper *v.* Hart.

As soon as I heard about the case, I scrambled to see what it was that I had said, and, luckily, found that it was justifiable. However, the consequence has been that Ministers should be very careful about what they say, and may not be quite so helpful in the future as a Minister was able to be in the past.

Sir Patrick Cormack: That is a very important point, which was recognised by all Committee members, and on which we had a long discussion.

Hon. Members must control the way in which we conduct our business. This House must be the place where the Government are called to account on behalf of those whom we represent. The courts must not take over Parliament's role. To ensure that that happens, we believe that a firmer and clearer boundary must be drawn. However, there is no guarantee that the courts would take any notice of the resolutions of the House. We do not lock up judges any more. I therefore welcome the Government's recognition that the Committee was right when we suggested that a new statute is needed to address the issue.

If the courts need to be restrained in any drift towards becoming legislators, we in Parliament must realise that modern standards of fairness, including the fundamental right to a fair trial, mean that the House is not entirely suited to a judicial role in dealing with serious contempts of Parliament.

Mr. Bercow: To what extent does my hon. Friend believe that the aspiration that he has just expressed, that judicial interference should be prevented or minimised, has been compromised by passage of the Human Rights Act 1998?

Sir Patrick Cormack: My hon. Friend tempts me down a long and circuitous road. I am—as I said very clearly in Committee—one of those who are not at all happy about the Act's implications. Again, however, we have to face the realities as they are. Much as I personally regret it—I am speaking personally, and only personally—the Act is there, and we have to recognise that fact.

Mr. Forth: Until we can change it.

Sir Patrick Cormack: Yes, but that will not be for a year or two yet.

Much is often made of Parliament's ancient power to commit anyone to prison for a serious contempt. However, that has not happened since 1880. Does anyone seriously contemplate that the House, without due process of law, would do it now? *[Interruption.]* Some hon. Members may wish that we could. However, in the unlikely circumstances that it should ever be necessary, surely it would be better done through the judicial process.

Statute law may even have a part to play in making our own proceedings effective. One of the most important developments in the past 20 years has been the use of Select Committees to scrutinise Government and to examine issues of public interest. Yet the ancient power to send for persons, papers and records is uncertain in scope and effect. The new delegated legislatures in Scotland and Wales, which we have created, have been

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given statutory powers by this House to require the production of persons and papers. Those powers are supported by procedures of enforcement by the courts. That seemed to the Joint Committee to be a suitable model for the United Kingdom Parliament to copy.

Transferring disciplinary powers over its own members to courts would undermine the House's authority and create the risk of undesirable conflict between Parliament and the courts. That is one area which must be for Parliament alone. I share some of the reservations of the Leader of the House about giving the House power to fine its Members. The subject occupied us for long debates in Committee. The Committee intended the provision as a substitute for the power to imprison, which some would be surprised to know that we can still claim to have. I very much doubt whether either power is really needed. I understand and, to an extent, share the right hon. Lady's reservations.

Mr. Bill Michie: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that sometimes when Members of Parliament have to be disciplined, it is better to hit their pocket than to give them a day off?

Sir Patrick Cormack: That is a valid point of view and we discussed it in Committee, as the hon. Gentleman well knows. I subscribe to the report, but, as he knows, I had reservations on that issue, as did some others. When a Committee seeks to arrive at a generally accepted conclusion there are always some aspects of the report with which individuals agree more strongly than others. I was merely picking up the point made by the Leader of the House and saying that I understand her reservation and, to an extent, I share it.

I am surprised that the Bill to reform the law of corruption appears to have been put on the back burner. The Home Secretary strongly pressed the Committee to hurry its findings. Perhaps the Leader of the House or the Minister who winds up will tell us whether the final version of the Bill has been drafted. The Law Commission produced a draft Bill at the beginning of last year—indeed, we included it in the report. Where do we stand now? The report accepts that in cases of alleged bribery it is appropriate that Members should not have the benefit of article 9 of the Bill of Rights. I am glad that the Leader of the House accepts the Committee's unanimous recommendation that in such cases the Attorney-General's consent must be given before a prosecution can be brought. The Committee, which included two former Attorneys-General and two former Home Secretaries, came to its view, conscious of the fact that Members of Parliament are vulnerable to malicious or misguided allegations.

A key recommendation of the report, to which the right hon. Lady referred, is the repeal of section 13 of the Defamation Act 1996 and its replacement with a broader power of waiver to be exercised by the Speaker, advised by a small Committee of senior Members. To recommend the repeal of a provision so recently enacted requires justification. My hon. Friend the Member for Altrincham and Sale, West (Mr. Brady) expressed some concern about that. I shall try to explain why the Committee came to its view.

The intention of section 13 is to remedy an accepted unsatisfactory situation. Article 9 of the Bill of Rights prevents a court from examining those actions that form part of proceedings in Parliament—speeches, questions, motions and investigations of Select Committees. Before section 13 was enacted, article 9 prevented a Member from calling evidence about proceedings to demonstrate that an alleged libel had been committed and prevented a defendant from calling evidence about proceedings to prove that his allegations were true. Where a case was dependent on such evidence, either the parties did not proceed, or if they did, the judge stayed the proceedings of the court. That has always been so, but, in this litigious and media-dominated age, that has rightly been perceived to be intolerable.

Section 13 was intended to allow an hon. Member to waive part of the House's protection from the scrutiny of proceedings by the courts to allow proceedings relating to him to be examined in court in a libel action. However, section 13 was drafted and enacted quickly in the charged atmosphere of a particular case. The House will know the history and it is summarised in the report from paragraph 60 onwards.

I am tempted to quote the aphorism, "Hard cases make bad law", but I am not concerned with the Hamilton *v.* Al Fayed action. If I were, you would doubtless stop me, Mr. Deputy Speaker, because the case is set to begin on 15 November and our own current sub judice rule prevents us from discussing it today. I am concerned not with that case, but with section 13 itself.

The section has a number of defects. It does not extend just to present or past Members of either House. It could be used by a witness, a petitioner, an Officer of either House, the adviser to a Select Committee or perhaps a lobbyist—any of them could in certain circumstances waive his privilege in a libel action without the House having any opportunity to judge whether Parliament would be damaged by the case continuing. Section 13, therefore, undermines the very concept of parliamentary privilege, which belongs not to any one of us, but collectively to the House. Our privileges have grown up on the basis that they are collective; they are the privileges of Parliament and not the perquisite of individual Members. It is also anomalous, as the report points out in paragraph 61, that under section 13 a waiver applies simply to defamation and to nothing else.

The Committee sought an alternative that would maintain the merits of section 13, but present fewer legal difficulties and would ensure that the privilege that belongs to Parliament is controlled by Parliament. We therefore recommended that section 13 should be replaced by a power for each House to waive article 9 for the purpose of any court proceedings, and not simply for defamation, where the words spoken or acts done in proceedings in Parliament would not expose the speaker of the words or the doer of the act to legal liability. That was a key point.

In order to keep decisions outside the political arena, the Joint Committee recommended the appropriate machinery for determining whether a waiver should be given might in this House be the Speaker assisted by the advice of a small Committee. It suggested that the Committee might include the Leader of the House, the shadow Leader of the House, the Attorney-General and one or more representatives of other parties with the

power to co-opt Members either generally or for a particular case. The presumption would be that a waiver would be granted unless there were overriding parliamentary reason for not so doing and some examples of where a waiver might be refused are set out in paragraph 80 of the report.

I emphasise that a waiver is not a total waiver of article 9 any more than section 13 is. There would be no question of legal liability for anyone for what he said or did in Parliament. The only exception where the operation of article 9 would be totally removed would be on a criminal charge of bribery under the proposed corruption Bill to which I referred a few moments ago.

The report contains many detailed recommendations. I shall deal with just two and then briefly summarise some of the rest. There is a good case to be made in principle for defining proceedings in Parliament in a statute to include Members' correspondence with Ministers and constituents. Previous Committees, including the Select Committee on Parliamentary Privilege in 1967 and the Privileges Committee in 1977 recommended such a change.

The issue is difficult, and the reasons for the Joint Committee's rejection of the idea are set out in the report. We were impressed by evidence on the extent to which the development of qualified privilege in law protects hon. Members who are acting without malice pursuant to their parliamentary duty.

There are certainly strong arguments in favour of absolute protection. We should take careful note of the subject in this debate and those that may follow. I would be interested to hear whether colleagues think that we have got it right or that privilege should be extended.

I was concerned by the Committee's conclusions on subpoenas and I needed a great deal of persuasion before I accepted them. The recommendation is that the two Houses should no longer claim the absolute right to refuse to answer a subpoena, but that subpoenas should not be issued without a judge's consent. Again, the case is carefully set out in the report, but, again, I would be interested to hear what both Government and Opposition Members have to say about the proposal.

Mrs. Beckett: I did not flag up the matter in particular in my speech, but let me return the hon. Gentleman's earlier courtesy by saying that I have some sympathy with his observations. I well recall occasions in recent years when members of the previous Government were threatened with being called to give evidence in various cases. I do not recall the individual circumstances, but it was clearly a ploy. I recognise that the Committee has made the important safeguard that a judge would have to agree, but—I hope that I am not in breach of any of the obligations of the House in saying this—I am not as confident as I would like to be that every judge would see things in quite the way that we do here.

Sir Patrick Cormack: I am very grateful to the right hon. Lady for reinforcing my reservations.

The Leader of the House referred to future legislation, but there are many recommendations that do not involve legislation. This is a matter for the House, as she rightly said, but I should be grateful if she or the Parliamentary Secretary, Privy Council Office would tell us whether the Government are prepared to find time for those recommendations to be debated or are sympathetic to them.

Paragraph 14 is concerned with ensuring that

"rules and conventions concerning standards of conduct are in readily accessible form capable of being understood"

by the public.

Paragraph 15 is concerned with the implementation of a new sub judice rule as set out in paragraph 202. That is a very important matter. I do not in any way challenge the Chair, but, time and again over the past year, the Speaker has felt obliged to prevent our discussing a long-running case because of our current sub judice rule. I should be interested to hear the Government's reaction to the possibility of a change.

Paragraph 18 advocates the production of advisory guides for Members of both Houses on the exercise of the privilege of freedom of speech. We have had some worrying examples of hon. Members perhaps too lightly using the freedom that the Chamber gives them to make all sorts of unsubstantiated allegations to which people can have no adequate and proper response. The report dismisses the idea of giving some sort of reply via *Hansard*. We did not think that that was practical or sensible, but we believe that the onus is therefore all the greater on the Member to realise just what a privilege freedom of speech is. We hope that that recommendation will find favour.

Paragraph 20 says that it should be made clear in every new statute that it applies to Parliament unless Parliament has been specifically excluded.

Paragraph 22 calls for the drawing up of a clear statement of parliamentary rights and powers, and urges that this, together with a statement of their own rights, should be given to all potential witnesses coming before parliamentary Committees. Paragraph 23 asks the Procedure Committee to examine and report on the desirability of maintaining the conventions that one House cannot compel the attendance of a Member of the other.

Paragraph 28 is concerned with the disciplinary powers of the House over its Members, and with the exercise of those powers by the Select Committee on Standards and Privileges, of which the right hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Mr. Sheldon) is such a distinguished Chairman. His views on that matter will be particularly interesting.

We made a clear recommendation on leaks, to which the Leader of the House referred. Here is the one occasion when I cannot find myself able to applaud what she said, as I believe that our recommendation is particularly pertinent in light of recent events. Some of us will have found her reply not only disappointing but, frankly, inadequate. I hope that she will think again, and that the Minister will deal with the subject when he replies to the debate.

One final legislative point has urgency. One consequence of the two Houses taking charge of their own affairs was the Parliamentary Corporate Bodies Act 1992, establishing the Clerks of the two Houses as corporate officers to make contracts on behalf of the two Houses. Circumstances could well arise—and, in one recent case, very nearly did—where, because the relevant proceedings on contracts are sometimes considered in domestic Committees, which are Select Committees, article 9 of

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the Bill of Rights prevents the court from considering the Committee's proceedings. This could seriously prejudice the case put by the House, and could be financially costly in some cases. Perhaps the Minister could indicate whether the Government plan any action to remedy this situation by accepting our recommendations.

The report is the fullest examination of the issue of parliamentary privilege for many years. I believe that it makes sensible and, in some cases, far-reaching recommendations which will modernise and safeguard parliamentary privilege for the new century. I am sorry if I have gone on rather long, but this is an important matter which should concern every Member of Parliament. I hope that this will be the first of many debates as we proceed to discuss in detail the Committee's recommendations and, where appropriate, to legislate upon them.

I hope that all Members will agree that the report illustrates the value of Joint Committees of both Houses looking in detail and in depth over a long period at important subjects.

4.37 pm

Mr. Alan Williams (Swansea, West): I intend to be brief, as the key points have been touched on and I wish to amplify only one or two.

I have already paid my respects to the noble Lord Nicholls for his admirable work in chairing the Committee, and I associate myself with the thanks expressed by the hon. Member for South Staffordshire (Sir P. Cormack) to the Patronage Secretary, who was fully committed to the work of the Committee.

May I also—if it does not embarrass him—congratulate the hon. Member for South Staffordshire? We did not always agree, but we always argued constructively and amicably. Both of us recognised that the other was trying to argue in the best interests of this House, and that no party politics were involved.

Privilege was a mishmash and a mess. Much of it was out of date and irrelevant, and it was time to try to clear things up. That is why we needed the help of the noble Lord. Throughout our work, our overriding consideration was that freedom of speech in the House is inviolate and must be protected at all costs.

I welcome the comments of my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House. Having committed about 15 months to the work of the Committee, it is gratifying that, whatever the House may decide, the Government can go along with 37 of our 39 proposals. There is one "maybe" and another recommendation on which the Government will, I hope, check the Scotland Act 1998 before the Minister replies. They will then find what we said about Parliament's recent decision on the Scottish Parliament, and whether we said that we could not have less defence for our own privileges in this House.

I shall first consider the issue of penalties. In addressing our discussions in the Standards and Privileges Committee, I have tried to draw on my experience of the old-style Committee in the previous Parliament and of the new Committee, under the chairmanship of my right hon. Friend the Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Mr. Sheldon). He can speak for the Committee better than I can, but we have been constrained in imposing penalties after we have found that an offence has been committed.

If we suspend a Member for a week, that leads to a £900 fine. We might feel that a £900 fine is enough in itself. Why should not we be able to impose such a fine and allow a Member of Parliament to continue to go about his work in the House? For more serious offences, we could impose a suspension, which of course would incorporate the fine. We do not request more draconian powers, and the House could impose limits on the level of fines. All we suggest is a change that would make it easier for the Committee to reach conclusions when dealing with individual cases, which all have different niceties and qualifying factors. The present system does not allow us to take those into account, which is why I support the proposal for fines.

Mr. Brady: Did the Committee consider the fact that a sum may have different value to different Members of Parliament, but a suspension from the House is an equal punishment for all Members?

Mr. Williams: It is also a punishment for constituents. We still have to work on the standard of living value of the fine, although perhaps we are being over-generous to Opposition Members, most of whom would probably find the fines less onerous than most Labour Members. However, it would be dangerous to apply subjective evaluations in that case.

The right hon. and learned Member for North-East Bedfordshire (Sir N. Lyell), a former Attorney-General, is in his place. He will remember, as do I, the cash for questions case in the previous Parliament. I still look back on that session of the Committee with no pride. Suspension can become a political punishment. Over the past 30 years, we have had Governments with small or non-existent majorities. In such cases, suspension may become a politicised punishment. Many of my hon. Friends who have served on the Committee may disagree with me, but I look back on the cash for questions case with a degree of shame—not because of the decision that we made, but because of the incredible and unjustifiable time that we kept the hon. Members involved hanging around while the two sides of the Committee sparred before reaching a decision. The fact that the decision was being made in the run-up to an election, and might have involved suspensions, coloured the thinking. I may be doing an injustice to hon. Members, but I think that we were unfair to two of our colleagues, even though our decision about the penalty was fair.

In the same way, I think that the House should be able to look after its own affairs. I hope that the distinction does not sound trivial, but we must distinguish between the club rules that, any organisation might have, and the criminal activity that, in other circumstances, could lead to imprisonment. Members of the Joint Committee on Parliamentary Privilege work according to the tribunal criteria, under which guilt is assessed according to the balance of evidence. We do not use the far tighter criminal requirement that guilt be established beyond all reasonable doubt.

I was involved in the Hamilton case, in which I consider that the Committee reached the correct conclusion. The Committee's ruling made it clear that the conclusion had been reached on the lesser criteria of the balance of the evidence received.

Although I pay tribute to the work of the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards, I recognise the constraints within which she has to operate. Even with the commissioner, the Joint Committee on Parliamentary Privilege does not have the investigative capability to investigate more serious offences, such as corruption, which attract much more serious consequences.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for Ashton-under-Lyne will remember, the previous commissioner had advice from a solicitor. In evidence, that solicitor said that he was struck by the fact that the Committee's investigative capability was far below that of the police. For that reason, I had no trouble in concluding that the more serious matters, such as corruption, should go before the courts.

I do not regard membership of the Joint Committee on Parliamentary Privilege as a privilege. Judging colleagues is no fun. One makes friends among hon. Members of all parties, with whom one has to mix for several years. Given that one has to deal with people whom one has known for many years, there is a risk that one's judgment might be coloured. That is only human, although I think that the Committee is, in fact, incredibly objective. People would be made to stand down from a jury if they had the same relationship with a defendant as we have with the people who appear before us.

The Government asked for our opinion on corruption and bribery. I believe that we should make such serious offences matters for the courts. It would be a pity if that recommendation were to be sidelined, but we shall have to await confirmation of that.

Sir Nicholas Lyell (North-East Bedfordshire): I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for allowing me to intervene, and I apologise to the Leader of the House and to my hon. Friend the Member for South Staffordshire (Sir P. Cormack) for not being present to hear much of their speeches.

The right hon. Member for Swansea, West (Mr. Williams) has touched on the question of bribery and corruption. I quite agree that Members of Parliament of either House should be exposed to prosecution for such offences, if there is a proper case to answer. However, does he share my recognition that the question of what is said in either House—the question of freedom of speech—raises very difficult and important issues indeed? If I catch your eye, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I hope to be able to describe them in more detail later.

Mr. Williams: The right hon. and learned Gentleman is correct and the House must consider those matters.

I recall that a former distinguished Member of this House—Lord Merlyn-Rees—asked throughout the Committee's 15 months of investigation: "Tell me, Mr. Chairman, as I look back over all my years in the House of Commons, why on earth would it have been worth anyone's while to bribe me?" There is a myth about the power exercised by the ordinary Member of Parliament.

Mr. Bill Michie: We might describe that as a trades descriptions problem.

Mr. Williams: Indeed.

I am glad that the Leader of the House has accepted our recommendation that the House should no longer be exempt from health and safety requirements and other such matters. Exemption has presented problems for officials in the House taking legal action over contracts. It has also come close to costing Members dear. When the Public Accounts Committee was chaired by my right hon. Friend the Member for Ashton-under-Lyne, it examined fire risk in public buildings and the absence of fire licences in some Whitehall buildings, including, most interestingly, the part of the Home Office that then housed those responsible for licensing.

I discovered that the House had no licence, and I met the newly appointed fire officer, who told me the likely consequences. I shall not go into them in detail because they might make some Members uncomfortable about being in their offices. The officer told me that in one part of the building, if a fire blocked the single stairway, the escape route involved going out of a window on to a parapet, edging along it and climbing on to a neighbouring roof. Hon. Members may note around the building previously bricked-up doors that have since been opened to gain us a lower grade of fire licence.

The situation was absurd. People who worked here were not given the legal protection to which they were entitled. Nor was the House as safe a place as it should be in which to work or—as we virtually do—to live.

4.53 pm

Sir Peter Emery (East Devon): It is with great pleasure that I say that the Joint Committee on Parliamentary Privilege has done a very thorough and complete job and we would all wish to thank hon. Members on both sides for their work.

I did not entirely agree with the right hon. Member for Swansea, West (Mr. Williams) when he said that he thought that privilege had been a mishmash. That was not so, and nor is it so now. In fact, the greatest of our privileges is freedom of speech, which has been guaranteed since 1689 when article 9 of the Bill of Rights made it absolutely clear, in words that bear repeating, that

"freedom of speech and debates or proceedings in Parliament ought not to be impeached or questioned in any court or place out of Parliament".

That absolute privilege is of the greatest importance in a democracy. In many nations, autocratic and dictatorial regimes make it clear that any major criticism of them—in Parliament or not—will get people quickly into prison. Members of Parliament have the right of freedom of speech, which, incidentally and rather amusingly, was secured mainly through the work of our forebears and the pressure applied by peers in another place. However, we will not go into that in this debate.

I shall raise four specific points. When I was Chairman of the Procedure Committee—I held the post for 14 years—these matters arose more frequently than any other, so we must try to rectify any problems now or in

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the draft Bill. I refer hon. Members to the sub judice rule, which will always be a point of contention. Page 52 of the report states clearly that the sub judice rule is reasonable and proper. The rule provides that

> matters awaiting adjudication in a court of law should not be brought forward

when it would make it more difficult for justice to be served. However, paragraph 191 states:

> "On the other hand, Parliament has a constitutional right to discuss any matters it pleases."

The limitations imposed by the sub judice rule is, and can be, damaging. It is not unreasonable to refer in this context to the Pinochet case, which has been much on our minds of late. It is madness that, although all the media and every man, woman and child can debate that case time and again, the sub judice rule prevents Members of Parliament even from considering it. I do not believe that that is right in today's world.

It is immensely difficult—as I am sure the Leader of the House will acknowledge—to attempt to put into words exactly how the sub judice rule must work in every case. However, Madam Speaker has the power to make that decision and I suggest—if I may be so bold—that she should enforce the sub judice rule much more leniently than she has done recently.

Sir Patrick Cormack: I refer my right hon. Friend to paragraph 202—which I mentioned briefly in passing—in which he will see that the Committee has attempted to frame a resolution that addresses the points of concern that he and I share.

Sir Peter Emery: My hon. Friend should not think that I have not looked at paragraphs 202 and 200, which are the key to the recommendations. However, as it is so difficult to describe the rule, its interpretation will rest with Madam Speaker. I urge her to be—I will not say more modern as that is perhaps unkind—slightly more pliable in her application of that rule. Perhaps we might even go further. Although it might be right to make such a ruling initially, if a matter continues for a long time and there is wider discussion, Madam Speaker might feel it right to give way on that initial judgment.

Mr. Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield): Does my right hon. Friend agree that one of the difficulties with the sub judice rule—especially in the Pinochet case—is that the House might want to explore matters related to the exercise of ministerial discretion rather than the actions of the court? However, by virtue of the blanket operation of the rule, we are prevented from exploring those matters.

Sir Peter Emery: My hon. Friend is absolutely correct, although I do not want to enter into debate on that subject as it might seem that I am criticising the Chair, which I would not do at any time.

Mr. Bill Michie: The Committee examined that matter time after time. Will the right hon. Gentleman tell us how we can stop abuse in this place if there is no sub judice rule, or if it is relaxed? That could be quite damaging. We are not editorials in a tabloid newspaper; we are the House of Commons—the high court. We must have a discipline; we may not like the idea that we are restricted, but surely that is for the benefit of justice, rather than for instant television from the House when someone is being judged by their peers.

Sir Peter Emery: The hon. Gentleman makes a not unreasonable point. The only counter to it is that the media are limited in that they cannot make any comment that is prejudicial to a trial. Perhaps we should consider that point more than we have in the past, to examine how prejudicial any possible debate in the House could be. If a Member were to make a speech that appeared to the Chair to be prejudicial, we might have to give powers to the Chair such that the Member could be brought to order. Surely we must have some discipline in our House for our procedure in such matters.

In relation to bribery, it is extremely sensible that there should be a draft Bill—as the Leader of the House pointed out. I fully welcome the fact that we shall make it clear that the offences of procuring a corrupt act and of performing a corrupt act should be hit equally hard. In the most recent case of cash for questions, it seemed wrong that Members of the House were hit time and again, yet the corruptor—the person who gave the bribes—apparently got off scot free. There is something wrong in that sort of justice—it needs to be rectified.

Sir Nicholas Lyell: I quite understand what my right hon. Friend is getting at, but does he agree that to suggest that our colleagues and our former colleagues, who were rightly disciplined by the House, were guilty of accepting bribes is perhaps to go beyond the conduct of which they were accused? Does he share my view that it is unlikely that any court would have convicted them of corruption? They were guilty of a breach of the required standards in this House. Is not that an important distinction?

Sir Peter Emery: I understand that. However, it seems to me that the suggestions in the recommendations go further than the implications made by my right hon. and learned Friend. I want to make certain that any condemnation should be equal on both sides. That has not been true so far. I feel strongly about that matter.

It is strange, but the interests of protection of privilege go to all aspects of proceedings in Parliament, and it is to the definition of those proceedings that I now turn. All the work of Select Committees is dealt with under the aspects of privilege pertaining to the House of Commons—with one exception: when a Committee presents its report to the country through a press conference held in a Committee Room, Members of Parliament attending the press conference are told that it is not considered a proceeding in Parliament and that there is no privilege. If an accusation is made there, it is no different from one made in the street.

It has been said that, unlike proceedings of Parliament, no record is made of such conferences, so one could not be certain of what was said. I understand that, but privilege is granted to private sittings of Select Committees, of which there is no record. Therefore,

I believe that occasions such as I have described, which occur about 30 or 40 times a year, should attract privilege as part of the proceedings in Parliament.

Mr. Sheldon: I see no problem. At a press conference, one is limited by the report and one can quote freely from it to explain one's arguments. If one wants to go beyond that, there are clear dangers, of which a wise Chairman or any Member of Parliament attending such a press conference will be aware.

Sir Peter Emery: I understand the right hon. Gentleman's point. However, I have attended many such events over the years and, time and again, heard the Clerk remind hon. Members attending the press conference that privilege does not apply to the meeting. It should be considered part of proceedings in Parliament when Committees present a report at such conferences; I see no reason why they should not be covered by privilege.

I was sorry to hear the Leader of the House speak about leaked documents. I consider the Committee's recommendations on leaked documents, set out on pages 71 and 72 of the report, to be extremely sensible. Paragraph 266 states:

"The media are not, and should not be, exempt from punishment for contempt when publication substantially interferes with the work of a House or one of its committees."

That is preceded by the assertion that:

"The primary responsibility, and therefore the more serious contempt, rests upon the person who leaked the document."

That is right, but members of the press appear to be able to get away with the publication of documents that they have acquired by one means or another—they take the "publish and be damned" approach. The report recommends that the House of Commons should pass

"a resolution which applies to reports at any time prior to publication and to the unauthorised use of committee material, and that the House of Lords should pass a similar resolution"

condemning such actions.

We should hold responsible not only the reporter who writes the article but the editor and the proprietor who are responsible for the management of the newspaper in which it is published. If we ensured that they were held responsible for such breaches of principle and returned to bringing them to the Bar of the House, the practice would stop overnight.

I have purposely brought *Hansard* of 24 January 1957, when the last person to be brought before the House was Mr. John Junor, the editor of the *Sunday Express*. He was lectured and had to apologise to the House. He said afterwards that it was the most worrying, unpleasant day that he ever had to suffer in his life. It is not fines, however large, that will bring about what we want but the fact—the disgrace, perhaps—of being summoned here to apologise.

Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours (Workington): Most journalists whom I know would welcome the prospect of coming before the House in that way. The right hon. Gentleman should reconsider his proposition.

Sir Peter Emery: That was not the case with Mr. John Junor. That is why I say that we should go for the proprietor, who would not wish it, as well the hon. Gentleman knows.

There are difficulties and complications in preserving the rights of Parliament. There is no doubt that we may often be open to much criticism in trying to preserve our privileges, but we have in Britain the fairest and, I think, the finest Parliament anywhere in the world. We are lucky to be part of it and, at all costs, it must be preserved.

5.12 pm

Mr. Robert Sheldon (Ashton-under-Lyne): The right hon. Member for East Devon (Sir P. Emery) made a useful and instructive speech. I am not sure that his solution to the problem of leaks is right. The privileges part of the Standards and Privileges Committee dealt with one aspect of leaks from Select Committees. It was important because there was a leak direct from a Select Committee to the Department concerned. That is a very serious matter because the Department could have interfered with the Committee's draft report. I am not so worried about final reports being leaked before publication because they are settled and cannot be interfered with. It is serious leaks before reports are finalised that trouble me. Departments involving themselves in the preparation of reports is serious. It is not that which occurred in this case, but there was a possibility that it could happen in future. We have dealt firmly with that.

I shall make a few brief comments. The first concerns the point that the shadow Leader of the House rightly made about Parliament's sovereignty over its own business. He pointed to the creative tension between the lawyers and the parliamentarians on the Joint Committee. Creative tension can be of value, but why did we have to have a lawyer as Chairman? We had an ex-Home Secretary on the Committee, and I should have thought that the balance should have been on the parliamentary side. The Chairman is a very able man of great distinction. My right hon. Friend the Member for Swansea, West (Mr. Williams), for whom I have great respect, has great admiration for him and that is fully justified. I was prompted to intervene on this point by the views of the Officers and Members of the Western Australian Parliament. They felt that this approach was far too legalistic and that there was far too much involvement of lawyers. I share their view. The lawyers should, as they say, be on tap but not on top. They were certainly needed, but why was the process so legalistic? Why are there legalisms throughout so much of the report?

Sir Patrick Cormack: I do not think that the lawyers came out on top. They made a valuable contribution to our discussions. I must be honest. I have not said this before anywhere, in public or in private, but, at the beginning, I shared the right hon. Gentleman's prejudice against having a Law Lord in the Chair. However, I became convinced that it was the right decision, not only because of the Chairman's intrinsic quality but because of the qualities that he was able to bring to the chairmanship. Although we dealt with the matter in a wholly bipartisan, non-party political manner, he was so removed from the field that it was a positive help to us all in Committee. Although I understand why the right

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hon. Gentleman takes the line that he does, I suspect that, had he been on the Committee, he would have been likewise persuaded.

Mr. Sheldon: I would have preferred the hon. Gentleman to be the Chairman. This is not a lawyers' do but a parliamentary one, and we should have had parliamentary people in charge. By all means, let us get as much expertise as we can, but I urge my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House, if we have ever again have to deal with such matters—in which case these debates may be examined—to ensure that parliamentary representation is predominant.

Mr. Alan Williams: The Chairman was not in charge and nor were the lawyers. The Committee was in charge and did the voting.

Mr. Sheldon: I am very much aware of that. I understand my right hon. Friend's point of view, but to have a Chairman from the legal side when it is a parliamentary matter is wrong. I felt that I should say so because my view is shared by those from whom I heard in Western Australia.

My next point concerns the interpretation of privilege by the courts. The courts have undoubtedly been encroaching on privilege for a long time. That is mentioned in paragraph 381. I want it stopped or, if anything, reversed. We have run our own affairs very well for hundreds of years. I see no particular advantage in the courts involving themselves more than is absolutely necessary. I understand that some of the report's points are valuable, but I shall not refer to them all.

Mr. Forth: My hon. Friend for South Staffordshire (Sir P. Cormack) said that we cannot turn back the clock. Surely we could do precisely that if it were the will of the House. Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that if we thought that on any of these matters the courts had got it wrong, had encroached on or diminished in any way what we thought correctly and appropriately a matter of privilege, it is the right and obligation of the House to take the appropriate legislative action to correct what the courts may have done in error?

Mr. Sheldon: The right hon. Gentleman has always had much praise from me for being the one reactionary to whom I listen with respect, but I am not prepared to follow him in many of the matters that he raises. Clearly, we have gone too far. It is time to take account of that in any changes that we make.

I shall deal briefly with the internet. I put the matter to Lord Nicholls personally. The House must excuse me for pursuing my hobby horse, but it is one that many people will be able to ride. The reports and activities of Select Committees must find a suitable place on the internet. For example, this morning I searched the internet to find out what the Home Secretary had said to a Select Committee. His evidence was not there. That matter is enormously important to the House. One could normally look up such evidence on the internet in a matter of seconds instead of going to read it in the Library, which may not even have it. That evidence could have been a matter for discussion or it could have come up in Prime Minister's Question Time, but it was not on the internet and Lord Nicholls's Committee did not want it there.

I have been able to persuade the House of Commons Commission of my case, at least in part. It has accepted that a Select Committee may put certain evidence on the internet, but only in the case of ministerial interviews. That would have applied to the Home Secretary's evidence. From the beginning of the next Session, we will be able, on the morning after a Committee sitting, to look up on the internet ministerial statements and answers if the Select Committee so decides.

I want that provision to be extended, but the Joint Committee did not want that. It said, comparing such evidence to *Hansard*:

> "Corrections to the 'Daily Part' are few . . . In one respect immediate publication of committee transcripts would conflict with the Joint Committee's report. Earlier in this report we stressed the importance of fairness to witnesses."

It is undoubtedly right that we must be fair to witnesses. However, there is nothing to stop any journalist writing down what is being said in the Committee and putting it in the following morning's paper. Despite that, we cannot get that evidence on the internet.

One of our advantages is that we can put the evidence on the internet, state clearly that it is only uncorrected evidence and that the final evidence will contain any correction. Making that evidence available would not, therefore, affect the final outcome of the investigation, and that would be clear. The sooner we realise that we are living at the end of the 20th century, the sooner we can make that information available at a level that is commensurate with the need for it.

Sir Peter Emery: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for giving way. It is naughty of me to intervene when I have just spoken, but I want to reinforce his point. The proceedings of many of those Select Committees are taped and are therefore available for any television station in the country to broadcast within hours of their taking place, so why should they be prevented from being published on the internet? That seems nonsensical.

Mr. Sheldon: I fully agree with the right hon. Gentleman. The Nicholls Committee did not accept that proposal because it thought that it would be unfair to witnesses who might have second thoughts about what they had said. I find that unacceptable. On the internet, it would be made clear that the publication was a provisional account of the Select Committee's proceedings, which would be published fully as soon as corrections could be made. That would not affect the Committee's final decisions. The right hon. Gentleman is right to draw further attention to the matter.

Sir Patrick Cormack: The right hon. Gentleman has a good point. The Joint Committee was concerned that witnesses who are not Ministers and who are not experienced in appearing before Select Committees feel awe when they do so and are therefore vulnerable. That was why we came to the conclusion that we did. However,

it is important that the right hon. Gentleman has made his points, and he has certainly given us something to think about.

Mr. Sheldon: The point made by the right hon. Member for East Devon is still correct. Those proceedings can be on the radio and in the following morning's newspapers, but they cannot be suitably presented to Members of Parliament, and that is wrong. The concession on Ministers' evidence was made by the House of Commons Commission and I expect it to be extended in due course.

Mr. Bill Michie: We were concerned about the extent to which reports published in newspapers or on the internet are the authoritative voice of the House. My right hon. Friend is suggesting that we could try to deal with that by saying that the publication is only a report and may be changed, and that what is being published on the internet is not the official organ of the House.

Mr. Sheldon: It would be quite clear that the publication was provisional. Publication has been accepted not only for Ministers' statements but for close questioning of Ministers, during which important matters may arise. It would be nonsense if that provision were not extended in due course.

I turn now to Pepper *v.* Hart, which is very important. I have not been following that matter closely, but I will be surprised if Ministers are not much more guarded in their replies to questions, particularly in Standing Committees considering legislation, simply because of that case. That would be a great pity because we need greater understanding in Standing Committees of the complicated parts of legislation, and few pieces of legislation are more complicated than a Finance Bill.

Ministers have to sit with their towels round their heads in the early hours of the morning preparing for proceedings on their Bill, knowing full well that many questions may be asked and that they would never have dreamed of some of the questions. They must understand their legislation and advise the Committee to the best of their ability, which means going beyond the words in the Bill, as they must do if they are to be of any use to their Committee in explaining the Bill. I worry that Ministers may be far too cautious in answering crucial questions that could elucidate the legislation.

Mr. Grieve: The courts, in reading what Ministers have said so that they can make a judicial interpretation of a statute, are for the most part trying only to go through the same process of elucidation that the right hon. Gentleman advocates for Committees. Is it not better for a Minister who realises that there may be consequences from the judicial interpretation of his words to be cautious in Committee rather than to express himself in gobbledegook?

Mr. Sheldon: The hon. Gentleman has far too rosy a view of Ministers' understanding of all possible consequences of legislation. All Ministers can do is give an explanation, to the best of their ability, of what the legislation is intended to achieve. A good Minister can make that explanation come to life, so that people better understand the intentions and the likely outcome of the legislation. The Minister's words are no guarantee—the guarantee is in the words of the legislation—but without an understanding of that legislation, the Committee will be much the poorer.

Mr. Forth: Perhaps I can put a slightly more positive gloss on what the right hon. Gentleman is saying. Many of us feared that televising the House would alter Members' behaviour, and I think that the right hon. Gentleman will agree that it did not. Very quickly, Members got used to the new ambience, and our behaviour reverted to its previous form. My experience is that, in the same way, Ministers who spend a lot of time in Standing Committees do not have Pepper *v.* Hart at the front of their minds. They behave naturally and are either effusively explanatory to the Committee or evasively secretive, and Pepper *v.* Hart does not inhibit their behaviour in long Committee proceedings.

Mr. Sheldon: I hope that the right hon. Gentleman is right. He should look at the Standing Committee that deals with the Finance Bill, where those matters come more to the fore. There are two different views of how our attitudes have changed since the coming of television, but I will not go into that.

Sir Nicholas Lyell: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for giving way as he was the subject of Pepper *v.* Hart. It was his midnight words in June 1976, if I remember rightly, when he was answering 90 questions put to him by a Committee that contained 12 future Cabinet Ministers and two future Chancellors, that were given so much weight in that interesting case. Does he agree that the courts have fortunately learned to be pretty cautious about using Pepper *v.* Hart too much? If that is their approach, I believe that they are wise.

Mr. Sheldon: I fully agree. I intervened before the right hon. and learned Gentleman came into the Chamber to explain the background to that case. They were clearly the most talented Opposition to have dealt with any Finance Bill. I was pursued in question after question. I could have ignored those questions, but I tried to be helpful. I was asked, "If that happens, what then?", "If that happens, what now?" I answered to the best of my ability.

When I heard about Pepper *v.* Hart, I turned to what I had said and, to my pleasure, I found that it was not bad. I could substantiate what I had said, but it could have been otherwise. It might have been a matter on which I had not worked too hard. There are dangers and it is as well for the House to understand that.

Clearly, the report deals with other valuable matters, but I wished to speak briefly to deal with those points.

5.32 pm

Mr. Paul Tyler (North Cornwall): I start with a confession. When the appointment of the Joint Committee was first mooted, in my capacity as Chief Whip I had to select someone to serve on it. As a new Chief Whip, I did not have anyone on whom I wanted to impose a great penalty, so I had to put myself on the Committee—and it has been an interesting experience.

I take issue with the right hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Mr. Sheldon), as the experience was interesting not least because of the impeccable

[Mr. Paul Tyler]

chairmanship of the noble Lord Nicholls. I agree with the right hon. Member for Swansea, West (Mr. Williams) that the best sort of chairman is someone who can rise above the discussion around the table. Lord Nicholls did so with great distinction and effect.

The draftsmanship of the report, which is uniquely well formed and educational for those of us who are not familiar with many of the topics, is very much due to Lord Nicholls and to the two Clerks. I put it on record that serving on the Committee was an instructive exercise.

We were appointed in July 1998 and we reported in March 1999, yet I think that I am right in saying that not one member left the Committee in that time, which is a tribute to the extent of people's commitment to its work. The business was complicated, but we did not get bored by its subtleties and complexities; that, too, is a tribute to the Chairman.

There were times when Members of this House, who worried that the pace of our business seemed to get slower, felt that the presence of so many lawyers, who tend to weigh the minutes in terms of guineas, slowed up the proceedings somewhat. However, the product that we produced is one of which both Houses should be proud.

I put on record the thanks of all members of the Committee—and I hope all Members of this House—to the former Leader of the House, the right hon. Member for Dewsbury (Mrs. Taylor), who is now the Parliamentary Secretary to the Treasury. I was disappointed this afternoon not because the President of the Council and Leader of the House was to introduce the debate, but because I did not see her right hon. Friend here. I had thought that this might be a unique political and parliamentary occasion if, for the first time in living memory, the Government Chief Whip could be allowed to dispel the illusion that he or she is speechless. It would have been a useful opportunity to break with that convention.

The fact that we went back to the Bill of Rights of 1689 has been mentioned. We dealt with three centuries of piecemeal attempts to tackle this difficult subject. Dead wood has been referred to in the debate and it was our job to adopt some sophisticated and comprehensive tree surgery to a complex and difficult bit of growth.

The right hon. Member for Swansea, West referred to a mishmash. Yes, there is a mishmash and I hope that, by bringing it all out into the open comprehensively, we have made it possible for Parliament to review the situation.

I do not accept the view of the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) that this is an opportunity to turn back the clock—far from it. Now is the opportunity to ensure that we drag this aspect of parliamentary procedures into the 21st century. If we do not do it now, those in the other place will perhaps have to do it for us—it looks as though they will be reformed before this House.

Privilege is a misnomer, as has been said. We are really talking about responsibility, immunity and freedom of speech, and what can be more central to the way in which Parliament serves the nation? Incidentally, when the Bill is introduced that will put these proposals into effect, I hope that we will call it not the parliamentary privilege Bill but something better. Even if the long title is more explicit, such a name is a switch-off and it gives the wrong impression to the world.

The Committee's proceedings were dominated by careful assessment of balance. We had to consider independence from the Executive, which is why the Bill of Rights was written—to ensure that never again would Parliament be unduly susceptible to pressure from the Crown. I hope that lawyers will agree that now, as then, Parliament should not be subject to judiciary appointed by the Crown, which was an issue then.

If it were not for the fact that time is getting on, I might be diverted into an analysis of how the Bill of Rights came to be and how my ancestor, Bishop Jonathan Trelawny—one of seven bishops—was arraigned in Westminster Hall and eventually, due to the good sense of a British jury, was let off. The judges were, of course, appointed by the Crown and it was a direct result of that case and the threat of the Cornish to march on London that we got the Bill.

The other balance that is extremely important is that between the individuals in this place and the citizens we represent. Their interests and protection are part of the reason for our protection, because we are representing them. We are defending the privilege of citizens of the British Isles to know that their representative in this place can speak up on their behalf, not the privilege of individual Members of Parliament.

Sir Nicholas Lyell: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. Does he agree that it is when the going gets rough and one aspect of opinion that is very unpopular needs to be mentioned, that these so-called privileges and immunities that grant real freedom of speech are at their most important?

Mr. Tyler: I agree with the right hon. and learned Gentleman and now that he is on the Opposition rather than the Government Benches I am delighted to hear him say that. As a member of, hopefully, a not too permanent minority, I am more used to that experience perhaps than he. He is right to say that every Member of Parliament should be well aware that the minority view must be given its opportunity. We are representing not ourselves, but minorities in the country and that is a principle to which we must attach enormous importance.

The Committee tried to grapple with the difficult problem of natural justice and the normal rights of the individual, be it the individual Member of Parliament—he or she has rights, too—or the citizen. Members of this House and those in the other place, whatever they are going to call themselves—senators, peers of the realm, lords of Parliament, or whatever—have rights in terms of natural justice. It is extremely important that we have what the right hon. Member for East Devon (Sir P. Emery) referred to, I think, as equity. We should not be treated differently and nor should citizens be treated less carefully when it comes to concerns about their rights.

That is why it is so important that we introduce as fast as possible comprehensive legislation on corruption. We cannot continue with a situation in which there appears to be one law for the legislators, and another law for the ordinary citizen. The sooner such legislation is enacted, the better.

As has been pointed out, there is a draft corruption Bill in our report, brought to us by the Home Secretary. If it is now kicked into touch or put on the back burner, the House has a right to know why that delay is taking place.

The Committee tried to recognise the facts of 21st century life. The right hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne referred to the internet. As I recall the discussion, it was not so much about whether parliamentary proceedings should or should not be publicised in that way, as about what their status would be if they were. It was not the responsibility of a Joint Committee on privilege to decide what should or should not be published, but we were concerned to ensure the appropriate level of protection for that publication. For both the electronic media and the broadcast media, we wanted to ensure that there were practical answers to practical questions.

Outside the House, it may be thought that the Committee's work on corruption and the extent to which the House disciplines itself was a knee-jerk reaction to a set of particular cases. That was decidedly not so. A discussion lasting 15 or 16 months is hardly a knee-jerk reaction. In any event, we were not obsessed by particular cases.

However, it has been pointed out by the right hon. Member for Swansea, West, who was much more involved than I, that there was widespread unease about the way in which a number of cases had to be dealt with. It was felt that the machinery in the House was fragile, inadequate and not up to the job. There was concern that had it not been for the fact that in at least one case, the person concerned admitted a number of charges and only one charge gave rise to dissension, we might have been in an extremely difficult situation in the House, or we might have been challenged outside.

As the report makes clear, the Committee was not happy with the way in which the previous arrangements had worked, and we wanted to create a more robust mechanism for the future. Were it not for the admission of various charges in those cases, we might have ended up with a parliamentary impasse which would have been gravely damaging. Reference is made to section 13 of the Defamation Act 1996. That reflects the recognition that there were fault lines in the system. We never anticipated such difficulties. In the report, we have managed to take a more sensible overview of the problems and the opportunities for improvement.

Reference has been made to the significance of Pepper *v.* Hart. Never having heard of Pepper *v.* Hart before joining the Committee, as I frankly confess, I found the discussion in the Committee and in the House this evening illuminating. It is important that we see that that judgment is being treated with wise caution by the courts, and rightly so.

As I understand it, the court may take account of what is said by a Minister in the circumstances described only if doubt exists. Where else is the court to turn? All too often in the past, because the court was prevented from taking note of what was said in the House in those circumstances, courts were left to make invidious decisions. It is surely better that if there is doubt, the court should be able to refer to the explanation of Ministers.

We heard exchanges earlier between former Ministers about the extent to which the arrival of the Pepper *v.* Hart judgment changed their attitude when answering questions in Committee. On balance, I would prefer Ministers to be cautious, rather than generously expansive, and to say, "I do not know the answer to that."

Sir Nicholas Lyell *indicated assent.*

Mr. Tyler: I see a distinguished former Minister nodding. I would prefer Ministers to say, "I will let the hon. Gentleman know at the next sitting", or to find some other way of providing information, rather than shooting from the hip and possibly getting into trouble with the courts. There is no harm in such caution.

I shall not refer in detail to all the other recommendations, which I support. The issue of the sub poena is realistically assessed in the report, and I hope that the courts will exercise their usual discretion in deciding whether an attempt to subpoena a Minister or a Member is vexatious or merely political. I hope that the courts will be sane and sensible in such circumstances.

Sir Nicholas Lyell *rose—*

Mr. Tyler: I hope that I am not about to be discouraged from that thought.

Sir Nicholas Lyell: Does the hon. Gentleman share my caution that Ministers who have been subpoenaed improperly, as has been mentioned in the debate, have frequently had to send lawyers, at considerable public expense, to prevent them being brought unjustifiably to court? Ought there to be some system whereby the House would assist or find some public means of assisting its Members who were unjustifiably subpoenaed, so that the courts could consider the arguments with proper representation?

Mr. Tyler: I was coming to that point, and I am extremely grateful for support from such a distinguished source. If a Minister is subpoenaed, the mechanisms are in place to deal with the matter, but an ordinary Member, or a Minister in the capacity of a constituency Member, could be put to considerable expense. I know that there have been such cases recently. I hope that the Minister will deal with the matter in his response, or that the Leader of the House will consider it urgently through the usual channels. The point could well be pursued, to the benefit of individual Members and of the House.

Regardless of whether we get a Bill soon and what it is called, a major exercise of education and information is necessary. One or two of the Committee's recommendations refer to that. For example, we state:

> "The rules and conventions concerning standards of conduct are in readily accessible form capable of being understood outside Parliament, as well as within".

That is relevant to witnesses who come before Select Committees, for example. It is of supreme importance that the law is seen to be observed, so people must understand how the issue is addressed in the two Houses.

Perhaps that exercise in education could extend to the media, which seem to find it increasingly difficult to understand our proceedings. I heard the exchange between the right hon. Member for East Devon and other hon. Members about the summons to the Bar of the House. I suspect that some reporters would think that a summons

[Mr. Tyler]

to the Bar of the House meant that they would be offered a drink. It is important for us to explain what is meant by such expressions.

I have some experience of that. When I was a Member in 1974, I had occasion to make a complaint about privilege, and my union, the National Union of Journalists, was to be summoned to the Bar of the House and was looking forward to it. The union was only dissuaded from that, and persuaded to apologise to the Chair, when it was realised that matters might go further and involve other penalties that were much less fun.

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): In 1967 I was summoned to the Bar of the House. The reaction of Mr. Callaghan, for example, was that he did not take part in blood rituals. That encapsulated the problem.

Mr. Tyler: I understand the hon. Gentleman's point, but my point stands that the summons is not as effective as the penalties that we suggest in the report.

My main point is that we are discussing not the privileges of individual Members of the House of Commons or of the other place, but those of Parliament—an institution—and our responsibility to ensure that we are able freely to conduct our business, represent our constituents and look after the nation's interests. That is why "privilege" is such a misnomer.

Finally, I have some points to put to the Minister. We must know this evening what the Government's intentions are, in broad terms. The Queen's Speech may give us more detail about the corruption Bill, but the whole House will be extremely concerned if it is being put on the back burner. The sooner we are told about that, the better.

No concerns about the broad thrust of the whole range of recommendations have been expressed this evening or during Committee proceedings. Although the Leader of the House said that they were tentative, I hope that the Government will express their major misgivings should they have any.

I can say on behalf of my party—I think that this is true of all parties—that we regard this matter as a parliamentary concern, not a question of party politics. Therefore, I hope that there will be a free vote across the House on it. Such a Bill is an absolutely excellent candidate for the procedure that we have adopted, on the recommendation of the Modernisation Committee, for pre-legislative scrutiny. Precisely such a Bill could be introduced rapidly as a draft measure and given the consideration it surely deserves.

5.51 pm

Mr. Bill Michie (Sheffield, Heeley): Having been put on the Committee, I was a little apprehensive about exactly what form it would take, but I found our proceedings, which lasted 15 months and produced 39 recommendations, absolutely stimulating to say the least. I recall boring my family to death by discussing every Saturday night what had happened the previous Tuesday morning when we spent four hours discussing the first paragraph of a draft report. Our discussions went on and on, but they were important and not at all boring.

The attendance tonight is not too bad, although there are not too many Members in the Chamber. That is the bad news. The good news is that, knowing the pecking order in this place, I would still be waiting to speak if many more Members of greater seniority were present. That is another matter which the Standards and Privileges Committee ought to consider on occasion.

Our proceedings were not dry in any shape or form, although there was plenty of dry humour, and I take the point about the Chairman of the Committee, who was very helpful. I have nothing but profound respect and gratitude for the way in which he conducted proceedings and, along with the other Lords and Members, helped the Committee. The Clerks in particular did a tremendous job for us. That appreciation should go on record. I do not think that the lawyers were on top, but it took a little bit longer to get our own way, which is always the case when lawyers are involved in any sort of discipline. I found their expertise very much to our advantage. I learned a lot as a member of the Committee, and I am sure that a lot of lords, including Lord Nicholls, did so as well.

A review of this nature is painstaking and it is obviously important not to throw the baby out with the bath water. I had some preconceived ideas about what I wanted to happen, but when I considered the way in which our procedures work and how they came about I learned day by day that the question of privilege is not a simple one to answer. There is no doubt that it is fascinating to discuss amending or codifying an unwritten constitution. The mind boggles because the constitution is not written down, but here we are discussing changing and modifying it. That was the job the Committee was given and I think that we did a good job, although that may sound like self-praise.

It is 30 years since the previous fundamental review of these matters and many circumstances have changed. I believe that the attitude of the people of this nation towards Parliament has changed. It was necessary to look at the way in which we run this place in any case, because the perception of it held by people outside is totally different from ours. In the light of events, we needed to consider changes and modification to achieve much more open and accountable Houses of Parliament while allowing Members to carry out their duties fully without fear or favour. That was one of the main planks of our discussions.

Chapter 1 of the review refers to

"Parliamentary privilege: its nature and origins"

and states:

"Parliamentary privilege consists of the rights and immunities which the two Houses of Parliament and their members and officers possess to enable them to carry out their parliamentary functions effectively. Without this protection members would be handicapped in performing their parliamentary duties, and the authority of Parliament itself in confronting the executive and as a forum for expressing the anxieties of citizens would be correspondingly diminished."

I fully believe that to be the case. Getting the right balance may have taken a long time, but we have arrived at it.

Members know from their own experience that people outside the House perceive us as members of a club, although we discipline some Members and interview them on certain occasions. From the outside, the House is seen as a club with privileges—an old boy network in which we all look after ourselves. The public were becoming

more and more critical and that was damaging the image of this place, so when we debate privileges we must make sure that we do not give the impression that we are self-serving. The media pick up on that impression—quite wrongly, on many occasions—and splash it about that we are looking after Members, but not looking after democracy and doing the job that we are supposed to do.

Nevertheless, we have to grasp the nettle. There is no doubt that we have to use our privileges—which are not personal privileges, but privileges of the House—to best effect to do our job properly on behalf of not only the country, but our constituents. The Joint Committee took all those points into account and we asked whether

"the law and practice of parliamentary privilege meet present and future needs? Do the existing procedures satisfy contemporary standards of fairness and public accountability? A modern code for parliamentary privilege should be principled and coherent."

Those matters were obviously discussed at great length because the public's perception was not always fair to us or to our constituents. The right to free speech, as provided for in article 9 of the Bill of Rights 1689, must not be misused or abused. We all understand that and have our own commitments and responsibilities.

I am glad that the Leader of the House has accepted the second option in the Home Office consultation paper, which is:

"To subject members of Parliament to the same corruption statutes as other people."

However, if there is to be a draft privileges Bill, I hope that some of the points of concern that were raised in Committee will be considered, for example the problem of who consents to the prosecution. I note that she said that that matter is likely to rest with the Attorney-General. I bored the Committee to death discussing when he would make such a decision—late, early or what? If we are not careful—and if, having weighed up the evidence, he thought that a case should be considered by the courts for prosecution—that very decision could prejudice the case for the defendant. I do not know a way round that. I suppose that we must hope that he does not have any more influence with the jury than does the Crown Prosecution Service when it makes such a decision.

Sir Nicholas Lyell: I am listening very carefully to the hon. Gentleman's speech. However, I do not think that he need worry about that aspect of the matter. The Attorney-General gives consent in very many cases—even in very high-profile ones, such as war crimes cases—but no one realises it. The fact that the Attorney-General has given consent will not weigh with the jury when it comes to consider the case.

Does the hon. Gentleman agree that to make hon. Members subject to corruption and bribery charges, as they may already be held to be in common law, does not mean that what is said and done in the Chamber or in Committee necessarily has to be made admissible in evidence? Does he agree that the two issues are distinct? Whatever his view on the matter, does he recognise that there are very real dangers for the immunities of the House if we go down the second route?

Mr. Michie: Yes, I do accept that there are dangers in taking the second route—which is why, time and again, the dilemma posed by the second route raised its head in Committee. However, I think that the position of hon. Members is slightly different, as it is a high-profile one, and one of our most senior peers has made a judgment that the courts should play a role in the matter. Nevertheless, I do not particularly disagree with the Committee's recommendation, and am happy that the Attorney-General will decide on prosecutions.

Section 13 of the Defamation Act 1996 has already been well rehearsed in the debate. I am happy that it will be replaced by a more general waiver, given by the Speaker, with the advice of a small Committee of senior Members. The Act was passed in a blaze of publicity, and for reasons that might have been good at the time, but the House and the Committee have made it quite clear that we have come to regret it.

I support the report's proposals, and hope that hon. Members will endorse them in today's debate. I also hope that we shall soon have a Bill that will not only clarify for hon. Members what they may and may not do—the Register of Members' Interests is certainly a step in the right direction—but give the public a better idea of how this place is run.

6.3 pm

Mr. Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield): It is a great pleasure to speak in this debate. I should like to apologise now if I am not able to be in the Chamber to hear the closing speeches, but I have an unavoidable engagement.

I found reading the report of the Joint Committee on Parliamentary Privilege extremely interesting, and have no reason but to endorse heartily the vast bulk of the proposals. The clarification that seems to be inherent in the way in which the Committee has approached the matter is very desirable. It is undoubtedly a tribute to the Chairman, and perhaps to a little bit of legal incisiveness that has been introduced into quite a murky area, that, in many respects, what emerges seems to be so clear. However, with that in mind, I hope that I may be forgiven if I flag up one or two potential problems.

A moment ago, my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for North-East Bedfordshire (Sir N. Lyell) touched on the difficulties in making corruption, in terms of what might be said in Parliament, a criminal offence. To make the position clear, all hon. Members are subject to the bribery provisions at common law, and we shall continue to be so if a statute is introduced.

The key issue that the House will have to decide is the extent to which it is prepared to waive its current privilege in what may be said or done in the House, if it were to transpire that that might be material evidence in bringing a prosecution for bribery or corruption against a Member of Parliament. Although I am quite prepared and open to persuasion on the issue, I have anxieties about how that waiver would work in practice.

A central principle of our privilege in the House is that we are given liberty to express our views as we like. As we know from some previous debates, it is often suggested—albeit not in a way, I hope, that would offend against the Speaker's or a Deputy Speaker's ruling—that some policy decisions or Executive decisions may have ulterior motives, serving other than the public benefit. It is a problem which the Minister and his colleagues face daily. It is also a problem that, less usually, individuals may face.

[Mr. Dominic Grieve]

Dealing with the problem is, of course, one of the reasons why the House has introduced the Register of Members' Interests. It is also one of the reasons why a very serious breach of the procedures of the House—effectively a contempt of the House—is committed if an hon. Member seeks to argue a case without making absolutely crystal clear what personal interest he or she might have in it. If someone were offering such an hon. Member a financial inducement, no more personal interest could possibly be found.

I am content with that system. If we start departing from it and saying that, when an allegation of corruption is made against a Member of Parliament, what he says in the House could be used upon a waiver of privilege, we shall be going down quite a dangerous road. I believe that it would lead to the risk that that device might be used against an hon. Member for improper purposes, and that it could give rise to a great deal of political discussion on the motives behind the bringing of the prosecution.

We have to face up to realities in all this. In the presence of the previous Attorney-General, my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for North-East Bedfordshire, let me say that I have never had the slightest doubt about the impartiality of his office. However, it remains the case that we have always accepted in the United Kingdom that the marriage of politics and the system of justice could not be neatly cut in two, as there will always be pressures with which to contend, even if an Attorney-General were not a Member of this place.

The further one goes down the road of trying to dissect the issue of parliamentary privilege and a Member of Parliament's role—to cut off various aspects of that role and to say, "In that respect, you shall no longer have that protection"—the more difficult the situation will become. The truth—as has been noted to be the case in not only the past, but the recent past—is that, if an hon. Member transgresses, he exposes himself to enormous opprobrium, and probably to the ruin of his career. That seems to be the suitable verdict upon someone who falls foul of the House's very clear rules on how we should conduct ourselves.

We shall raise very serious issues by carrying the matter further and saying that, in a trial for bribery or corruption, what is done in the House should be open to analysis in the courts. Although I should be happy to pursue the issue further if it is raised again, all I wish to do now is to flag up my anxieties about it.

I should like to deal with two other matters. There is a very important section in the report on the waiver of privilege. I had certain anxieties about the route that was taken in 1996, and believe that some of the problems—which are linked to what we have been talking about—stemmed from that hurried legislation. Therefore, on that basis, I should be very happy to consider alternatives.

When reading the report, however, I had some anxiety about the proposed alternative. As cases that may involve a waiver may well be the subject of considerable political polemic and contention, leaving to the House the power to decide whether a Member of Parliament may be able to avail himself of the right to waive privilege raises many anxieties about what might happen if a waiver were not granted.

Clearly, if the rules of the House were sufficiently tightly drawn in the way suggested in the report, so that the waiver would be granted except in cases in which the integrity and credibility of the House would be in some way in danger if it were, I see no great difficulty. However, my second anxiety is that unless that is the case there would be a real risk that a Member of Parliament seeking to bring a libel action might find himself unable to obtain the waiver because there was a majority in the House against it. That would be an undesirable politicisation of the issue. Unless the rules are clear, I would rather go back to the situation before 1996. It was unsatisfactory in some ways and did injustices to some, but at least it had the merit of clarity. Unless we are certain on the issue, we should not embark on change.

Mr. Peter Bottomley (Worthing, West): We cannot go back to the situation before 1996, but were we to do so it would mean going back to a situation before a newspaper made the claim that a Member of Parliament was barred. That was a novel idea brought forward by the newspaper.

With respect and delicacy, there is another revision of the law that might be useful. A year or two ago, the House authorities—which I do not define—made applications or representations in a court that Members of Parliament had not known about. That difficulty is well worth avoiding in future.

Mr. Grieve: I heartily agree with my hon. Friend's second point. That struck me as an extraordinary state of affairs. I also agree that the situation is evolving. There is no point in simply looking at historical precedent. We have to accept that the way in which the newspapers and the media operate and the problems that arise may change. I also accept that the situation in 1996 was novel. I am mindful of the problems and possible injustices that the 1996 legislation has caused. I am merely saying that if we are to take a further step on the issue, it had better be a step in the right direction and not one that we subsequently have cause to regret. The Committee's suggestions might work, but the rules will have to be tightly drawn so that only in exceptional circumstances would a waiver of privilege be denied to a Member of Parliament; otherwise we shall be in very difficult territory.

I concur with the view of the Committee on subpoenas. When I read the report, I was interested in the origins of the protection of a Member of Parliament from answering a subpoena. It is not to protect the Member from embarrassment, but to allow him to perform his services to the House. However, I suspect that if the provision has been used at all, it has tended to be used for the former rather than the latter reason. I do not know why Members of Parliament should have a greater protection than that afforded to the average citizen in this country from having to attend court on a subpoena.

Of course, subpoenas are grossly abused at times. As a barrister, I have seen it being done in court. That often puts a person to inconvenience. However, the court tends to take a dim view of litigants who subpoena witnesses unnecessarily. That undoubtedly provides considerable protection for anyone who receives a subpoena, including a Member of Parliament. If we add to that the requirement to explain and justify to a judge beforehand why the subpoena is required, there is ample protection.

If we want to go further, the solution might be to say that no Member of Parliament shall be subpoenaed or required to attend court during the sitting hours of the House. That would still allow plenty of time during the week for him to attend. In that way, nobody would be disadvantaged by being unable to attend in this Chamber, which is apparently the reason for the privilege.

I broadly welcome the report. It is useful when a Committee that puts itself so diligently to its task casts light on areas that are normally obscure. We are undoubtedly the beneficiaries, but it may well be worth reflecting a little before diving into legislation on all the recommendations.

6.15 pm

Sir Nicholas Lyell (North-East Bedfordshire): I am glad to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Beaconsfield (Mr. Grieve), whose last remarks were very wise. I endorse the majority of the report and pay tribute to those who served long and hard on the Committee, but I have one grave reservation. It comes back to the fundamental facet—privilege is in some ways an outdated word—of our membership of this place: freedom of speech. I entirely agree with the right hon. Member for Swansea, West (Mr. Williams) that freedom of speech is inviolable. Unfortunately, the report invites a dangerous attack on freedom of speech in relation to bribery and corruption.

I have no hesitation in saying that it is entirely right that Members of Parliament should be subject to the ordinary law of the land in relation to offences of bribery and corruption. If Members of Parliament allow themselves to be bribed, they should be able to be prosecuted. If they act corruptly, they should and can be prosecuted. However, that is not the issue. It is whether words spoken in the Chamber and in Committee and actions such as voting or the tabling of questions can be called in evidence, contrary to article 9 of the Bill of Rights.

Having been a Law Officer for a decade, I have given my fiat in a significant number of corruption cases. Corruption cases involving Members of Parliament are very rare and I doubt whether they would turn on what was said or done in Parliament. There is not likely to be any grave inhibition on the proper prosecution of Members of Parliament if, contrary to the recommendations in paragraph 168 of the report, the House determines—as it would be wise to do—that we should not waive our privileges in that regard.

We have the unfettered privilege of freedom of speech. In a sense, our privileges are those of the House, but more fundamentally than that they are the privileges of every citizen of this country. We have that privilege in order that the citizens of the United Kingdom—and, indeed, the world—may know that any Member of Parliament can speak his or her mind in the Chamber of the House of Commons or in Committee and can vote or ask a question without the slightest fear that what they say or do in the House may put them at risk of legal proceedings, either civil or criminal. It is not just a protection for Members of Parliament, but one of the fundamental safeguards of the liberties of every citizen. It is therefore unlikely that it will be waived, and, in so far as it is under attack in the report, albeit in the most courteous sense and with the most careful reasoning, it must be defended. Of course it is under attack in relation to bribery and corruption, and I have already made it clear that I have no hesitation in saying that Members of Parliament should be capable, as they are today, of being prosecuted for bribery. It is a common law offence.

In the only case in recent years, where our former colleague was rightly acquitted, Mr. Justice Buckley none the less held at an early stage that the offence of bribery applied to Members of Parliament. I have never had the slightest doubt about that, but we are having to balance one public interest against another—the public interest in our absolute right of freedom of speech against the public interest in enabling a Member of Parliament to be prosecuted. It is very important to appreciate that clearly because a prosecution can certainly proceed without reference to what is said or done in the House if it is likely to be a remotely strong case.

Let us consider for a moment the kind of cases that lead to prosecution for bribery or corruption. They tend to happen because somebody who is in a position to grant an advantage to somebody else—such as the chairman or an influential member of a planning committee—takes money quite improperly and corruptly in order to give an opinion or persuade colleagues to a ruling. That is pretty much the essence of an offence of corruption.

I have great sympathy with what was said earlier in the debate about our former colleague, the noble Lord Merlyn-Rees, who asked what he had ever said in the House that was of advantage to anybody. I do not think that he quite said that, but the humorous way in which I put it encapsulates the essence of what he had in mind. If people had to rely on what had been said in the House, I could see it being laughed about a good deal in court, in the way in which things get laughed out of court.

Paragraph 168 of the report argues that there will be very few prosecutions for corruption. It is also argued that it will be very rare that what is said or done in Parliament will have any relevance and that, therefore, the proposal is a minimal encroachment on our liberties. I beg strongly to disagree. The danger is that it is not the cases that do happen which encroach on our liberties; it is the cases that might happen. During my years as a Law Officer I saw a good deal of that.

Before turning to personal insights, we know perfectly well that the very business of politics is a matter of people seeking advantage, usually for totally proper reasons, of Government or of a Member of Parliament to try to persuade Government, and thus seeking and conferring advantage. That seeking and conferring of advantage is of the very essence of the proposed Bill. In preparing my thoughts, I wrote down some quotations.

Mr. Peter Bottomley: Drawing the House's attention to paragraph 168 was really useful. My right hon. and learned Friend is right to concentrate on the minor encroachment that it covers. Does he agree that if the Government intend to act on it, they should remember that Members of Parliament accused of taking some consideration for something they do in the House have broken the advocacy rule and probably others, so it will not be a question of letting them off? They can be exposed to a full investigation by the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards and, as right hon. and hon. Members, we can certainly look at what goes on in the House.

Sir Nicholas Lyell: I entirely agree with my hon. Friend. In a moment I shall make the same point in my own way.

I was searching for the very definition of corruption that is set out in the draft Bill prepared by the Law Commission which is to be found at annexe D on page 103 of the report. One has only to read that definition to see how many ingredients of the offence, without being in the least corrupt in themselves, are an essential part of political life every day. They include conferring advantages, soliciting advantages and doing something that one has a right to do in consequence of another's request, primarily in return for the conferring of an advantage. I am reminded again of the old joke where one person says that there is no such thing as gratitude in politics and somebody else replies, "Yes there is. Gratitude in politics is the confident expectation of favours in the future". Of course, that is the whole business of soliciting and conferring an advantage. It is a vital but, in some senses, a very quick jump between the perfectly honest and indeed noble activities in which we seek to engage ourselves in public life and the allegedly dishonest and corrupt abuse of those activities. Consequently, we are extremely vulnerable. Indeed, there will not be one of us who has not been accused of acting corruptly during his period here.

I was about to draw on my experience as a Law Officer. The Law Officer's Department receives reams of letters almost daily containing widespread allegations of corruption, usually of a totally footling and foolish sort, which are sincerely made by citizens who are disgruntled in one sense or another. There are reams of letters and every one of us will have received copies of them. I do not wish to trivialise this, but the ones to which one pays least attention start by being addressed to the Queen, then the Archbishop of Canterbury, then the Prime Minister and copied to ourselves as Members of Parliament.

Sir Patrick Cormack: Underlined in green ink.

Sir Nicholas Lyell: As my hon. Friend rightly says, they are underlined in green and red ink. However, a number of those letters, although they are deeply saddening, are from people who have suffered the misfortunes of life which they believe are the result of corruption.

In the tough interplay of politics, people say and begin to believe that things which are done at least not corruptly are corrupt. I shall not mention them because I do not wish to give the slightest indication of corruption, but if right hon. and hon. Members present in the Chamber think back over a certain number of matters in the past two years where substantial sums of money have been paid by one person to another for one reason or another, it is not too difficult to suggest, quite wrongly, that there was an element of corruption in them. Where is this leading to in my speech? We should be confident that such accusations of corruption, which are frequently made, can never in themselves lead us into courts—either civil or criminal—in respect of anything which we say or do in this Chamber. If we do anything corrupt outside the Chamber, we can be brought to justice.

Sadly, my hon. Friend the Member for Worthing, West (Mr. Bottomley) has had to leave the Chamber just as I have got to his point. New rules of the House have properly been put in place in the past four or five years. If we transgress them, perhaps by failing to declare a consultancy—I have never held a consultancy, although I do not regard the practice as dishonourable, provided that it is properly declared—a financial interest or a foreign trip, we are likely to be either lightly reprimanded or severely censured and put on the rack through the procedures of the House. That is an advance under the modernisation of our procedures that I totally applaud.

We come back to the fundamentals. We should be liable to prosecution for bribery or corruption if there is a case to answer, and I agree that we need the filter of the Attorney-General. I entirely agree with my successor, the right hon. and learned Member for Aberavon (Mr. Morris), who said to the Committee that the decision could be very difficult, especially if it relates to someone of one's own party, because there is always the great danger of leaning over backwards, and the proper stance is not to lean either forwards or backwards but to remain completely upright, but it is certainly necessary to require the Attorney-General's consent before a proceeding for corruption can be brought against a Member of Parliament.

It has always been the law that any proceeding for corruption must have the Attorney-General's fiat. That should continue. There is no need to draw a distinction between Members of Parliament and other citizens in that respect, but we are not as other citizens in the privileges that we enjoy and the duty that we have to speak up on difficult and controversial issues.

It is when the going gets rough and there is a witch hunt, and ideas of treachery, corruption or collusion are most rife, that the need to speak up bravely, and the dangers of doing so, are most pertinent. It is our duty to protect the integrity of the House against any diminution of our freedoms. Consequently, although I commend so much of the report, I ask that we think very carefully again on that aspect.

6.33 pm

Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours (Workington): I want to raise some matters of privilege that perhaps the Committee has not dealt with fully. I have been in and out of the Chamber today, as I have had other duties, including attending a Standing Committee on Delegated Legislation. I have not read the full report, but I have read the summaries and had conversations with colleagues over the past few months. I was surprised by the radical nature of some of the conclusions.

We should consider the process of dealing with privilege for an individual Member of Parliament and the way in which the Standards and Privileges Committee investigates issues of privilege and contempt. The present system is not working as it should. In 1981, I brought a complaint against the chairman of British Steel as I believed that there had been a breach of privilege. The Speaker, if he or she is so disposed, gives the individual Member the right to table a motion that is given precedence on the Floor of the House—it is taken straight after questions—to seek the approval of the House to refer the matter to the Committee.

That procedure is fundamentally wrong. It is wrong for the Speaker to have to decide whether the issue warrants being given that priority over the rest of the day's business. The Speaker is placed in a very difficult

position. The decision cannot readily be deferred because it has to be taken on receipt of the complaint, which has to be made as soon as it is possible to report the breach to the Speaker. The Joint Committee might have considered a different procedure whereby the matter could be referred, if not directly by the Member to the Committee, at least by a truncated process. The Speaker, sitting in his or her quarters, might take the decision on behalf of the House.

The Social Security Committee—or was it the Liaison Committee?—referred a complaint to the Standards and Privileges Committee about the leaking of documents, so a Committee can refer a complaint and thereby route round the Speaker. I want an individual Member to have a fast route for application to have a complaint considered by the Standards and Privileges Committee.

Mr. Sheldon: To clarify the point, the complaint came from the Social Security Committee to the Liaison Committee and eventually came before the Standards and Privileges Committee.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: I am also concerned about what happens when the complaint gets to the Standards and Privileges Committee. I have served on the Members' Interests Committee and its successor post-Nolan from 1983, although I missed a couple of years. The mechanisms whereby we deal with privilege are wrong. The commissioner for standards and privileges—not the Commissioner for Standards—should be given the power to carry out the investigation in precisely the same way as she currently carries out investigations on matters of standards.

I argue that for precisely the same reason for which I argued for the new structure long before it was introduced: I believe that there is a danger that the Committee can be politicised during the process of considering a complaint against a Member in the period before a general election. My experience is that that is precisely what has happened. To be honest, that is always likely to happen. There will always be members of the Standards and Privileges Committee who have an element of political consideration in mind when considering such matters.

Under the standards procedure, that is no longer possible, because the commissioner—acting independently, and as an Officer of this House—assumes responsibility for the investigation. The investigation should be carried out by the commissioner under another procedure, who would report to the Standards and Privileges Committee in exactly the same way as she does now on standards. The result would be a more neutral consideration of the important issues.

I do not wish to refer to individual complaints, but I can think of one where I am convinced that consideration of the matter under the heading of privilege was being distorted before the general election.

I wish to refer to privilege as it relates to the protection of Members of Parliament in the carrying out of their public duties. "Erskine May" refers to harassment and molestation of a Member of the House of Commons, and defines the circumstances in which a Member might feel in a position to bring a complaint. I wish to give an example of Members not being given sufficient protection.

Last year, I was harassed at home by a Manchester business man. He rang me repeatedly and harassed me and my family. I reported the matter to Cumbria police, and the man got the message and stopped before the police had to intervene. Had I been prepared to identify the person, and had I referred the matter to Madam Speaker, she would—if I had provided evidence—probably have given it precedence. The matter would have stood referred to the Committee, which would have had to reach a judgment.

If my understanding of the system is correct, the person involved would have been brought before the House of Commons. However, the system does not necessarily deal with someone who is harassing a Member of Parliament. The person can be brought before the Privileges Committee of the House in so far as he is interfering with my rights as an individual Member of Parliament and preventing me from carrying out my public duties without fear of intimidation. In reality, we have no right to impose any penalty.

Equally, we could say that the matter could be referred to the police. However, because of all kinds of issues—I keep hearing one in particular: that it is "not in the public interest"—I am not convinced that there would be a prosecution. Parliament should be able to say to the authorities and the police that we require that the person involved in the intimidation be arraigned before the courts and prosecuted. That is what Members need to protect them from harassment by someone outside.

The harassment of me last year arose when I was investigating the background of the prosecution of Mr. Owen Oyston for rape. I had interviewed some 60 people in Lancashire over a couple of recesses and during the parliamentary term. I was carrying out the interviews with another person, a journalist named Andrew Rosthorne. He, it could be argued, has been acting as my agent. On 11 October, Mr. Rosthorne received 89 phone calls on his mobile phone from the same person who was harassing me. The calls were traced through Cellnet.

Mr. Rosthorne is writing a book about the matter, and we converse all the time about the case, and about another case that is coming before Preston Crown court concerning a Preston councillor, in which we feel equally under pressure from people who do not want us to get close to the truth. In so far as he is acting partly as my agent, Mr. Rosthorne needs some protection, but he has no protection whatever.

Mr. Rosthorne received 89 calls on one day and was harassed over three weeks. He was harassed last week on the telephone, and he can do very little about it. He has been to Blackburn police station to report the incidents, and he has referred the matter to Cellnet. However, he is being intimidated and harassed, and I am directly connected with him. For all I know, two or three of the strange phone calls that we received last week—one of which we managed to tape—were attempts to harass me as well. However, I have been unable to trace the calls.

This person is harassing a Member of Parliament and people outside involved in gathering information for that Member of Parliament. We are being impeded in our public duties. No process provides me with any sense of protection, and I believe that these matters should be considered not by the Joint Committee but by the powers-that-be when they consider legislation. Such

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legislation could go further than bribery and corruption. It might have to go into other areas where Members feel that they need protection.

I am worried about the legal position of the Intelligence and Security Committee, of which I am a member. As far as I am concerned, we are not a Committee of Parliament—to which I take strong exception. I believe strongly that our Committee should be a Committee of Parliament, enjoying all the privileges of Parliament, but it does not have those privileges. That will have to be discussed. The Committee might have looked at it—perhaps it is my fault for not drawing it to its attention. Perhaps the Government will consider what I am saying this evening.

Under present arrangements, the Standards and Privileges Committee cannot compel Members from the other place to appear before a Committee of the Commons. We can ask them, and they can agree to do it.

Mr. Alan Williams: That matter is referred to specifically in the report, which recommends that the Committee should be free to call such Members.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: Absolutely—I read that recommendation. However, the recommendation is that we would have the right to bring before any Committee of the Commons a Member of the other place. That is my interpretation of the recommendation.

I wish to refer to an inquiry by the Standards and Privileges Committee into the case of a complaint against Lord Steel, who is now the Presiding Officer of the Scottish Parliament. The complaint was that, in 1997, he failed to supply an employment agreement in relation to £93,700 that he had received from the Countryside Movement. The complaint was upheld by the Committee. In other words, he was found to be in error.

The Committee's investigation took place after the general election. Lord Steel failed to make the declaration and submit the agreement before the election. If he had done so, it would have been an issue in the election, as a Liberal Democrat would have been identified with that contribution when we debated hunting. We could have asked him to appear before us, but we did not. Why not? The answer is simple: we could do nothing about it. Lord Steel had gone. He had flown off to the other place. We could not punish him by suspending him. In fact, we could do nothing to him. That is why the Committee could have gone a little further in its recommendations. We should have the right to require members of the other place to attend, but we should also have the right to impose a penalty on them for transgressions while they were Members of this House.

The Committee report on the Steel case states:

"We agree with the Commissioner on the failure to deposit an employment agreement."

Had Lord Steel still been a Member of the House of Commons, we would have called on him to deposit a record of the relevant information, even though the period of employment had ceased. However, he managed to avoid justice in the House of Commons because he had left to go to the House of Lords. Perhaps the Committee should have considered that issue, and perhaps I was remiss in failing to draw it to its attention, but I am sure that the Government will wish to consider the matter when they conduct their general review of arrangements.

6.51 pm

Mrs. Eleanor Laing (Epping Forest): It is always a pleasure to listen to the hon. Member for Workington (Mr. Campbell-Savours). I do not often agree with him, but—as many people have said before me—I defend for ever his right to say it. That is what we are talking about this evening and I am sorry that so few hon. Members are present when we are considering an important and fundamental issue of democracy. Perhaps their absence is a measure of the trust that they have in those of us who are present to defend their rights.

I will immediately contradict myself, because we are talking about not the rights of Members of Parliament as individuals, but their rights as representatives of the electorate. In that respect, I am pleased to agree with the Leader of the House today when she said that the two key issues are freedom of speech and the right of Parliament to conduct its own affairs. We can all agree with that.

It has been an education to hear the wealth of wisdom and experience from right hon. and hon. Members who have spoken today, many of whom have taken part in the thorough determinations of the Committee. I am glad that we all agree that the report is a good basis for future action. My hon. Friend the Member for South Staffordshire (Sir P. Cormack) set out the position of many of my right hon. and hon. Friends with his usual eloquence and clarity. I am sure that the House will agree with his point that this debate is essential to democracy, and that his statement that it is important to build on what is tried and tested will prove to be correct.

I also share the concerns expressed by my hon. Friend about the development of judicial review and the effect of the judgment in Pepper *v.* Hart. Some of my hon. Friends have suggested that that was a bad judgment and other hon. Members have suggested that it was a good judgment. However, we are all agreed that it was an important judgment in taking forward the relationship between the workings of Parliament, the judiciary, the court system and Ministers and Back Benchers. The case certainly deserves consideration. It might well be a good thing to encourage Ministers to be more careful and more accurate in their answers in Standing Committees that are considering Bills.

One concern that has emerged from today's debate is the potential conflict between Parliament and the courts. We were privileged—in the ordinary sense—to have the benefit of the experience and wisdom of the right hon. Member for Swansea, West (Mr. Williams). I understand his point about the importance of penalties, but I do not understand the suggestion that a certain sum might have more value to Labour Members than to Conservative Members. As far as I am aware, all Members of Parliament who do not hold ministerial office have the same salary. Deprivation of a certain sum would have the same effect on everyone, in or out of Parliament.

Mr. Alan Williams: It was the hon. Member for Altrincham and Sale, West (Mr. Brady) who said that a

certain sum would be worth different amounts to different Members of Parliament. It was not my observation: I merely responded to it.

Mrs. Laing: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for elucidating that point. Perhaps I would agree with it if I won the lottery tonight and was, therefore, less concerned about how far my parliamentary salary would go next month.

I was pleased to hear the points made by my right hon. Friend the Member for East Devon (Sir P. Emery), who, as usual, brought wisdom and experience to our debate. I wholeheartedly agree with him about the vital and fundamental importance of freedom of speech. It might be our right now as parliamentarians, but it is our right only because it has been fought for over centuries on our behalf. Therefore, it is our duty to protect it. I hesitate to say this, because I have never found myself in disagreement with my right hon. Friend before and I am happy to take his advice on many matters, but I cannot quite agree with him on his proposal that the sub judice rule should be more flexible. That is another issue that calls into question the potential conflict between Parliament and the courts.

I was also interested to hear what my right hon. Friend the Member for East Devon had to say about privilege at press conferences that happened to take place under the roof of this building. I disagree with my right hon. Friend on that point. People at press conferences in this building should not be subject to privilege in the same way as those who participate in proceedings in this Chamber, and other proceedings in Committees that are reported to this Chamber. That issue highlights another point of great importance that my right hon. Friend did not mention as such. When important matters are being announced, they should not be announced to press conferences in other Rooms in this building. Ministers should be questioned and held to account not by journalists in press conferences in front of television cameras, but by the representatives of the electors here in this Chamber. This is where matters Ministers should bring matters to the attention of the House or of the public. It is almost as important as freedom of speech itself that hon. Members should be able to question Ministers and hold them to account here in the Chamber.

My right hon. Friend the Member for East Devon made a fourth good point on the same theme. Would the supposed bravado of journalists, to which some Labour Members referred, be so evident if they were to be brought to the Bar of the House to answer questions?

Mr. Campbell-Savours: They would love it.

Mrs. Laing: The hon. Member for Workington says that they would love it, but, although they might want to feed off the publicity, would they love it in fact? My right hon. Friend the Member for East Devon distinguished between journalists and editors, and newspaper proprietors. If proprietors or editors wanted to publish a leaked report, it is possible that the threat of being brought before the Bar of the House would deter them. They are used to saying, "Publish and be damned", but I wonder how they would feel about being held to account themselves.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: The villain of the piece is not the journalist, but the Member of Parliament who leaks the document, and that is who should be held to account. The House has never been prepared to consider the possibility that leak inquiries should be carried out on oath. That is how we should tackle the leaking of documents. We should not penalise the people in the Press Gallery. There is no one there now, as is usual with the great and important occasions in this House, but that is another matter. We must avoid conflict with the press at all costs. Journalists are totally free.

Mrs. Laing: Once again, I find myself in disagreement with the hon. Gentleman. If someone takes the responsibility of using a document—or any other item—that he or she has procured by false means, that person must take the risk of being held to account. The hon. Gentleman and I should perhaps leave this dispute to another day, but I agree with him about the importance of defending the freedom of the press.

Mr. Bercow: I fear that my hon. Friend was finding the arguments of the hon. Member for Workington (Mr. Campbell-Savours) a little trying, but would she agree that it would be a matter of the utmost seriousness if the practice of journalistic freedom were to endanger people's lives—for example, the lives of witnesses to a criminal trial? Should we not deprecate such conduct?

Mrs. Laing: I agree with my hon. Friend, who makes a good point. I hope that we can continue this important discussion on another occasion.

It was also a pleasure to listen to the right hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Mr. Sheldon). I can understand his unease about having a lawyer as Chairman of the Joint Committee on Parliamentary Privilege. I am a lawyer—or was once—although I was never as distinguished as Lord Nicholls of Birkenhead. However, I remind the right hon. Gentleman that peers remain parliamentarians, even after last night's sad events.

The Parliamentary Secretary, Privy Council Office (Mr. Paddy Tipping) *indicated dissent.*

Mrs. Laing: The Minister appears to question my use of the word "sad". Our history was changed in another place last night, and I believe that that was a sad sight. My point is merely that noble Lords are parliamentarians even when they are lawyers too, like many hon. Members.

Mr. Bill Michie: Don't call me a lawyer.

Mrs. Laing: I would not dream of insulting the hon. Gentleman in that way.

It was fascinating to hear the account of the right hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne of the birth of the controversial Pepper *v.* Hart decision. I understand his reservations about the effect of that decision, but surely the process of interpretation by the courts is similar to the process of interpretation of the law in Committee. The Committee has a duty to look in great detail at the law

[Mrs. Laing]

while it is being made. That is the duty of all of us who are legislators. The court has a duty to examine the precise words of the law as they are to be applied. However, the same standards should apply, as the meaning and complexity of the words do not change.

I agree that Finance Bills are often extremely complex. If the Pepper *v.* Hart judgment encourages Ministers to be more careful and precise in their answers to questions in Committee, surely that is a good thing.

Sir Nicholas Lyell: I have two brief points to make about Pepper *v.* Hart. First, it has had the good effect of causing Ministers to be careful in explaining the purport of a Bill, and certainly the right hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Mr. Sheldon) did a magnificent job at the time of the case in 1976.

Secondly, it shows proper openness towards our debates. It is entirely right that the world at large should be able to read what is said and done in Parliament, and that the courts should be able to draw comfort from that, and assistance where that is available. However, courts have to be careful in the sense that it is often difficult to construe by a Minister's particular words—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The right hon. and learned Gentleman's intervention is far too long.

Sir Nicholas Lyell: I shall cut myself short.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The right hon. and learned Gentleman has finished.

Mrs. Laing: It is always a pleasure to give way to my right hon. and learned Friend, as he understands these matters extremely well. Perhaps I can return to this matter in a moment, and he can finish his point if I give way to him again.

Another point occurred to me as I listened to the description from the right hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne about what happened in the Committee that gave rise to the Pepper *v.* Hart judgment. Surely the courts will consider the weight or significance of any fact, witness or evidence put before them. I venture to suggest that the explanations given by some Ministers—for example, by the right hon. Gentleman or by my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for North-East Bedfordshire (Sir N. Lyell)—would carry more weight or significance than the explanations given by others whose grasp of detail may not be so sure. As ever, it is up to the courts to decide whether the evidence given under the Pepper *v.* Hart rule is good evidence, or not.

Sir Nicholas Lyell: Does my hon. Friend agree that Pepper *v.* Hart is benign because it enables a clearer interpretation of statutes by Parliament, although it should be used with caution? Does she also agree that it is benign because it offers no threat to proceedings in the House, in comparison with my previous point about what is said and done in the House being used against an hon. Member in subsequent civil or criminal proceedings?

Mrs. Laing: Yes, I agree. I am glad that my right hon. and learned Friend has had the chance to finish making his point.

The hon. Member for North Cornwall (Mr. Tyler) introduced an element of political correctness. He does not like the use of the word "privilege". I must disagree strongly with him. To speak in Parliament is a privilege that we exercise on behalf of the electorate. There is nothing politically incorrect about the word.

I agree with the hon. Gentleman that Parliament must be free from interference. In the 17th century, that interference came from the Crown, and that is why the Bill of Rights of 1689 was necessary. Other influences today may attempt to interfere with Parliament. One of the clearest examples from today's debate is the potential for conflict between Parliament and the judiciary, and the effects on our legislative and democratic processes of the development of judicial review. I dare to suggest that certain senior judicial appointments should in future be considered by Parliament. Some judges should not merely be appointed, but be subject to scrutiny beforehand. That would be an important safeguard of the separation of powers, one of the most important conventions of our constitution and safeguards of our freedom.

Mr. Bercow: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mrs. Laing: I am told that I have taken rather a long time, so I ask my hon. Friend to forgive me for not giving way. Hon. Members are anxious to conclude the debate, and reasonably so.

A future committee might be appointed to consider scrutiny of judicial appointments. If freedom of speech for Members extends to the Chamber, should it not also extend to certain written correspondence between Members and Ministers?

Mr. Bercow: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mrs. Laing: Of course I will.

Mr. Bercow: I am exceptionally grateful to my hon. Friend. It is dangerous of me to disobey the instructions of the Whips, but I do so in extremis. Does my hon. Friend agree that parliamentary scrutiny of future judicial appointments would be less necessary were it not for an exponential increase in judicial review and the recent passage of the Human Rights Act 1998?

Mrs. Laing: I agree entirely. My hon. Friend makes an excellent point and I am sorry that he was not here earlier to make a full speech. Judicial appointments are extremely important and entirely relevant to the points before us.

It seems logical that if the words spoken in the House and questions answered by Ministers in the House are privileged, correspondence between Members and Ministers on matters before the House should also be privileged.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To some extent.

Mrs. Laing: That is fair enough. As the Joint Committee clearly enjoyed deliberating on the report before us, it may wish to consider the points that I have raised. The hon. Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Mr. Michie) suggested earlier—he has disappeared from his place, but I can see him—that he very much enjoyed the Committee's proceedings. We have enjoyed hearing his account of them. However, these matters are not merely matters of enjoyment, but matters of the historic development of our democracy.

As ever, it was a pleasure to hear my hon. Friend the Member for Beaconsfield (Mr. Grieve), who has already apologised for being unable to be here now. He, like my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for North-East Bedfordshire, is a learned Member, whether or not he is entitled formally to the accolade. He makes extremely good points from his position as a practising lawyer. I understand his anxiety about the waiver of privilege proposed in the report, and about the consequent possible introduction of a party political aspect to these matters. However, I sincerely hope that he is wrong, and that those fears are unfounded. The House should continue to put the working of democracy and the dignity of the House above party politics.

The same applies to some of the concerns expressed by the hon. Member for Workington. I hope that his concerns will also prove unfounded, but it would be bad for the House and for democracy if he and my hon. Friend were not wrong to believe that the proceedings of the House and matters of judgment of privilege will become party political footballs. I hope that both hon. Members are wrong.

My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for North-East Bedfordshire concluded with distinction that when we are considering amendment of such a fundamental piece of the democratic structure as the Bill of Rights—one of the foundations of our democracy and of the many democracies around the world that are based on ours—we must not become carried away. We must realise that the rights that had to be protected in 1689 were considerably different from those of 1999. It is a question of balance. The most important part of the Committee's report is on page 2 of the executive summary, which states:

"The Joint Committee concluded that corruption, a serious and insidious offence, can only be dealt with effectively by using the police and the courts."

[Interruption.] No, it appears that whoever is missing cannot be found at all.

Change is a question of balance. In commending the report, we are giving up a little—

Mr. Bercow: Would my hon. Friend allow me to intervene?

Mrs. Laing: No, I must disappoint my hon. Friend. It really is time that I concluded. It is a question of balance and, in commending this report, we are relinquishing some of the freedoms that were granted by the Bill of Rights many centuries ago.

Sir Nicholas Lyell *rose—*

Mrs. Laing: I cannot give way even to my right hon. and learned Friend.

We are gaining a balanced privilege that is more relevant to the present day. There will be few prosecutions for bribery and other insidious offences through the courts. As the report says, the occasions when a court will be called upon to question a parliamentary proceeding will be rare. Therefore, I conclude that it is a question of balance and that the report should be commended.

Although this is an Adjournment debate, it is also a take-note debate and I hope that Parliament as a whole will have the opportunity to reflect on the many valuable points raised today.

7.21 pm

The Parliamentary Secretary, Privy Council Office (Mr. Paddy Tipping): The hon. Member for Epping Forest (Mrs. Laing) has wound up the debate so comprehensively that there is little left for me to add. I noticed that she received a great deal of advice during her speech. In fact, I thought at one stage that she was going to talk about grammar schools in Boston and Skegness—but I have a feeling that the House may have missed the opportunity to discuss that subject tonight.

Like other hon. Members, I thank Lord Nicholls and the Joint Committee for their hard work. The report is extremely well written and easy to understand and I know that it has been well received, not only in this place but across the Commonwealth.

I was struck by Committee members' references to creative tension. Some Committee members were pressed men—such as my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Mr. Michie) and, I suspect, my right hon. Friend the Member for Swansea, West (Mr. Williams)—and others, such as the hon. Member for North Cornwall (Mr. Tyler), volunteered to serve. The subject clearly suited the hon. Member for South Staffordshire (Sir P. Cormack), who made an important contribution to the debate.

It was clear from the speeches of those hon. Members who served on the Committee that they believe that the work is valuable. They are excited about this rather dry subject and their thinking has developed. Their enthusiasm spread to other hon. Members during the debate. The hon. Member for South Staffordshire said that the report has not received much attention, but I have a feeling—I will put it no stronger than that—that the report will develop a head of steam. This is the beginning of a very important debate.

The Committee report addresses Parliament, and Parliament must consider the issues and decide how to proceed. This debate has provided an important opportunity to listen to different views, of which many have been expressed. Some of my hon. Friends sought to extend the debate. My hon. Friend the Member for Workington (Mr. Campbell-Savours) was keen to add things to the Committee report, and we have noted his comments.

[Mr. Paddy Tipping]

In opening the debate, my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House made it clear that the Government generally support the report. She put down only two markers on matters about which she required some advice. She flagged first the issue of relinquishing the power to imprison and introducing a fine instead. She asked candidly for different views on the subject, and that is what she got—there was no consensus in the House. We must take stock of the discussion and decide how to proceed.

There was also some argument about breaches and the early publication of Select Committee reports. We all accept that the person who leaks a report is liable to severe punishment, but I am not as convinced as some hon. Members that dragging journalists and even proprietors to the Bar of the House will have much value. I think that it will tend to pour petrol on the fire rather than extinguish it. Nevertheless, we sought views about this issue at the beginning of the debate and we must reflect upon the comments that have been made.

Mr. Bercow: I note the tender mercy that the Minister displays towards the journalistic profession—a tendency with which many hon. Members on both sides of the House would concur. Will he comment specifically on the point raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Epping Forest (Mrs. Laing)? She said that Ministers suspected of leaking Government or other documents should be obliged to respond to questioning and to do so under oath. If Ministers are not guilty, they will have nothing to fear from such investigations.

Mr. Tipping: If the hon. Gentleman will contain himself for 24 hours, he will receive the benefit of the advice that the Prime Minister intends to issue to Ministers. This is a trailer of coming attractions—it is a leak. The best is yet to come, and I urge the hon. Gentleman to watch the screen tomorrow.

Mr. Bercow *rose—*

Mr. Tipping: I must make some progress.

There has been much discussion of Pepper *v.* Hart, but no one mentioned judicial review except in passing. I believe that it is more corruptive and pervasive than the Pepper *v.* Hart judgment and I believe that we should reflect carefully upon the whole matter of judicial review. My right hon. Friend the Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Mr. Sheldon), who has much experience in this area, asked whether Pepper *v.* Hart had changed the behaviour of Ministers in Committee. It is a question of balance: the Minister responding to questions must try to be open while providing correct and factual answers. It is important to strike the right balance.

Mrs. Laing: I agree with the Minister's comments about judicial review. As a consequence of judicial review, the judiciary is becoming more powerful and getting involved in legislating. Therefore, does the Minister agree that the judiciary should be subject to scrutiny before appointment?

Mr. Tipping: We can look at organisation in different ways. The current mood of the House is that Select Committees, for example, should have a greater say in judicial appointments, and the matter deserves careful consideration over a long period. If the hon. Lady is seeking a personal opinion, I believe that we should have that debate; there is a lot to be said for reviewing our procedures. That is what we are doing today.

To return to Pepper *v.* Hart, we must recognise that Government lawyers, more than anyone else, like and rely on that judgment. Therefore, the Government have no intention of changing that convention, whatever the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) might think. He did not like something so he wanted to turn back the clock. My right hon. Friend the Member for Ashton-under-Lyne referred to turning the clock backwards or forwards in relation to the internet. He has conducted a long and strong campaign to make Select Committee proceedings available on the internet the following day and he is clearly making progress with Ministers' evidence. I believe that technology will drive change—it is sometimes irresistible. As we move through the information age, we will have to change our practices.

Other Members, including the right hon. and learned Member for North-East Bedfordshire (Sir N. Lyell) and the hon. Member for Beaconsfield (Mr. Grieve), referred to the difficulties that arise. These are complex matters. There is an understanding in the Chamber that we need clarity and certainty. People often tell me that they do not mind what rules there are, provided that they know for certain what they are. Those Members who talked about the need for clarity, certainty and transparency—for a clear and rational understanding that is not driven by political considerations—made some of the most important points of the debate.

It is essential to discuss the way forward. In opening the debate, my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House made it clear that there was a general welcome for the proposals—the vast majority of the 39 proposals are acceptable. There are problems with some of them, but, with thought and discussion, those problems can be resolved. After the debate in this House, our colleagues in the House of Lords will want a similar debate. The point was made that these matters also affect that House. It will not be long before their lordships also discuss the report, although that is a matter for them.

Throughout the debate, reference has been made to the Law Commission's draft report on corruption. There is clearly a desire among hon. Members that it should not be kicked into the long grass, as one hon. Member put it. I assure hon. Members that that is not the case. The Home Office is actively working on the draft Bill, but it is still holding consultations. At this time of the parliamentary year, it would be most unwise—especially with my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House sitting beside me—for me to give any indication of when legislation will be introduced. However, the matter has certainly not been put on the back burner.

Mr. Tyler: As the Leader of the House is sitting on the Treasury Bench, will the Minister tell us whether such a Bill might be a candidate for the pre-scrutiny review that we found so useful in a number of other non-contentious cases?

Mr. Tipping: If the hon. Gentleman reads the record, he will see that when my right hon. Friend opened the debate, she pointed out that the matter was a clear

candidate for pre-legislative scrutiny. I hope that it may be possible to produce a Bill in the not too distant future and to put it out for consultation, because although the issues are complex, it would be fairly easy to make progress on them.

The hon. Member for South Staffordshire rightly pointed out that we could take some action now; he mentioned the laws on sub judice, although I think that that is one of the more difficult examples. My impression is that whatever action we took, matters would remain more or less the same, in that the Speaker currently has great powers of discretion. As everyone is aware, these are extremely difficult issues. The hon. Gentleman said that we could also make progress on giving advice to witnesses who appear before Select Committees. I think that we could make some progress in that respect.

However, the real way to make progress is to go ahead on the recommendations of the Joint Committee report—to task it either to the Modernisation Committee or to the Procedure Committee. The Procedure Committee is already following up some comments on parliamentary papers. My right hon. Friend the Leader of the House is minded to ask those Committees to explore those matters so that we can develop and implement good practice before introducing a new Bill—whatever it is called. It might be called the Parliamentary Privileges Bill, or it might have a more modern title if people would prefer that. However, we shall need more legislation.

Some Members pointed out that we last considered this subject in 1967, and that little progress has been made since that time. However, the Government set up the Joint Committee and asked it to undertake its work. We have accepted most of its recommendations; we are keen to make progress. It is important to modernise, but we should draw on our traditions. We must ensure that Parliament as a body takes seriously its rights and responsibilities. The Joint Committee report is a cornerstone on which we can build.

Sir Peter Emery: I thank the hon. Gentleman. Will he give—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order.

Sir Peter Emery: By leave of the House—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The Minister has finished.

Sir Peter Emery: By leave of the House—

Mr. Tony McNulty (Harrow, East): I beg to ask leave to withdraw the motion.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Is it the House's pleasure that the motion be withdrawn?

Sir Peter Emery: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I am putting a Question to the House. Is it the House's pleasure that the motion be withdrawn?

Hon. Members: Aye.

Motion, by leave, withdrawn.

ADJOURNMENT

Resolved,

That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. McNulty.]*

Adjourned accordingly at twenty-four minutes to Eight o'clock.

House of Commons

Thursday 28 October 1999

The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

PRIVATE BUSINESS

CITY OF LONDON (WARD ELECTIONS) BILL

Motion made,

That the Promoters of the City of London (Ward Elections) Bill shall have leave to suspend proceedings thereon in order to proceed with the Bill in the next Session of Parliament, provided that the Agents for the Bill give notice to the Clerks in the Private Bill Office not later than the day before the close of the present Session of their intention to suspend further proceedings and that all Fees due on the Bill up to that date be paid;

That on the fifth day on which the House sits in the next Session the Bill shall be presented to the House;

That there shall be deposited with the Bill a declaration signed by the Agents for the Bill, stating that the Bill is the same, in every respect, as the Bill presented in the House in the present Session;

That as soon as a certificate by one of the Clerks in the Private Bill Office, that such a declaration has been so deposited, has been laid upon the Table of the House, the Bill shall be read the first and second time and committed (and shall be recorded in the Journal of this House as having been so read and committed) and shall be committed to the Chairman of Ways and Means;

That the Chairman of Ways and Means shall make such Amendments thereto as have been made by the committee in the present Session, and shall report the Bill as amended to the House forthwith, and the Bill, so amended, shall be ordered to be considered;

That no further Fees shall be charged in respect of any proceedings on the Bill in respect of which Fees have already been incurred during the present Session;

That these Orders be Standing Orders of the House.—*[The Chairman of Ways and Means.]*

Hon. Members: Object.

To be considered on Tuesday 2 November at Seven o'clock.

Oral Answers to Questions

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

The Secretary of State was asked—

New Deal (Renfrewshire)

1. **Dr. Norman A. Godman** (Greenock and Inverclyde): How the new deal has been implemented in the Clyde coastal area; and which target groups have been identified in relation to the Renfrewshire labour market.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education and Employment (Mr. Malcolm Wicks): A wide range of new deals are available in the Clyde coast and Renfrewshire area to tackle unemployment. These include the new deals for young people, for long-term unemployed people and for lone parents. In Renfrewshire, new figures to the end of August show that more than 1,000 people have found jobs through the new deal.

Dr. Godman: First, I offer my compliments to my hon. Friend on his new appointment—long may he occupy the post.

Although I think that there is too much emphasis on targeting, I wish to make a plea about the new deal on behalf of my disabled constituents, and of disabled people in the west of Scotland. I know that a first-class pilot project, the new deal for disabled people, is being conducted in Lanarkshire under the able management of Mr. Robert Jack and his team. However, we need a comprehensive system which will encourage disabled people to take up voluntary, part-time and therapeutic work, as well as education and training courses. If, as sometimes happens, things do not work out, disabled people should not have to face the threat of having to claim again for incapacity benefit and other benefits. The system has to be compassionate and sympathetic, and meet disabled people's needs.

Mr. Wicks: I thank my hon. Friend for his good wishes. I shall do my best in the new deal that has been offered to me.

My hon. Friend raises a serious issue about the treatment of people with disabilities. In his area, 561 people with disabilities have already started on existing new deal schemes, but he is right to say that we need to do much more. Pilots for the national new deal programme for disabled people are being held. We want to establish good practice so that we can roll out a national programme. In conjunction with our colleagues in the Department of Social Security, we are making sure that there is a sensitive interface with the social security system so that people who have to return to the system if a job opportunity does not work out are not penalised.

Long-Term Unemployment

2. **Mr. Malcolm Savidge** (Aberdeen, North): If he will report on progress under the New Deal in tackling long-term unemployment. [94250]

The Secretary of State for Education and Employment (Mr. David Blunkett): The latest figures released this morning show that 144,600 young people have found work through the new deal. Bearing in mind that these young people have been unemployed for more than six months, I believe that that is a very substantial contribution to the 700,000 people who have work under this Government and who would not have had that work under the Conservative Government. More than 92,000 people have benefited from the various options under the new deal, including more than 20,000 on the voluntary option and 20,000 on the environmental option. There has been a 60 per cent. fall in the number of young people who are unemployed, and youth unemployment is at its lowest level for 25 years.

Mr. Savidge: Has my right hon. Friend assessed the financial and social costs that would be incurred if the Government adopted the policies proposed by the Conservative party of scrapping the new deal and replacing it with daily signing-on for benefit claimants?

Mr. Blunkett: I am aware, of course, that the shadow Secretary of State for Social Security, the hon. Member for Havant (Mr. Willetts), has proposed those ideas as Conservative party policy. It is impossible to detail the calculations that he has made, but we calculate that it would cost more than £540 million a year to force all job seeker's allowance claimants to sign on each day. That money could be used to get people jobs, implement the programmes that we have put in place, and ensure that people have the opportunity to work and to gain the skills necessary to hold down jobs.

Mr. Michael Fallon (Sevenoaks): Do not this morning's figures show that at least a third of people who have left the new deal have done so for what are called unknown destinations? As they are neither working nor not working, they seem to be the new disappeared. If the new deal really is working as the Secretary of State claims, why has the Secretary of State for Social Security proposed toughening up benefits sanctions?

Mr. Blunkett: The survey work being undertaken shows that many of the people to whom the hon. Gentleman referred in fact go into jobs. Ironically, it is the new deal that has winkled out people from the sub-economy—the black economy—more effectively than any other measure this century. It has ensured that people are not drawing benefits and working on the side. We are achieving the goals that the shadow Secretary of State for Social Security seeks to achieve, but we are doing so in a way that is positively improving the life chances of thousands of men and women.

Ms Linda Perham (Ilford, North): I welcome the Government's measures to help the long-term unemployed. In my part of north-east London, by the end of July, 1,030 people were participating in the scheme for the over-25s. Almost one third of those people are over 50. Does my right hon. Friend have any plans to reduce the qualifying period for the new deal for older people? Six months is a long time to be unemployed, and particularly so for anyone over 50. Two years is a very long time indeed.

Mr. Blunkett: We have 28 pilots—plus Northern Ireland—for the over-25s. My right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer and I announced earlier this year that we would pilot the programme for the over-50s, and more will be said soon about that. We intend to roll out that programme across the country to ensure that, in addition to the 24,000 people who have gained jobs under the programme, others may benefit, and we are evaluating the pilots that currently monitor unemployment of more than 12 and 18 months to determine which date is most effective in ensuring that people can return to work. That will meet precisely my hon. Friend's correct analysis that the sooner we get people back to work, the more likely they will be to hold down the job.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): Is the Secretary of State aware that most new deal leavers do not succeed in gaining sustained unsubsidised work? Does he know that almost three quarters of those aged over 25 do not get jobs, and that no less than 41 per cent. of those who leave the advisory process on the scheme are simply left to traipse through the revolving door of benefits dependency? This week's Employment Policy Institute report shows that YMCAs across the country are complaining that they have to subsidise the over-bureaucratic wheeze introduced by Ministers. Why does the right hon. Gentleman not admit that the new deal is an expensive white elephant which has done little but spray cold water over the legitimate hopes of thousands of jobless people the length and breadth of Britain?

Mr. Blunkett: It is not surprising that the hon. Gentleman takes that view because he has been against the new deal since it began. He has opposed the measures we have taken which have succeeded in getting young people back into work. Let me offer him some statistics. Out of 144,600 people who have gained a job, 106,000 are in what is clearly identified as a sustained and long-term job. That entirely refutes the hon. Gentleman's figures.

Mr. Bercow: Wrong.

Mr. Blunkett: Those are independent figures from the Office for National Statistics, which the Conservatives were happy to defend when they were in government. If they want to take up the matter outside Parliament, they are welcome to do so.

The YMCA programmes are funded on a basis and to an extent never before achieved in the voluntary sector. Some 21,000 people across the country have benefited from the voluntary sector option. The sector has contracted voluntarily for that option in the full knowledge of what it was taking on. It is also reinforced by our intention, as I said at the Labour conference in Bournemouth, to extend the intensification of the gateway so that we can deal with the real problems that young people face. None of that would be supported if the Conservatives had their way.

Judy Mallaber (Amber Valley): Will my right hon. Friend encourage other areas to follow the example of the

southern Derbyshire new deal joint venture partnership, which yesterday published its annual accounts and report on activities that have helped 2,500 young long-term unemployed adults into training and employment? Will he congratulate the five young adults who gained special awards at yesterday's launch in recognition of their outstanding work on the new deal programme, including Simon Carrier, who has undertaken a voluntary sector option at the Stepping Stones day centre in Amber Valley? Simon, who previously had a poor school attendance record, no educational qualifications and little work experience, has gained unsubsidised evening employment and will soon be a trained cook.

Mr. Blunkett: I am pleased to be able to congratulate Simon and his colleagues on what they are doing. One of the most encouraging things about the new deal programme is the pride and confidence that it is returning to young people who, after six months or more of unemployment, had lost expectations and confidence in themselves. The partnership that has developed between the private and voluntary sectors and the Employment Service is unique, as are the training and qualification measures, which are being carried out in ways that previous job schemes never achieved. Young people themselves are committed to the new deal, and they welcome what we are doing. They are the best judge and jury of the new deal.

TECs

3. **Miss Anne McIntosh** (Vale of York): If he will make a statement on his plans for the future of TECs. [94251]

The Secretary of State for Education and Employment (Mr. David Blunkett): I am announcing today the boundaries of the new learning and skills councils at sub-regional level—subject to the legislative process of this House—following consultation through the regional development agencies and with the broader community. I am also announcing that a minimum of 40 per cent. of the membership of both the national and local councils will be those with recent experience in business and commerce, that the chairman of the national council and the majority of local council members will similarly have had recent business and commercial experience, and that we will try to ensure coherence in the delivery of funding and the provision of services to provide the skills that we need for the 21st century.

Miss McIntosh: I take it from the Secretary of State's answer that the training and enterprise councils are to be abolished officially. May I take this opportunity to place on record my overwhelming support for North Yorkshire TEC and the contribution that it has made through the business community to training in the area? May I also ask the Secretary of State who is to be responsible for Investors in People and what the local involvement will be of the business community in training in future? I understand that reporting will be not local or sub-regional, but national—there will be no local involvement.

Mr. Blunkett: The last point is entirely wrong. There will not only be direct involvement, but a great deal of discretion will be given to local learning and skills councils. Today, the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry and I are putting out the details of the boundaries and of the operation of the Small Business Service. Those details are in the Vote Office for all Members to see. The Investors in People and work force development programmes will be carried out from the Small Business Service, which in the majority of cases locally will be coterminous with the learning and skills councils. It will have the opportunity to contract out those services to ensure that, by building on the success of the many business links, we will be able to provide the support and help to small businesses that they have lacked and for which they have clearly called.

Mr. Ian Pearson (Dudley, South): I welcome my right hon. Friend's announcement. Does he agree that he needs to get two big things right? One is to manage sensitively the transition in the next 18 months, so that the wheel does not fall off, and TEC staff continue to be motivated and committed to delivering their training and enterprise agenda. The other is to ensure that the new learning and skills councils are not mired in the bureaucracy that was heaped on TECs and are allowed genuinely to tackle skill shortages in their areas. What plans has my right hon. Friend in both fields?

Mr. Blunkett: On the first point, I assure my hon. Friend that we will take every possible step to ensure that the transition is effective and that we carry forward programmes that are working to the new system. We will draw forward the announcement on resources for TECs from the usual time in the spring to the middle of November. We hope that that will ensure that they can support and work with us, as the TEC National Council is committed to doing, to ensure that the transition works effectively.

Secondly, we are absolutely committed to business playing a vital role to ensure that learning is customised for the needs both of localities and the regions, and to ensure that in a modern, knowledge-based economy, we get the skills required non-bureaucratically and effectively. We will reduce the layers that exist in providing those skills, redirect the money from administration—up to £50 million a year—into training and skills development, and ensure that we meet the needs both nationally and locally of an economy of the future.

Mr. Richard Allan (Sheffield, Hallam): The Secretary of State will be aware that many of my constituents work for his Department in Sheffield and are interested in decisions that affect the national headquarters of the learning and skills councils. Can he tell us where that will be? Can he assure staff in Sheffield about his Department's long-term commitment to maintaining a significant presence in the city and say what options may be offered to staff who may be affected by the decision?

Mr. Blunkett: I am releasing today the decision taken following the investigation by Capita into the most cost-effective and administratively sensible approach to delivering the new programmes. We have decided that the learning and skills councils headquarters, together with the adult inspectorate, should be in Coventry. We believe that that will have an impact at the headquarters in Sheffield on about 100 or more employees. As usual,

we shall give guarantees of redeployment and further training to them. We need to point out, however, that they will benefit from the Department's own concentration at the Moorfoot site of the staff needed to oversee the transition and to implement the new programmes, and a guarantee to retain the support that exists to the 2,750 people across Moorfoot and the Employment Service headquarters who currently have a job in the city.

Ms Joan Ryan (Enfield, North): Is my right hon. Friend aware that the London TEC council has stated that it strongly supports the objectives of the White Paper "Learning to Succeed"? We have a skills gap in London, particularly in the manufacturing trades and commercial construction services. We must have a learning and skills council that targets and closes those gaps. Does my right hon. Friend agree that for that to happen, it is vital that we have greater business involvement and greater training investment from businesses and employers?

Mr. Blunkett: This is a partnership, which involves the allocation of £5 billion a year to 5 million current learners, matched by the commitment of business and commerce to their own in-house training and the broader needs of the sectors. The new 70 national training organisations are assisting in precisely that. The new structure, with a co-ordinating body and five learning and skills councils in London, will enable us to focus on the needs of Londoners more clearly and ensure that we meet the skills needs of the capital and the nation.

Mrs. Theresa May (Maidenhead): The Government's proposals on TECs and post-16 education and training have been described by the Confederation of British Industry as

"a step in the wrong direction",

by the Institute of Directors as

"a potential form of centralised manpower planning",

by the Local Government Association as introducing

"unnecessary layers of bureaucracy",

and by a former permanent secretary at the Department of Employment as

"central control that cannot take account of local circumstances".

Will the Secretary of State now accept the need to abandon his heavy-handed, centralised approach? Or do we assume that he classes the whole of British business, local government and the civil service as forces of conservatism?

Mr. Blunkett: The main forces of conservatism are on the Benches opposite.

I met Adair Turner and his colleagues from the CBI this week, and they welcome today's announcement. They embrace the way in which we have listened to the comments that they, the British Chambers of Commerce and others have made. They are fully in favour of our devolved powers and funding for the local learning and skills councils, and to the commitment to business having a substantial role in determining how public money is spent to meet the demand, which they rightly identify as being crucial to our nation's future. Therefore, they are behind what we are doing, not against it, and behind the Government, not the Opposition. They will work with us to ensure that the system works.

Disability Rights

4. **Mr. Nigel Griffiths** (Edinburgh, South): How the Government are fulfilling their commitment to support comprehensive, enforceable civil rights for people with disabilities. [94252]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education and Employment (Ms Margaret Hodge): We have made considerable and important progress towards fulfilling our manifesto commitment. To mention just some of the key achievements: the Disability Rights Commission will be in place by April 2000; last December, we reduced the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 employer threshold from 20 to 15; and from 1 October this year, service providers have been required to make reasonable adjustments to their policies and practices for disabled people. We are raising awareness of disability issues through our "see the person" campaign. I know that you, Madam Speaker, like brief answers so I will just say that there is much more to come.

Mr. Griffiths: This is landmark legislation of which the Government can be proud. When will the Disability Rights Commission be fully operational? What steps are the Government taking to ensure that people with disabilities are able fully to utilise the services that it offers them?

Ms Hodge: We have given a commitment that the Disability Rights Commission will be open for business next April and we have publicly announced the appointment of the chairman, Mr. Bert Massie, who has long experience as a disability campaigner and as chief executive of the Royal Association for Disability and Rehabilitation. We shall ensure that the majority of people on the commission have a disability and that in terms of both where we locate the commission and the way in which it does its work, the organisation is fully accessible to people with a broad range of disabilities, who will want its services.

Mr. Roy Beggs (East Antrim): There is widespread acceptance in Northern Ireland that the civil rights of all sections of society must be upheld. Bearing in mind the increased expectations of parents whose children have been statemented, is the Minister satisfied that there is adequate funding to ensure that people with disabilities throughout the United Kingdom receive the individual help that they need and can achieve their full potential through education and training?

Ms Hodge: This is an important point. I know that my right hon. Friend the Minister for School Standards has put huge efforts into introducing a new action plan for children with special educational needs, which will be properly funded. I am sure that with that plan in place and the additional funding that has been available, we can ensure that children with disabilities and other special educational needs get the best possible education so that they can meet their full potential.

Mr. Tom Clarke (Coatbridge and Chryston): Does my hon. Friend recall that the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 applies to people who work for firms of 15 or more? Does she accept that, given the commendable speed with

which the Government introduced the Disability Rights Commission, it would be appropriate to consult it as well as the Employers Forum on Disability, which is progressive on these matters, about extending that employment protection to other disabled people and those who could find important jobs?

Ms Hodge: I commend my right hon. Friend's work on disabled people's rights throughout his long and distinguished parliamentary career. I assure him that we share a desire to bring all businesses, whatever their size, within the parameters and framework of disability discrimination legislation. To achieve that, we inserted a clause in the Disability Rights Commission Bill to enable the DRC to advise the Secretary of State on further reductions in the employer's threshold so that we can move as speedily as possible, bringing everyone with us, to coverage of all companies by disability discrimination legislation.

National Year of Reading

5. **Dr. Brian Iddon** (Bolton, South-East): What assessment he has made of the impact of the national year of reading. [94253]

The Secretary of State for Education and Employment (Mr. David Blunkett): The National Literacy Trust will produce its evaluation report in December, but it has already told us that the success of the national year for reading has resulted in a massive take-up of library services, an increase in reading by parents and grandparents with children and a substantial contribution to the success of the national literacy programme which, as hon. Members will know, resulted in a five percentage point improvement in literacy levels for 11-year-olds this summer. The Conservatives, who announced their policy at their conference in Blackpool, would sweep away that programme, along with the numeracy programme, which is making so much progress.

Mr. Simon Burns (West Chelmsford): One group of people are not benefiting from improved literacy skills, and they are individuals who are excluded from school. I thank the Minister for School Standards for the help that she gave a constituent of mine on this problem during the summer. Can the Department do more to ensure that excluded pupils benefit from improving their reading? Some children are excluded from school for more than a year without receiving any other education, even though they should be receiving it.

Mr. Blunkett: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his generous comments about my right hon. Friend; I, too, offer her congratulations on her becoming a Privy Councillor only a week ago. I am extremely glad that she is in the Chamber today, because she was stuck in a lift in Sanctuary Buildings, which could have excluded her from today's Question Time.

School exclusion is a serious matter; it transcends party differences. Children who are not in school are not learning, and those who are excluded for long periods are likely to drift into crime and other activities which make matters worse. Ensuring that such children are quickly and effectively dealt with, and that support units throughout the country are available rapidly so that we can re-engage those young people in the most appropriate ways, is an essential task to make the literacy programmes work in practice.

Madam Speaker: I have not called Dr. Iddon for his supplementary question. I think that I may have been confused because, after half an hour, we have only reached Question 5. However, I now call Dr. Iddon.

Dr. Iddon: Will my right hon. Friend join me in congratulating Bolton local authority library service on the huge success of its national year of reading? During that year, the service contacted more than 40,000 people across the age spectrum—including 15,000 of the local authority's workers through their wage packets. It also put adverts on local multiplex cinema screens. One effect of that scheme has been a noticeable increase in library membership. Will my right hon. Friend promote numeracy in a similar way?

Mr. Blunkett: In view of Madam Speaker's strictures, I shall be brief.

Madam Speaker: I am glad that the Minister has got the message.

Mr. Blunkett: That has taken up a little time.

I congratulate all the people in Bolton whom I saw when I came to the festival held there during the summer. It was a tremendous success and has enabled Bolton to exceed the national improvement in literacy. I am sure that the maths and numeracy year will give equivalent results during the 12 months ahead.

New Deal (Gateway)

6. **Ms Rosie Winterton** (Doncaster, Central): What steps his Department is taking to enhance the services offered at the gateway stage of the new deal. [94254]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education and Employment (Mr. Michael Wills): We have strengthened the gateway through extra support for young people during its fourth month, and by developing new tools to help identify their needs. We have also established trailblazer projects in 12 locations to test further improvements.

Ms Winterton: I welcome my hon. Friend to his new position, and thank him for that reply.

The Employment Service in Doncaster greatly welcomes the Government's initiatives—especially the trailblazing initiatives—because of the help they give to promote best practice in dealing with clients who pose particular challenges. The Barnsley and Doncaster training and enterprise council has emphasised the need for a coalition with employers. Will my right hon. Friend tell the House what steps are being taken to ensure best practice from trailblazing through the involvement of employers? How can that best be passed on when the scheme rolls out nationwide? Will he come to Doncaster to encourage employers to join the Employment Service in that scheme?

Mr. Wills: I thank my hon. Friend for her kind words about me and about the trailblazer projects. Their point is

to promote best practice. We are already encouraging other units of delivery to adopt for their own gateways the successful aspects of the trailblazer approach. Trailblazers are about developing in young people the kind of soft skills that employers tell us that they want. It is most pleasing that employers are already getting on board; for example, Scottish Amicable in the Forth valley, Bovis in Liverpool and Vauxhall in Luton.

I should be delighted to visit Doncaster, to encourage employers to see the real advantages these projects can offer them—as well as the young people who have already benefited from the scheme.

Mr. Ian Bruce (South Dorset): I welcome the unpaid Under-Secretary to his new Department and I am sorry that my campaign to get him a salary has not worked. We shall keep on trying.

Has the hon. Gentleman examined the detailed statistics on new deal and the gateway? How many people complete the gateway but do not gain access to any schemes or employment? How many people who completed the gateway had their benefits stopped because they did not accept a place on any scheme?

Mr. Wills: I am always grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his solicitude on my behalf, but I must inform him that his campaign has paid off. Perhaps the Prime Minister listened to the hon. Gentleman on that issue, if not about anything else.

I am afraid that, as usual, the hon. Gentleman is looking at the problem in the wrong way. He needs to consider the big picture. As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has already said, more than 100,000 young people have secured jobs. They have regained hope—which would never have happened under the previous Government. *[Interruption.]* Perhaps the hon. Gentleman will allow me to finish. He should also consider the benefit that the new deal brings to the economy as a whole. We are removing the inflationary pressures that come from not having enough competition in the job market to fill existing vacancies. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman remembers inflation from the years of Conservative Government.

Higher Education

7. **Mr. Andrew Miller** (Ellesmere Port and Neston): What action he has taken to secure high standards of teaching and research in higher education. [94255]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education and Employment (Mr. Malcolm Wicks): We expect high standards in both teaching and research in our universities. We have supported the work of the Quality Assurance Agency and the Institute for Learning and Teaching, and we expect new teachers in higher education to be trained on programmes accredited by the institute.

Mr. Miller: I congratulate my hon. Friend on his well-deserved appointment to the Front Bench. Has he considered the proposal by the hon. Member for Daventry (Mr. Boswell) to empower universities to set their own fees? Does my hon. Friend think that such a proposal would damage our attempts to open access to universities—especially those universities that are regarded as more prestigious—to all people?

Mr. Wicks: I noted the comments by the hon. Member for Daventry (Mr. Boswell) with some sadness, because at the end of the 20th century, when we are looking forward to new higher education challenges in the 21st century, we do not want to return to an elitist 19th century university system. We have introduced measures that will prevent that from happening. Access to any of our universities should be based on academic ability, not socio-economic status.

Mr. Phil Willis (Harrogate and Knaresborough): I welcome the Minister to his position and thank him for his excellent work as Chairman of the Education Sub-Committee.

The Bett committee recommended a 2.5 per cent. increase in university budgets to allow universities to meet their statutory obligations regarding equal pay. The effect of not granting that increase would be reduced teaching and research standards. Given the Bett committee's clear recommendation and the fact that the Government have said that they will not respond to the committee's findings, what advice will the Minister give to vice-chancellors? Should they go for statutory equal pay or reduce teaching and research standards?

Mr. Wicks: We support equal pay across all spheres. We are grateful for the work of the Bett committee, but pay rates for university academics are a matter for their employers—the universities—and those who represent the sector. I must point out that we have provided an extra £776 million to universities over two years.

Mr. David Chaytor (Bury, North): I welcome my hon. Friend the Minister's commitment to continuing to widen access to our universities. However, is he aware of the experience of one of my constituents who applied earlier this year to study for an economics degree? This young man, whose academic performance has been outstanding, is in a wheelchair; his application was rejected by one of Britain's leading universities explicitly on the ground that the university could not cope with his access problems. Another university later accepted him.

I am sure that my hon. Friend will agree that his rejection was unacceptable and illegal. Will he take up the matter directly with the vice-chancellor of that university to ensure that it does not happen again, either at that university or any other in the United Kingdom?

Mr. Wicks: I am sorry to hear about that distressing situation. If my hon. Friend will give me details, I will personally write to the vice-chancellor of the university. Such a practice belongs to the past, not the future.

The disability task force is specifically considering these issues. We want to see every able young man and woman in a British university, regardless of any circumstance and certainly regardless of disability.

Mr. Tim Boswell (Daventry): I welcome the Minister to his new position. It is evident from earlier exchanges that, bizarrely, the Prime Minister is able to countenance

the soliciting of top-up contributions by maintained schools to continue their activities, but the Minister rules out top-up fees for universities.

In view of what the Minister has said about the quality of the university experience and his commitment to that, will he explain why Health Ministers are, rightly, seeking to end the lottery of prescribing by postcode, but Education Ministers are letting it be known that they would favour the incorporation of an element of postcode discrimination into selection for places in higher education? Does he realise that that would call into doubt the credibility of the individual student and, certainly, the quality of the university itself?

Mr. Wicks: It is appropriate to find suitable statistical mechanisms for targeting resources so as to achieve our goal of enabling every young person with ability to go to university. However, I repeat that we are totally against top-up fees because, by definition, they would favour only young people from richer families and would discriminate against those from poorer families. We do not want social class to be the gateway to university; we want ability in the class to be that gateway.

Mrs. Anne Campbell (Cambridge): I add my best wishes to my hon. Friend for his future career on the Front Bench, which is wholly deserved. As an MA Cantab., I understand that this honorary title may in future be refused to others, unless they undertake a course of postgraduate study. Will my hon. Friend take on board the fact that many of us feel that the title is not wholly deserved? May I encourage him to continue to press for a consistently high quality throughout the postgraduate sector?

Mr. Wicks: It has been remiss of me not to thank those who have offered their congratulations, but I have been so anxious to spot the hand grenade rolling across that I may have been impolite. I now thank everyone for their congratulations.

The awarding of MAs and other qualifications is essentially a matter for the university, but the public have a right to expect that throughout British universities a BA, a BSc or an MA has meaning. In my earlier career, I taught postgraduate students at two excellent British universities, and I knew that when they got their master's degrees they had studied very hard for them and earned them.

Foundation Schools

8. **Mr. Nigel Evans** (Ribble Valley): If he will make a statement on the cost of administering foundation schools. [94257]

The Minister for School Standards (Ms Estelle Morris): Foundation schools receive delegated budget shares from their local education authorities, which should reflect schools' additional costs arising from additional statutory responsibilities.

Mr. Evans: The Minister will be aware of the excellence of Clitheroe royal grammar school in my constituency, which has superb examination results. It was a grant-maintained school and is now a foundation school and a beacon school. When I spoke to the headmaster this morning, he said that he has been told that next year his budget would be reduced by £107,000. He has a choice: he could get rid of some of the teachers, or he could do as other headmasters have done and ask parents to make a voluntary contribution.

The Minister will be aware of parents who are facing that dilemma. What advice would she give to parents who send their children to that school? Should they pay the money?

Ms Morris: I am delighted to acknowledge excellence in any school in the hon. Gentleman's constituency. I am sure that it exists in many grammar, non-selective, infant and junior schools. I am surprised that the head of Clitheroe royal grammar school is in a position to talk about next year's budget, given that it has not been set. I assure the hon. Gentleman that, as a result of the announcement of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State in the summer, foundation schools—former grant-maintained schools—will next year receive a 2.5 per cent. increase to protect them from inflation. That is on top of the cash protection that was offered last year.

Mrs. Theresa May (Maidenhead): I congratulate the Minister on her appointment to the Privy Council. When abolishing grant-maintained schools by turning them into foundation schools, the then Minister for School Standards said that the Government were "levelling up" funding,

"not to cut grant-maintained schools' funds but to increase the funding for pupils in other schools".

Given that GM schools are losing £100 million this year, will the Minister admit that the Government have broken their promise not only to the former grant-maintained schools, but to teachers, governors, pupils and parents of all other schools?

Ms Morris: I thank the hon. Lady for her kind comments. Former grant-maintained schools still receive £62 more per pupil at primary level and £101 more per pupil at secondary level to reflect their additional responsibilities. The hon. Lady knows that, following evidence from the Public Accounts Committee in 1994, her Government took action progressively to withdraw excess funding for central services, which had been provided under that Administration. This Government are about fairness and ensuring that all schools benefit from the increased money that we are putting into the system—no matter their status. Every school—not just the 1,000 former grant-maintained schools, but all 24,000 schools—will benefit over the years from the extra resources that the Government are providing.

New Deal (Disabled People)

9. **Ms Chris McCafferty** (Calder Valley): What direct consultation his Department has had with personal advisers working on the new deal for disabled people pilots. [94258]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education and Employment (Ms Margaret Hodge): Ministers and officials have frequent contact with the Employment Service and with the private sector, local

authority and voluntary sector contractors which deliver the pilot for my Department. I have also visited many of the pilot areas and met personal advisers from all pilot areas.

Ms McCafferty: I thank my hon. Friend for that reply. Can she assure me that personal advisers for disabled people who wish to participate in the new deal receive disability awareness training? Can she further assure me that there is effective monitoring of the treatment of and the help given to disabled people on the new deal, through, for example, exit surveys or interviews? Does that happen? What efforts are the Government making to ensure that disabled people who can work and who want to work are better off working, given their clear extra needs?

Ms Hodge: I think that my hon. Friend asked three questions. First, there is specific training for personal advisers. We have the ambition that all personal advisers working on the new deal for disabled people should reach NVQ level 3. Ten per cent. of personal advisers are themselves disabled. They receive extensive training in all the areas that they need to cover.

On monitoring, we are closely and comprehensively evaluating the pilot new deal for the disabled. Loughborough university is undertaking a study and initial findings will be reported at the end of this year, with the full findings next year. The study includes, for example, surveys of clients who have participated in the new deal, group discussions and in-depth interviews. There will be plenty of feedback.

We have several initiatives on making work pay for disabled people. This week, my right hon. Friends the Chancellor of the Exchequer and the Secretary of State for Social Security launched the disabled persons tax credit, which will make work pay. We have introduced a linking rule to make it easier for disabled people to move from benefit into work. There are also initiatives such as jobfinders grants and a fast track to the disabled persons tax credit—all of which support disabled people in their move from benefit dependency to work.

Information Technology

10. **Mr. John Smith** (Vale of Glamorgan): What support schools will be given to ensure that all teachers are trained in the use of information communications technology. [94259]

11. **Ms Ruth Kelly** (Bolton, West): If all teachers will be trained in the use of information technology. [94260]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education and Employment (Mr. Michael Wills): The new opportunities fund is making available £230 million to support the training of serving teachers and school library staff in the maintained sector in the effective use of information and communications technology. The training is available to all teachers in maintained schools in the UK.

Mr. Smith: I am grateful for that reply. Does my hon. Friend agree that our schools could become a vital resource for the whole community, giving access to information technology? That especially applies to schools in poorer areas, where we might create cybercentres in every less-favoured community. Does my hon. Friend look forward to the day when all our schoolteachers are on-line, and hard copy becomes a thing of the past?

Mr. Wills: I very much agree with my hon. Friend, and I am grateful to him for drawing the attention of the House to the important IT initiatives that we are undertaking.

We must ensure that all children leave school with basic competence in information and communications technologies. We must also ensure that they have the opportunity to receive the benefits that those technologies can contribute to the whole educational experience in the classroom. I strongly agree that we must use our schools as a basis for making those technologies available to the wider communities—a process that is already under way in the excellence in cities initiative, and that we shall pursue with the roll-out of more than 700 IT learning centres next year.

Ms Kelly: I thank my hon. Friend for that reply. I very much welcome his commitment to turning schools into centres of excellence that the whole community can use. I take the opportunity to draw his attention to the bid by a school in my constituency, Rivington and Blackrod school, which not only intends to set up an IT centre of excellence but expects to be able to draw in business and industry, parents and members of the local community to develop a real learning town, both for Horwich and for Blackrod.

Mr. Wills: I thank my hon. Friend for drawing that project to my attention. It sounds interesting and exactly the type of project that we want to encourage. I look forward to receiving a bid from the school when we invite bids for the IT learning centres.

Mr. Nick St. Aubyn (Guildford): While considering support for teachers, is the Minister aware that yesterday the National Union of Teachers, in evidence to the Select Committee on Education and Employment, joined the chorus of criticism of the Prime Minister's patronising remarks to head teachers last week? Is he further aware that they will not be mollified by some spurious offer of laptop computers from someone who does not know how to use them?

Mr. Wills: Perhaps the hon. Gentleman should read what the Prime Minister said. He congratulated the great majority of head teachers on the wonderful work that they are doing. I believe that every Labour Member would agree with those sentiments. I do not know why the hon. Gentleman supposes that the offer of £3 million for laptops for heads is spurious. Every head has welcomed it, and heads in my constituency have said how valuable they have found previous IT initiatives. I hope that the hon. Gentleman will open his eyes and see the real advantage that those technologies can bring to all teachers.

Mr. Desmond Swayne (New Forest, West): Is the Minister convinced that such initiatives are cost-effective? The Prime Minister's lack of IT expertise is legendary,

but it has not held back his achievements. Given that he said that the profession was still pervaded by the forces of conservatism, would not the money be better spent on a programme of re-education on the Chinese model? After all, it had a remarkable effect on our police force.

Mr. Wills: I am very interested to note that the hon. Gentleman has now become a Maoist, to add to all his other accomplishments. We shall ensure that the initiatives are cost-effective. We are absolutely convinced of the benefits that those technologies can bring to everyone in education. I look forward to the day—perhaps some time in the next century—when Opposition Members will join everyone else in the country in recognising those benefits.

Helen Jones (Warrington, North): I, too, welcome my hon. Friend to his new post. Will he join me in congratulating the head teacher and staff of William Beamont high school in my constituency? They have made a great investment in new technology and, by linking up with Warrington collegiate institute, have given free internet access not only to their partner primary schools, but to a number of community groups in a deprived area in the centre of my constituency. Is not this the way in which we should encourage schools to proceed in future?

Mr. Wills: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. I should be interested to come and see that exciting project. She draws attention to an important point: as the technologies become more and more available in our society, it is fundamental that our most deprived areas should get exactly the same benefits from them as other areas. That is fundamental to the roll-out of the IT learning centres, which we are targeting on the 1,500 most deprived wards. I thank my hon. Friend for drawing our attention to the importance of making sure that no digital divide opens up in this country.

School Places

12. **Mr. Howard Flight** (Arundel and South Downs): What discussions he is holding with directors of education to ensure that there is an adequate supply of school places in areas where housing growth is expected to take place in the near future; and if he will make a statement. [94261]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education and Employment (Jacqui Smith): Responsibility for the adequate supply of school places rests with local education authorities, which take proposed new build into account in their planning.

Mr. Flight: I congratulate the Minister on her appointment. I am sure that she is aware that there is a major problem in my constituency and in many other rural areas in the south-east. With the additional housing forced on areas by the Government, there are not sufficient schools places for children, so young children must travel five, six or seven miles to primary school. Will the Government ensure that that contradiction in policy is resolved? It is unsatisfactory that such problems should be forced on children.

Jacqui Smith: I am sure that, for those reasons, the hon. Gentleman will be pleased to learn that the number of infants in class sizes of 30 in west Sussex has fallen from 3,875 last September to 1,251 this September; that the Government have made available in his constituency an extra £8 million, through the new deal for schools and class size capital; and that the planning undertaken by his local authority through the school organisation plan has been approved by the local schools organisation committee, which gives a role to schools and head teachers in the planning process. Hon. Members on the Opposition Front Bench would do away with that if they were allowed to put their own policies into operation.

Caroline Flint (Don Valley): I congratulate my hon. Friend and my very good friend on her promotion to the Front Bench. I know that she will make a great success of it. I draw to her attention the number of rural schools that were closed under the previous Conservative Administration. Does she agree that the Government have done much to safeguard schools in rural communities, such as one primary school in my area, to keep them open and to protect them for the future, so that they can meet the needs of all the children in the communities where they are situated?

Jacqui Smith: I thank my hon. Friend for her words. I agree that the activities of the previous Government with regard to rural schools give the lie to the Conservatives apparent concern for promoting those schools now. The Labour Government have provided support through the small schools support fund, which will enable small schools, particularly in rural areas, to work together constructively to safeguard those facilities for local communities and to raise standards.

Mr. James Clappison (Hertsmere): I join my hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs (Mr. Flight) in welcoming the hon. Lady to the Front Bench. Is not my hon. Friend right in his analysis—that the extra development of 1.1 million houses in the south-east is likely to be in areas where schools are already oversubscribed? What the hon. Lady has just said about class sizes is likely to make that situation worse. Would it not be common sense to try and plan so that local authorities would not be obliged to provide further development in the green belt and on green-field sites? In our schools, we rightly teach children about the importance of the environment. Should we not plan so that we can avoid development that ruins the environment?

Jacqui Smith: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his kind words. I agree that it is important for local education authorities to work with district councils in looking at local structure plans in planning their school places. That is why the Government, in the School Standards and Framework Act 1998, required LEAs to produce school organisation plans which are subject to local decision making through school organisation committees, which, I reiterate, involves local schools and local head teachers. The hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs. May) has already announced that she would get rid of all that, presumably to reduce the level of local planning and the influence of schools and head teachers in the planning of school places in local authorities.

Business of the House

12.30 pm

Sir George Young (North-West Hampshire): Will the Leader of the House give us the business for next week?

The President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons (Mrs. Margaret Beckett): The business for next week will be as follows:

MONDAY 1 NOVEMBER—Remaining stages of the Contracts (Rights of Third Parties) Bill *[Lords]*.

Motion to approve the Administration Committee's second report on record copies of Acts.

TUESDAY 2 NOVEMBER—Until 7 o'clock, Opposition Day [14th Allotted Day Second Part]; there will be a debate entitled "Planning, Greenfields and Brownfields: The Two Britains" on an Opposition motion.

The Chairman of Ways and Means has named opposed private business for consideration at 7 o'clock.

WEDNESDAY 3 NOVEMBER—Until 2 o'clock, there will be debates on the motion for the Adjournment of the House.

Supplemental allocation of time motion relating to the Welfare Reform and Pensions Bill.

Consideration of Lords Amendments to the Welfare Reform and Pensions Bill.

THURSDAY 4 NOVEMBER—Progress on consideration of Lords Amendments to the Greater London Authority Bill.

FRIDAY 5 NOVEMBER—Debate on family friendly employment policies on a motion for the Adjournment of the House.

Sir George Young: The House is grateful for next week's business. We note that the Leader of the House is unable to shed any light on business for the week after next, although the options must be narrowing. Nor can she give us the date of Prorogation.

There is a meeting of Finance Ministers to discuss the withholding tax. Will the Chancellor be coming to the House next week to make a statement assuring us that he will exercise his veto on that proposal?

On Northern Ireland, as Senator Mitchell has said that he plans to return on Sunday, might we have a statement from the Secretary of State on the outcome of the review talks?

The right hon. Lady will know that there is substantial pressure on the Government to complete their programme, with four major Bills still to come back to the House—the Welfare Reform and Pensions Bill, the Immigration and Asylum Bill, the Greater London Authority Bill and the House of Lords Bill. Two of those Bills are ready and two are not. The Bill that was ready first is not to be debated at all next week, whereas a Bill that has not completed its passage is down for debate. Is that not a perverse way to manage the business of the House?

The right hon. Lady announced as the business for Thursday consideration of Lords amendments to the Greater London Authority Bill. As 750 amendments have already been agreed to, with 35 still to be debated and more to be tabled, how long does she think the House will need to do the Bill justice? When it left us, it had 330 clauses and it now has 413, as well as five new schedules, including a new clause on the part-privatisation of the tube. I am sure that the right hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras (Mr. Dobson) and other contenders for Mayor of London will want ample opportunity to debate that and all the other amendments. We certainly will and we need adequate time.

Finally, last week I asked the right hon. Lady to find time for debates on important issues, not least the royal commission on long-term care, and my right hon. and hon. Friends made other suggestions, as did Labour Members. No one asked for a debate on whether the public records should be printed on vellum or paper, but that is the debate that she is visiting on us on Monday. With all the pressures on Government business, the Government amendments to important Bills, and a guillotine on the Welfare Reform and Pensions Bill, is that really the best use of this Chamber's time?

Mrs. Beckett: If the Chancellor believes that there is something that he needs to report to the House on the withholding tax, he will no doubt seek an opportunity to make a statement. But since the Government have said repeatedly and on every occasion when it has been discussed that we shall certainly veto any settlement that we regard as not being in Britain's interests, it is not clear to me that there is anything new to say.

The right hon. Gentleman asked about Northern Ireland and the fact that Senator Mitchell has said that he may return on Sunday. Obviously, I know no more than he about where matters stand or what, if anything, is likely to be able to be reported to the House, but of course I give the undertaking that we will do everything we can to keep the House informed, as we always have, on this difficult and delicate issue.

The right hon. Gentleman referred to some of the legislation in the pipeline and said that were large numbers of amendments. I accept that but, sadly, it is not unprecedented in any way, shape or form. It is not a precedent that I care for and the Government are working hard gradually to overturn it. Unfortunately, there is nothing whatever unprecedented about large numbers of amendments being made at a late stage in the House of Lords and returning to this House towards the end of a Session.

The right hon. Gentleman also asked about the debate on long-term care. He knows that I have repeatedly told him that the Government will hold such a debate in the House, but when we are ready and able to do so. On the Administration Committee motion, he may not have called for such a debate, but the matter was objected to and so a decision is required.

Dr. Ian Gibson (Norwich, North): Can my right hon. Friend please find time for a debate on education spending, from the primary sector through to the secondary? The allegation is that, although we inherited a system in which young people were much worse off, we have improved it. We need to put that on the record.

Mrs. Beckett: My hon. Friend is entirely right. A range of improvements have been made and he will know that we inherited a system in which, under the spending plans of the previous Government, there would have been a fall in real-terms spending of £38 per pupil. Thanks to the decisions made by the Government, there has been a real-terms spending increase of £73 per pupil. In his area,

the Minister of State, Home Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich, South (Mr. Clarke), recently opened one of the new initiatives—a homework club at the Norwich City ground. That is another of the developments that are bringing so much benefit to our education system. My hon. Friend is right to raise those matters, but I cannot undertake to find time for an extra debate, especially as we have just had Education and Employment questions.

Mr. Paul Tyler (North Cornwall): I share the concern of the Conservative spokesman about the idiosyncratic sense of priorities for Monday when we clearly have important business to debate. In particular, will the right hon. Lady give us an absolute assurance that there will not be an allocation of time motion for the Greater London Authority Bill on Thursday? Given the many amendments that have been tabled so late, it would be outrageous if there were any attempt to push it through without proper regard to the concern in all parts of the House about important issues.

Will the right hon. Lady return to how the Welfare Reform and Pensions Bill is to be handled on Wednesday? Can she give us an explicit assurance that there will not be an artificial cut-off time of 10 o'clock, midnight or whatever and that there will be a real attempt to understand that Members in all parts of the House want to debate important issues of principle properly? It would be outrageous if debates were cut short.

In her capacity of Chairman of the Modernisation Committee, is the right hon. Lady satisfied at the way in which those Bills have been crashed in during the last few days of this Session? Can we not try to find a better way to deal with them in future?

Mrs. Beckett: The House debating a variety of other matters and then turning to pressing legislation as it comes from the House of Lords has always been a feature of this time of year. I agree that there may be better ways of organising things and it is part of the work of the Modernisation Committee—and, indeed, of the Government—to try to move in that direction, but these things cannot be done overnight.

The hon. Gentleman asked for an assurance about an allocation of time motion for the Greater London Authority Bill and mentioned the one on the Welfare Reform and Pensions Bill. I tell him quite straightforwardly that the Government would prefer, on all those matters, for there to be no need for such a motion. He will recall that the Modernisation Committee recommended, to all parties in the House, that programme motions and programme motion agreements provided the best way of ensuring that we achieve proper discussion of all factors that are raised in a Bill and that need to be debated without anything being overlooked. That is how the Government always prefer to operate. It is for the usual channels to discuss how far it is possible in regard to these issues, and the same applies to the allocation of time motion relating to the Welfare Reform and Pensions Bill.

I agree with the hon. Gentleman that this is not the best way to run things. We will continue to try to improve the manner in which legislation is handled, so that the present system is not a feature of the future. However, he will know as well as any other Member that it has been a repeated feature of the handling of business here for all the 20-something years during which I have been—fleetingly—a Member of Parliament.

Mr. Harry Barnes (North-East Derbyshire): The Leader of the House will know of the case of my constituent Anita Froggatt, who had a breast removed in error at Chesterfield and North Derbyshire Royal hospital owing to a mix-up of slides. The former Secretary of State for Health expressed extreme concern. Would it now be appropriate for the new Secretary of State to make a statement? A report was published on Wednesday, but it is inadequate in that it merely calls for the retraining of the doctor concerned in dealing with slides, and recommends that no further checks should be carried out on any of the slides with which that doctor dealt previously. A statement would allow us to discover the Government's opinion of the report.

Mrs. Beckett: I know of my hon. Friend's concern, and I know that he has pursued this matter for some time. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health is obviously aware of the report, but my hon. Friend will appreciate that he has not had much time in which to consider it. I cannot undertake to find time for a special statement now, but I will draw my hon. Friend's concern to my right hon. Friend's attention in case he can add anything to what is already on the record.

Sir Norman Fowler (Sutton Coldfield): Can we have a wider debate on local authorities than that envisaged for next week? Does the Leader of the House realise that in the west midlands, Labour-controlled Coventry council is maintaining a ban on British beef in schools and old people's homes? If a debate is not possible, will the right hon. Lady at least urge the council to change its policy immediately?

Mrs. Beckett: I was not aware of the issue. I will simply say that, however much any of us may regret the aftermath and the knock-on consequences of the British beef crisis, I fear that blame does not rest with this side of the House.

Mrs. Alice Mahon (Halifax): I am sure that the Leader of the House has been following events in Kosovo since the KFOR occupation, and will therefore know that more than 100 Serbs and people from other minorities have been murdered or injured by the Kosovo Liberation Army and 100,000 have been ethnically cleansed. Yesterday, as a column of Serbs attempted to leave Kosovo—supposedly protected by NATO troops—they were set upon by Albanians who tried to burn them alive in their vehicles. At least five are missing. Given that we went to war with Yugoslavia to prevent such practices, will the Leader of the House ask the Government urgently for a debate on this serious situation?

Mrs. Beckett: As my hon. Friend will know, the Government share her concern. An explicit part of the remit of those who now seek to keep the peace in Kosovo was that there should be a fair and even-handed approach, and that we should try to preserve the safety and the human rights of all concerned. She will also know that that is not always an easy task. I fear that I cannot

[Mrs. Beckett]

undertake to find time for a special statement in the near future, but she may find an opportunity to raise the matter next week during Foreign Office questions.

Mr. Owen Paterson (North Shropshire): Why is there to be a statement on the millennium bug today? The House rose early on Monday and yesterday. We are experiencing the biggest crisis in British agriculture since the 1930s, and we need every minute to discuss it today. Why could the millennium bug statement not have been made earlier?

Mrs. Beckett: There is nothing sinister about the decision to have the millennium bug statement today. It has long been scheduled. I cannot recall whether the hon. Gentleman was present when I last made a statement about this, but part of the undertaking given by the Government was that there would be a statement. It comes immediately after the publication of the findings of the national infrastructure forum, and a number of other events directly related to the millennium bug.The House rising early yesterday and on Monday is a matter for the whole House. If hon. Members do not wish to add their voices to debates, there is nothing that the Government can do to make them.

Mr. Dennis Skinner (Bolsover): If the House is rising early, is it not true that the Opposition cannot be doing their job? When Labour was in opposition, the father of this lad here, my hon. Friend the Member for Hornchurch (Mr. Cryer), and I would keep that lot up all night. It did not take very many of us to do that.

My right hon. Friend will recall that the Government allocated £2.5 billion for the sufferers of white finger and of bronchitis and other chest problems. Is she aware that paying out the compensation has been a very laborious process? It is taking a long time and needs to be speeded up. Can we have a statement from the appropriate Minister, and ensure that we get all those miners dealt with before the end of the year? Many of them are 70 or 80 years old and may not be around to pick up the compensation.

Will my right hon. Friend also have a word with the lawyers who have been given some of that £2.5 billion by the Government, and who are calling on those miners and miners' widows for an extra 5 or 10 per cent., although they have already been paid?

Mrs. Beckett: On my hon. Friend's first point, there was much in what he said, although I am not necessarily all that grateful to him for pointing it out to the Opposition. I have long thought that it would be good for them if we gave them tutorials, but I have resisted the temptation.

On the serious matter of those who have suffered because of their service in the mining industry, I know that £35 million of the money has already been released. Nevertheless, the Government and I share my hon. Friend's view that we should do more to try to speed up release of the allocated funds. From my own experience in the matter, I think that he was entirely right to identify the fact that, to some extent, the problems have been related to the legal handling of the case. However, my right hon. Friend the Minister for Energy and Competitiveness in Europe, who is responsible for those matters, is taking action to try to speed up payments, in exactly the way that my hon. Friend wishes.

Sir Nicholas Lyell (North-East Bedfordshire): Is the choice of paper, parchment or vellum in modernising Britain really the Government's priority for Monday? Given the crisis in farming—with two chicken abattoirs going bankrupt in the past 10 days, but hundreds of tonnes of chicken breast being imported to the United Kingdom from Thailand—is it really impossible to move the millennium bug statement to the empty day on Monday so that we might have a full debate on agriculture today?

Mrs. Beckett: I am glad that the right hon. and learned Gentleman indicated in his final remarks that he is aware that there is a debate on agriculture today; one might otherwise not have thought so. Today's agriculture debate has been initiated by the Government, and there will be plenty of time—should hon. Members choose to use it—to debate farming issues. We have had many opportunities to debate those issues in the House this week, and we shall continue to have such opportunities.

Mr. Bob Blizzard (Waveney): Will my right hon. Friend find time in the near future for a debate on the Government's recently announced plans to make NHS dentistry available to all who want it? Does she agree that that would provide a fine opportunity to reveal whether the Conservative party would delay, reverse or even destroy such an initiative with their recently announced policy of creeping privatisation of the NHS?

Mrs. Beckett: My hon. Friend is entirely right to identify the public concern about the availability of dental treatment, and particularly of NHS dental treatment. Dental treatment was one of the best examples of creeping privatisation under the previous Government. In many parts of the country, it has become hard for people to gain access to NHS care. I agree that it is very important to restore such access. I fear, however, that I cannot undertake to find time for a debate on it in the near future.

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East): The right hon. Lady knows that I am always keen to assist her if she is in a spot of difficulty. May I therefore suggest that, to pad out Monday's business—which is currently composed of inconsequential and uncontroversial matters—she might find time for the appropriate Law Officers to make a statement to the House on why Dr. Anthony Glees, a distinguished researcher at Brunel university, has not been contacted by the Security Service, the police or the Crown Prosecution Service about the contents of the Stasi files that he found? They exposed in great detail the activities of Dr. Robin Pearson, Ms Fiona Houlding and others. The same material in America and Germany has been the basis of successful prosecutions, in one case sending someone to prison for a total of 18 years.

Mrs. Beckett: I understand that the hon. Gentleman has raised this matter, quite properly, in the House already. It seems to me that there is no need for a further statement on it. However, if he still wishes to raise it again, I remind him that he can do so at Home Office questions on Monday.

Mr. Vernon Coaker (Gedling): Will my right hon. Friend find time for a debate on the future of the branch

network of Britain's clearing banks? She may be aware that, in my constituency, Barclays bank is to shut its crucial Gedling branch. Local people have not been consulted, and the closure is being presented as a fait accompli.

Mrs. Beckett: My hon. Friend makes an important point. It is a matter of great concern when people lose access to personal banking services. Many feel that such losses are not compensated for adequately by some of the developments in telebanking. Although I fear that I cannot undertake to find time for a special debate on the matter, my hon. Friend may find other opportunities to raise it—perhaps at the forthcoming Treasury questions.

Mr. Michael Jack (Fylde): This time last week, the Leader of the House announced that European Standing Committee C was to debate two European directives, on copyright and on e-commerce. Those directives were issued in connection with a Single Market Council meeting on 7 December. Her announcement gave members of the Committee precisely three and a half working days to read files on those directives that were each about 3 in thick. Committee members also had to try to get a briefing from the Library of the House on all the matters involved, but there was no time to arrange any consultation or advice sessions with interested parties outside the House.

Will the Leader of the House assure me that we will not suffer the same farce when it comes to the future scrutiny of crucial European legislation? Back Benchers must have adequate time to get properly briefed and to seek the views of the people affected by the directives, if we are to scrutinise the legislation properly.

Mrs. Beckett: I have some sympathy with the right hon. Gentleman, but may I gently point out that the problem is a consequence of the summer recess. The documents were not available to hon. Members earlier because the House was not sitting.

Mr. Jack: They could have been.

Mrs. Beckett: The right hon. Gentleman says that the documents could have been available, so I presume that a conscientious Back Bencher with an interest in the matters involved might have tried to get them from the Library earlier.

I repeat that I sympathise with the point that the right hon. Gentleman makes. He will know that the Government have taken steps to try to improve the scrutiny of European business, and we will continue to work on that. However, he will also know that it is sometimes not possible to give hon. Members as much notice as we would like. We shall continue to strive to improve in that regard.

Judy Mallaber (Amber Valley): My request follows on from that made by my hon. Friend the Member for North–East Derbyshire (Mr. Barnes). As we reach the end of breast cancer awareness month, will my right hon. Friend find time for a debate on the very important issue of breast cancer? That would allow the House to examine the success of the Government's pilot initiatives in extending routine screening to women aged between 65 and 69.

Does my right hon. Friend agree that such a debate would provide a useful opportunity for the House to examine the Opposition's attitude to such important initiatives, especially as they are on record as stating that the Government are being reckless in giving an extra £40 billion to the NHS and education services?

Mrs. Beckett: My hon. Friend is entirely right. There was a half-day debate on health service matters in Opposition time this week, and the matter that she raised continues to be important. I cannot undertake to find time for a special debate, but my hon. Friend has reminded me of a point that I should have drawn to the House's attention earlier. As we have agreed to experimental sittings in Westminster Hall, that is precisely the kind of debate that might find a place there when it is not easy to find time in the Chamber.

Mr. Andrew Rowe (Faversham and Mid-Kent): Would the right hon. Lady ask a Minister to make a statement on a very important issue? Among all the heat and light generated over the national health service, no mention has been made of methicillin resistant staphylococcus aureus. MRSA is a killer which has invaded virtually all our hospitals. It is extremely difficult to get rid of and it has enormous knock-on effects on staffing and the segregation of male and female beds. Whether or not people should be admitted to hospitals from nursing homes that have MRSA is a tremendous issue. Nothing seems ever to be said about it, and many trusts are going into deficit partly because of the costs incurred as a result of it.

Mrs. Beckett: The hon. Gentleman makes a powerful and entirely correct point. I share his concern. I cannot undertake to find time for a special debate in the near future, but the House would sympathise if he looked to the opportunities available to hon. Members to raise important issues. MRSA is a good example of a specialist, non-party political issue that requires consideration in depth. There are, unfortunately, so many such issues that it is not easy to find time to debate them all.

Mr. David Chaytor (Bury, North): In view of the ministerial statement earlier this week in response to the report of the Lords Select Committee on Science and Technology on radioactive waste management and the additional statement on means of complying with the Ospar convention, not to mention the important and controversial decisions pending on the Sellafield MOX plant and the discharge authorisation at Sellafield and the proposed partial privatisation of British Nuclear Fuels, does my right hon. Friend agree that there is an overwhelming argument for a debate in Government time on all aspects of nuclear policy?

Mrs. Beckett: My hon. Friend raises a number of important, and to some degree related, issues, but I must tell him, as I have told others, that I cannot find Government time for a debate on those matters in the near future. I am confident that my hon. Friend will use his ingenuity and the procedures of the House to find other ways to raise those matters.

Mr. David Chidgey (Eastleigh): Is the Leader of the House aware that it is perfectly legal to allow 12-year-old children—minors—to be subjected to cosmetic body

[Mr. David Chidgey]

piercing without parental consent? During an earlier debate, her colleagues recognised the law's inadequacy and the need to strengthen it. However, they did not find time for new legislation. Will she use her good offices, if not to introduce legislation in this Session, to do so early in the next? That would put at rest the minds of many parents throughout the country.

Mrs. Beckett: That is one of the many worthy issues for which it is not easy to find legislative time. I suggest that the hon. Gentleman may press the matter on one of the hon. Members who wins a place in the private Members' ballot. I cannot undertake to introduce Government legislation in the near future, although I say that without pre-empting the Queen's Speech in any way.

Mr. Gerald Howarth (Aldershot): Is the Leader of the House aware that two days after the House rose for the summer recess, but before the other place had risen, a substantial amendment to the air navigation order was laid before us? It will have swingeing bureaucratic and financial consequences on flying training, and is likely to increase costs by about 35 per cent. Bearing in mind that 45 per cent. of our pilots train themselves initially through private flying, will the right hon. Lady—who has a constituency interest in aviation as she represents the home of the Rolls-Royce aero engine company—allow the House time to debate an issue of serious concern to the flying training industry?

Mrs. Beckett: I freely confess, and hope that it will not be held against me, that I was not aware of that. I had other things on my mind two days after the House rose for the summer. I understand the concern that the hon. Gentleman has expressed about the possible knock-on effects, and I undertake to draw the matter to the attention of my relevant ministerial colleague.

Mr. Huw Edwards (Monmouth): I am sure that my right hon. Friend and other hon. Members have enjoyed watching the Rugby World cup in the past few weeks. Will she find time for a debate to ensure a fair deal for rugby supporters? I was able to attend the game last Saturday at Cardiff and there were clusters of empty seats at a game that was supposed to be a sell-out, thus denying many supporters the opportunity to go to the game. Next Thursday, there will be no trains back to London from Cardiff after the third and fourth place play-off and the minimum price of the tickets for that game will be £30, thus denying my constituents, especially young people, the opportunity to go to the Millennium stadium to see what a wonderful creation that is in Cardiff.

Mrs. Beckett: I was not aware that the travel difficulties would be as great as my hon. Friend has identified and can understand his concern about those who will suffer a disadvantage. I can only hope to draw the matter to the attention of the relevant authorities, since from what he said it is a combination of the activities of the rugby and the transport authorities that have led to those difficulties.

Mr. Patrick McLoughlin (West Derbyshire): Does the right hon. Lady understand Opposition Members' concern about the fact that she has chosen today for a statement on the millennium bug when the House has risen early two days this week? There is growing concern in the countryside that we have not had sufficient time to debate agriculture. The simple fact is that the Opposition have chosen it as the subject of debate on three occasions this year. There are many concerns also about the wider implications for the countryside.

Mr. Tyler: We had a debate on agriculture last week, but the hon. Gentleman was not here.

Mr. McLoughlin: Is the Leader of the House also aware that in the past two days I have received letters from the Post Office to inform me of the closure of two rural post offices in my constituency, at Lea Bridge and Roston? It is the whole fabric of the countryside about which we are concerned as well as the agriculture industry.

Mrs. Beckett: I can only repeat that the Opposition have no cause to complain about the Government since we have volunteered the time for that debate. As the hon. Member for North Cornwall (Mr. Tyler) has pointed out, there was a further opportunity to debate agriculture last week, when attendance on the Conservative Benches was unfortunately a little thin. Undoubtedly, there will be further opportunities to discuss a range of rural matters when the White Paper is published. I assure the hon. Gentleman that as we now have so many Labour Members who represent rural constituencies, the Government will be happy to find further opportunities for such debates.

Mr. John Smith (Vale of Glamorgan): Will my right hon. Friend try to find time to deal with the worrying problem of train overcrowding? I draw to her attention early-day motion 941.

[*That this House notes the incident on the 10 a.m. Paddington to Swansea train on Saturday, 23rd October, when over 1,000 passengers boarded a train designed to carry fewer than 450 persons; notes that in the interests of passenger safety, the drivers refused to stop the train beyond Reading at Bristol and Newport station to take on more passengers; and calls upon the Government as a matter of urgency, to consider introducing a numeral limitation on the numbers of people who can travel on passenger trains.*]

The situation on the train was so dangerous—it was designed to take only 428 people—that the driver and guard refused to stop at stations beyond Reading in case more passengers tried to board it. Dangerous overcrowding happens daily in my constituency and affects my commuters. I suspect that many other hon. Members on both sides of the House have a similar problem. Is my right hon. Friend aware that there is no numerical limit or maximum capacity for that form of public transport, unlike any other? We should tackle that problem.

Mrs. Beckett: I am aware that there is no limit on capacity for rail transport and can understand the concern that my hon. Friend expressed in the circumstances that he described. All aspects of rail safety are under review following the tragic accident on the line to Paddington. I strongly suggest that he should draw that aspect of safety

to the attention of those conducting the review and encourage his constituents to do so, since I suspect, as he does, that it may be an aspect that is sometimes overlooked.

Mr. Robert Syms (Poole): I implore the Leader of the House to reconsider the outrageous decision to guillotine the Welfare Reform and Pensions Bill. My constituents care greatly about that measure and it deserves sufficient debate. If the House had been over-busy this week and we had been dealing with a matter of substance on Monday, one might understand the Government's position, but the Contracts (Right of Third Parties) Bill is nothing like as important as welfare reform. Please may we take the Welfare Reform and Pensions Bill on Monday and give it at least a fair airing, because it is an important issue?

Mrs. Beckett: I remind the House that when the Bill previously came before the House three days were available for debate, although the Opposition had asked for only one. We have done our best to ensure that adequate time has been provided for those debates and we will continue to do so.

Mr. Hilary Benn (Leeds, Central): Has my right hon. Friend had an opportunity yet to consider early-day motion 954?

[*That this House notes with concern the proposal by Remploy to make 35 able-bodied employees compulsorily redundant at its Leeds orthotics factory; and regrets that the company's admirable no-redundancy policy for its disabled employees in not being applied to its able-bodied staff in this case.*]

It concerns the 35 compulsory redundancies proposed at the Remploy factory in my Leeds constituency. The matter is of particular concern to those affected because although Remploy has a no redundancy policy for its disabled staff, it does not apply to able-bodied employees. Will my right hon. Friend find time for a ministerial statement on this issue?

Mrs. Beckett: I understand my hon. Friend's concern. As he knows, the employment provided by Remploy is greatly valued, particularly by its staff with disabilities. I fear that I cannot undertake to find time for a special debate on this matter, but I am confident that my hon. Friend will use his ingenuity to find other ways in which to raise it.

Mr. John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings): Given that the Leader of the House has parliamentary time on her hands, squeezing important Bills such as the Welfare Reform and Pensions Bill into the minimum time while on other days she sends her Labour colleagues on gardening leave, will she arrange for an early statement to be made on the impact on e-commerce of the matters referred to by my right hon. Friend the Member for Fylde (Mr. Jack)? Those changes from Brussels are likely to destroy the Government's strategy. We understand that the Lord Chancellor's Department, in supporting them, did not consult the Department of Trade and Industry or the Secretary of State there. We need to know what impact those directives from Brussels will have on e-commerce, particularly as business failures in this country have risen by 13 per cent. in the past three months and will rise further as a result of this additional meddling and red tape.

Mrs. Beckett: I assure the hon. Gentleman that I, as a former Whip, never send anybody on gardening leave. The impact of the directive on e-commerce will have to be carefully considered. The Government do everything we can to ensure that the level of regulation, whether from Brussels or stemming from our internal activities, is kept under review and to a minimum, and to resist things that are not in our interests. We shall continue to do so. The hon. Gentleman may find an opportunity to raise the detail of the issue with DTI Ministers next week.

Millennium Compliance

1.8 pm

The President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons (Mrs. Margaret Beckett): I am announcing today the results of the October monthly review of progress in tackling the millennium bug across government. The completed questionnaires will all be placed in the Libraries of the House and published on the internet as usual. The report follows those that Members have received in writing from my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Secretary, Privy Council Office and myself during the recess. I will also be reporting on preparedness across the national infrastructure, including key services delivered by the wider public sector. I have also informed the House of information published during the recess, in answer to a question from my hon. Friend the Member for Northampton, North (Ms Keeble).

I am pleased to report that very good progress has been made by Government Departments and agencies in tackling the bug since I last reported on the Floor of the House. The latest returns show that work on more than 99 per cent. of business-critical systems has now been completed. That means that systems have been fixed, tested and successfully put back into operation. However, work on a few business-critical systems still remains to be completed. Three organisations report some completion dates in November and December: the Ministry of Defence, the Office for National Statistics and the Planning Inspectorate.

The Ministry of Defence's very large and complex programme is close to completion. Ninety-eight per cent. of critical systems have been made compliant and all front-line systems are ready. Robust and comprehensive continuity plans have been developed and tested.

The Office for National Statistics has experienced a delay in the roll-out of new compliant registration software to register offices in England and Wales. The roll-out in England is due to finish by the end of this month, except for register offices in one county—Hampshire—which has requested a delay until November to fit in with its operational plans. The roll-out is not scheduled to finish until mid-November in Wales, but in all these cases, robust and tested business continuity plans are already in place.

The planning inspectorate has completed 90 per cent. of work on its business-critical systems and is on target to finish in November. Since autumn of last year we have been placing greater emphasis on the importance of business continuity plans and millennium operating regimes, which are essential safeguards against the impact of unforeseen bug failures and the other pressures of the millennium holiday period. The vast majority of Departments and agencies already have tested business continuity plans and millennium operating regimes in place. Ministerial colleagues have given me their personal assurances that all Departments and agencies will meet the deadline of the end of October for putting into place and testing the plans and millennium operating regimes.

As I foresaw in my September letter to Members, arrangements have been put in place so that the Government and the key infrastructure providers can share information over the millennium about how things are going and how any problems that emerge are being handled. Yesterday my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary and I announced the arrangements for the Government millennium centre, which will handle the flow of information over the critical period.

Exercise Herald, which took place on 26 October, tested how the information flows will work. This Cabinet Office-led exercise involved Government Departments and their agencies, Action 2000, the utilities, the Central Office of Information, the Government offices, and representatives of the media. A full analysis of the success of the exercise is not yet available, but preliminary indications are that a further exercise on a similar scale is unlikely to be required.

Independent assessments of the readiness of key parts of the national infrastructure have been undertaken as part of Action 2000's national infrastructure assessment programme. This programme has also included an assessment of business continuity plans and millennium operating regimes. The results of the latest assessments were announced at the national infrastructure forum on 21 October and are being published in a series of newspaper adverts in the national press.

I am pleased to report that almost all sectors of the national infrastructure have been rated as 100 per cent. "blue". That means that the independent assessors have not identified any risk of material disruption and that the public can expect a normal service. This includes key utilities services such as electricity, telecommunications, water and gas.

A number of essential and important services are delivered by the public sector. They, too, have been independently assessed as part of Action 2000's NIF programme. The benefit payments process has been blue since July. I am pleased to confirm that police services, fire brigades and NHS organisations are now all 100 per cent. blue. There has also been considerable progress in tackling the bug in local government. Local authorities in England, Scotland, and Wales are now 100 per cent. blue.

Financial institutions have been assessed as 98 per cent. blue. Seven medium-impact financial institutions are rated amber, but are expected to be blue by 12 November. Elsewhere, very few elements of amber remain, but further assessment work is under way in these sectors and all are expected to be 100 per cent. blue by the end of October.

No matter how much testing has been done, the possibility of failures occurring still remains. To address any remaining or unforeseen risks, and in line with best practice in the private sector, we have adopted a belt-and-braces approach to the issue, emphasising the need for all service providers to put proper and robust business continuity plans in place so that they can continue to deliver essential services, come what may.

There has been a vast amount of work in the UK to prepare for the millennium bug. We have subjected essential service providers to a rigorous programme of independent assessments—a process which gives us one of the most, if not the most, comprehensive and objective pictures of national readiness in the world. However, we have less information about other countries, so we cannot be confident that the rest of the world will be ready. We will therefore continue to prepare for potential disruption and make contingency plans to minimise any impact.

The Government will continue to lead by example and to be open and transparent on this issue. I will report further progress to the House in November and December. The United Kingdom remains one of the world leaders in tackling the millennium bug.

Mrs. Angela Browning (Tiverton and Honiton): I am most grateful to the right hon. Lady for giving me an advance copy of today's statement, and for the briefing with officials that she enabled me to hold earlier this month.

I welcome the fact that, in the latest report, blue status has been awarded in many private and public sector organisations. I am grateful for that information. We can all share the right hon. Lady's relief at that progress. However, some concerns remain, especially in the public sector.

When the right hon. Lady makes statements on this subject, she places in the Library some rather large tomes of detailed data. She will be encouraged to know that I have ploughed through the documents that were placed in the Library in September, although I have not had a chance to consult those for October, which she is placing in the Library today. My questions are thus based on the information available to me.

I noticed that the contingency plans for many parts of government—the business continuity plans—have yet to be tested. If alternative arrangements have been set up, it is imperative that they have at least been tested. I hope that the right hon. Lady will give us some updated information on progress on testing. In her statement, she announced the establishment of the Government millennium centre, which will be Cabinet Office led and will be the Government's hub for dealing with any problems that might arise. However, in the section on the Cabinet Office in the September report, I note that the business continuity plan for the Government's secure intranet has not yet been tested. If the internal intranet is to be at the hub of the Government's dissemination of information, it is important that it should be tested. I should be grateful for some updated information on that point.

In her statement to the House on 17 June, the right hon. Lady announced 30 September 1999 as the target date for NHS contingency plans. Will she confirm that that target was met, and that the systems and contingency plans for the NHS have been satisfactorily tested?

There is continuing concern about the testing of contingency plans in many parts of the public sector—for example, the Passport Agency. The right hon. Lady will know why I choose that example. That agency does not have a good track record, so the fact that it has yet to report the completion and testing of the work is worrying. Will she confirm that the Passport Agency completed its business continuity plan by the end of September and that the October report, which she is placing in the Library today, shows that the plan has been tested?

Even more important are those plans with a target date of the end of November and the end of December. The right hon. Lady nods—I am grateful for that acknowledgement that the matter is now of extremely grave concern, because of the time constraints. On 9 September 1998, when she made her quarterly statement on the subject, she stated:

"I am concerned that there has been some slippage: the completion dates of a small number of plans have moved by a quarter, mostly from December 1998 to March 1999. I am particularly concerned that a number of the target dates are close to the end of 1999."

I share the concerns that the right hon. Lady expressed a year ago—especially those about the overall capability of the Ministry of Defence to complete its work on time and, in particular, for that work to be tested. She stated that she was satisfied that critical systems—especially front-line systems—had met their targets. However, there seems to have been no overall improvement in the completion of work in the MOD to a target of the end of November or December—according to the graph in the right hon. Lady's documents in the Library, the MOD does not appear to have made any progress during the past year. If the work is to be completed by the end of December, it is self-evident that the test will not be made before the millennium—the millennium itself will be the test for the MOD. That is a matter of extreme concern.

I appreciate the fact that things such as nuclear weapons systems are not involved; I am referring to the MOD's overall capability. None the less, that Department is very important and we are looking to the right hon. Lady to advise us today as to what action she is taking to ensure that it not only completes its work by the end of December but puts its systems through the required testing in advance of that date.

The right hon. Lady referred to the state of preparedness in other countries. If the Cabinet Office is to act as the hub of Government at the millennium, it is important that we know exactly how the general public will receive information post-millennium. The Cabinet Office will presumably not be able to rely entirely on IT systems to disseminate that information. As it is only 64 days to the millenaium, will the right hon. Lady outline today how the Government intend to put information in the public domain? For example, people may require travel advice, perhaps for health and safety reasons, for various parts of the world. How will our embassies and high commissions provide local information to the United Kingdom so that it may be analysed and passed on to the public?

The right hon. Lady promised in her statement to give two further personal statements before Christmas. The right hon. Lady will appreciate that, if we are scrutinise the situation properly, we must have access to as much information as possible before the House rises for Christmas. As the right hon. Lady has influence over the scheduling of business in the House, will she arrange for the December statement to be made in good time so that hon. Members can study it and ask relevant questions? It will be our last opportunity to do that before the millennium, and we will want to test the reassurances that the right hon. Lady has given today.

Mrs. Beckett: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her comments and I will try to deal with most of the issues that she has raised.

Further testing is continuing on the Cabinet Office intranet. I am not certain whether it has been completed, so I shall write to the hon. Lady about the matter. I think she will find that NHS work and testing is now complete. The hon. Lady asked also about the Passport Agency. Its work is well under way and the Home Office announced recently that, after encountering some problems, the Passport Agency is now meeting its normal targets. Much of its work using older systems has dealt with post-2000 dates for a considerable period.

The hon. Lady raised concerns about some November and December completion dates. She will know that I share her concern in that regard, and have long done so.

[Mrs. Beckett]

We have nagged Departments ruthlessly to bring those dates forward as far as they can. The hon. Lady will be aware—the available information will confirm this—that in all cases, not just the vast majority, we are talking about finalising testing and the independent assessment of contingency planning. A feature of our assessment process is that we are not prepared to sign off people until all the work is completed.

The hon. Lady expressed particular concern about the work of the MOD, which she said seemed not to have improved in the past year. That is certainly not the case: the MOD has improved enormously. I suppose that it appears, to some extent, to be in the same parish because some work remains to be completed. However, the Royal Air Force and the Royal Navy, for example, have finished all work on their business-critical systems. Although a small amount of work on MOD programmes remains to be done, it is on systems that provide support—for example, logistics support and equipment maintenance. The vast majority of the remaining work is awaiting the completion of testing and assessment certification. Although I share the hon. Lady's regret that the work was not finished earlier, we are talking about the final stages of completion, not about work that has barely begun.

The hon. Lady also asked me about the international situation and how information will be collected and disseminated. As was announced yesterday, over the millennium period information will come to the information centre, primarily from Foreign and Commonwealth Office posts, which are charged with that responsibility. That information will be monitored. Media representatives will be in the information centre, so information that gives cause for concern can, if it is of considerable impact, be disseminated immediately. However, the Foreign Office will, of course, continue to update and assess the information that it has.

The information centre will remain open until 4 or 5 January at the least, because that is when many people will return to work and when some minor problems may be discovered. Similarly, as information comes in about other countries, we shall continue to update it. I anticipate that that will be done through the FCO website. If there is more that I can say about that, I shall write to the hon. Lady.

Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody (Crewe and Nantwich): Is my right hon. Friend aware that one of the issues that worries us is that some foreign countries do not have the same access to skilled support systems and may still be lagging behind, particularly in aviation? Will she assure me that the Civil Aviation Authority and the Foreign Office have carried out all possible checks to ensure that other nations' airlines that fly over London into Heathrow are absolutely certain that their systems are capable of dealing with any problems that might arise?

Mrs. Beckett: My hon. Friend is entirely right to express that concern. That assessment and monitoring is continuing. I assure her that the air transport authorities, which are independent of Government, have made it absolutely clear that should there be any dubiety about the safety of aircraft or of airlines that would normally fly into London, their licences will be withdrawn. There will be no question of such aircraft being in United Kingdom airspace.

Mr. Richard Allan (Sheffield, Hallam): The Leader of the House will be aware of the problems that can be caused to the telecommunications network by peaks in demand, as we saw recently when the simple operation of selling tickets for an England v. Scotland game caused major disruption, and callers—whether Scottish or English—were left being offered glazing services instead of tickets. Will she assure the House that business continuity planning covers the possible cumulative effect of panic calling resulting from systems going down or simply from human concerns?

On a more parochial level, will the right hon. Lady endorse and support efforts by the Information Committee and Officers of the House to ensure that all Members upgrade their systems and their staff's systems so that we are all ready to serve our constituents from the morning of 1 January 2000?

Mrs. Beckett: I shall deal first with the hon. Gentleman's second question. I fear that I cannot take responsibility for all Members and their offices. However, the House authorities are on the case and we are doing everything that we can to ensure that the services provided by the House to Members will be available in the ordinary way. We certainly encourage all Members to be aware of the impact on their own activities.

On the hon. Gentleman's initial question, everyone has been very mindful—there has been much discussion and in-depth consideration—of the problems that could occur, including those that result from human behaviour and from peaks of demand. All the telecommunications agencies have prepared for exceptional demand. Equally, one feature of the Government's approach to the matter—I commend this to Members—is that we encourage human behaviour that is less likely to exacerbate the difficulties. For example, we urge everyone not to pick up the phone and test it to see whether it is working immediately after midnight. That is the one thing that might mean that it does not work when one wants it to. I assure the hon. Gentleman, however, that special work and special committees have dealt with the general operation of telecommunications and, in particular, emergency communications. They are addressing issues such as demand as well as any problems that might arise from the millennium bug.

Mr. Gerald Bermingham (St. Helens, South): Will my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House reassure me that, in the event of people suffering loss or damage because of a non-compliance fault, they will be compensated with speed and efficiency, so that the state will set an example of best practice to those who will undoubtedly be hurt by the private sector's non-compliance in some cases?

Mrs. Beckett: I cannot give my hon. Friend the blanket assurance that he seeks. We cannot undertake to remove completely the ordinary, day-to-day problems that occur in the natural course of life. That is one of the features of handling the issue. I shall give him a simple example that I always find quite compelling: every day, an average of 40,000 people are without electricity supply for about

an hour. We clearly cannot undertake that such things will not happen over the millennium period. However, we can say that everything is being done to minimise the likelihood of any problems. Of course, if there are problems due to negligence in some way, that will have to be taken into consideration. Our aim is to avoid such difficulties.

Mr. Ian Bruce (South Dorset): Are there any instances in reports that the right hon. Lady has received from different Departments of the other dates about which we were all warned—9.9.99, the beginning of the financial year and the beginning of 1999—causing problems for Government computers? Has she any indication of the cost to all Departments of preparing for 2000? Have the Government provided additional funds for organisations such as the health service, which might have had to take money from patient care to deal with the problem?

Mrs. Beckett: I am indeed aware of such implications. There was some worry about 1 September and, for obvious reasons, about 9 September. There has been no adverse impact, that we can discover, on any of those dates. Indeed, there have been few confirmed reports of adverse impact even in the private sector or in other countries.

The anticipated cost to Departments has been pretty stable for some considerable time at around £420 million or £430 million. One of the reasons for that, which the hon. Gentleman will readily appreciate, is that, in the national health service, for example, to which he referred, work, albeit on a smallish scale, began as long ago as 1995. We are talking about work in many key areas that has not been confined to one critical period, but has been spread over time.

Mr. Andrew Miller (Ellesmere Port and Neston): From my discussions with people in other countries, it is clear that, on international comparisons, the Government and the nation have so far done a superb job—about that there is no doubt.

One aspect that is worthy of further consideration, perhaps through the newly created millennium centre, is the possible occurrence of minor problems as a result of the coincidence of Y2K and, for example, bad weather conditions. That could present difficulties in areas such as the public utilities, which no reasonable person could foresee. Indeed, part of my electricity supply was off over last Christmas and new year, without a Y2K problem. Against that background, will my right hon. Friend ask the newly created millennium centre to draw up contingency plans in order to cope with such eventualities?

Mrs. Beckett: My hon. Friend is entirely right in his observations. He is right, too, to identify the substantial implications of the size and scale of the holiday and, obviously, when it arises. If there is any impact, we may look back on it as being due primarily to bad weather, a flu epidemic or something of that kind, rather than to the millennium bug. I assure my hon. Friend that that has been a huge factor in all the thought, preparation and planning.

One of the reasons why the millennium centre was launched yesterday by the Home Secretary and myself is the range of services that are engaged in dealing with events over the millennium quite apart from the millennium bug. As an information centre, the millennium centre will be handling the flow of information on millennium events, not merely on millennium bug issues. We hope that that will mean a satisfactory flow of information to all who need to be kept informed.

Mr. Alasdair Morgan (Galloway and Upper Nithsdale): Is the Leader of the House in a position to estimate, however roughly, the percentage of the work on this problem that has been taken up with checking and testing, and the percentage taken up with fixing bugs that have been found? In other words, what amount of the work has turned out to be purely precautionary, albeit a necessary precaution?

Mrs. Beckett: That is a very good question. I cannot make such an assessment at this moment. My gut feeling, from the very many reports to which I have listened, is that, on the whole, in most areas, fixing has been a fairly small fraction of the work, and that the great bulk of the work has been that of checking and identifying possible problems, contingency planning and so on. However, obviously no one could have known that without that checking and examination.

I told my hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Mr. Miller) about the operation of the millennium centre. Although the hon. Member for Galloway and Upper Nithsdale (Mr. Morgan) did not raise the matter with me, he may like to know that similar centres will operate in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): I thank the President of the Council for her helpful statement, acknowledging in the process the hard work that is being done throughout the country to seek to ensure universal compliance by the due date. But, given that the right hon. Lady will recall from earlier exchanges in the House the widespread concern about the fact that the Department of Trade and Industry, a sponsoring Department, was a serious culprit and had a very dilatory approach to tackling those important matters, I wonder whether the right hon. Lady can give us an update today. Will she tell the House how the DTI has since performed—no doubt following a degree of nudging and encouragement from her—in absolute terms and relative to other Departments? Will she add something about the performance of the Export Credits Guarantee Department, about which there has been widespread concern for many months?

Mrs. Beckett: I would not call it nudging; it would be more accurate to call it beating over the head. I understand that all Government Departments, including the DTI and the ECGD, have completed their work, tested their contingency plans and are up to speed.

Mr. Owen Paterson (North Shropshire): Last year the River Severn flooded, causing very serious damage, and this year it has already overflowed its banks. As I understand it, the countermeasure systems in the event of a possible failure have yet to be tested, and that is especially important for flood warning and the estimation of river levels. What contingency plans do the Government have?

Mrs. Beckett: I understand that that work also is on target. My hon. Friend the Parliamentary Secretary to the

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Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, who will reply to the agriculture debate, has some responsibility for those matters. Who knows—with the hon. Gentleman's ingenuity and Madam Speaker's good will, he may manage to pursue the matter.

Mrs. Browning: I remind the right hon. Lady that when she laid the September report in the Library, no countermeasures had been identified by the ECGD. They were due to be completed in October. Therefore they have yet to be identified as complete, let alone tested. I should be grateful if the right hon. Lady would investigate that specifically.

Mrs. Beckett: I am most grateful to the hon. Lady. I have no briefing that suggests that there is any continuing problem with the ECGD, but she is right to raise the matter and I am grateful to her for doing so. I shall ensure that there is no continued problem.

Point of Order

1.38 pm

Sir Peter Emery (East Devon): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. I tried to give you notice via the Clerks of this point of order, which arises on a simple matter.

Can you confirm that, as "Erskine May" says in several places, if, during a debate in the House that has not exceeded its limited time—when there is still plenty of time for the debate to continue—a Member who has previously spoken rises to speak again, he can do so with the leave of the House?

Madam Speaker: The right hon. Gentleman is of course quite right in saying that a Member who wishes to make a second speech may do so by securing the leave of the House, with no single Member objecting. However, in my experience—I am sure that it is the experience of many Members—"Erskine May" is accurate in stating on page 375:

"It is very rare for a second speech to be allowed to a private Member other than the mover of a motion."

However, for all that, I know of the great interest that the right hon. Gentleman takes in such matters of procedure, and I am sorry that he was disappointed last evening. Having read *Hansard* carefully, I think that the Chair followed the current practice, whereby the House normally expects a Government winding-up speech to conclude a debate on a Government motion.

Sir Peter Emery: Further to that point of order, Madam Speaker. It is most helpful to have had your ruling, but surely it is the House that makes the decision, not the Chair.

Madam Speaker: It is the House that makes the decision, but may I draw the right hon. Gentleman's attention to last evening's *Hansard*? I see that the Government Whip asked the leave of the House to withdraw the motion. As the right hon. Gentleman knows from his great experience of procedure, one voice raised objecting to the withdrawal of the motion could well have led to a different situation.

Very often, when we come to the end of a debate, members are confused about procedure. It is important that they should understand the courses of action that are open.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): Further to that point of order, Madam Speaker. I was a spectator last night at those enticing events. I confide in you—obviously, if one wants to keep a secret, one expresses it in the House of Commons—that it was a source of misery to me, as I was settling down, awaiting a couple of hours of outstanding speech from my right hon. Friend the Member for East Devon (Sir P. Emery), that he did not have the opportunity to deliver that speech.

As you know, Madam Speaker, I am a new Member, and I seek clarification and guidance. Are you telling the House that if there had been a single objection to the request of the Government Whip to withdraw the motion, I would have had the succulent pleasure of listening to my right hon. Friend for a couple of hours?

Madam Speaker: Indeed you would.

Sir Peter Emery: May I make it quite clear that I had no intention of speaking for two hours?

Agriculture

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Allen.]*

Madam Speaker: I inform the House that Back-Bench speeches will be limited to 10 minutes.

1.42 pm

The Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mr. Nick Brown): In little more than a week, agriculture has been the focus of two debates in the House. That is right. It demonstrates the importance that the House attaches to these matters.

Today, I want to set out how the Government are helping the industry to prepare for the future by providing special measures for the short term, and by providing a framework for an efficient, forward-looking and modernised industry for the longer term.

Before I deal with that, I shall say something about the French beef ban and the Government's response. As well as being a clear breach of European Union law, the French import ban has hindered the resumption of our beef exports. The Government have been, at both official and ministerial level, in regular contact with the European Commission and the French Government, to let them know just how seriously we take the matter and to bring the problem to a swift resolution.

The European Union Scientific Steering Committee is meeting today to consider France's evidence for its continued import ban. I have looked at the evidence, and it contains nothing not already known to us or to the Commission. I therefore expect the steering committee to dismiss the French evidence.

The Prime Minister has made it clear to the French Prime Minister this week that he expects nothing less than the immediate lifting of the ban on British beef, and I have made exactly the same thing clear to my counterpart as well. If the French fail to lift their ban, the Government will call upon the European Commission to take legal action at once.

We have made it clear that we have the science on our side, the law on our side and the Commission on our side. The French are isolated. We have played by the rules and fully expect to achieve the outcome that will benefit farmers and the entire beef industry.

Mr. Patrick McLoughlin (West Derbyshire): I am grateful to the Minister for giving way. There have been press reports that the French Agriculture Minister has cancelled his meeting with the Minister. Is that meeting now to take place?

Mr. Brown: A routine bilateral meeting was arranged for Saturday which, I regret, the French Agriculture Minister has had to cancel because the French Prime Minister has asked him to accompany him on another overseas visit. *[Interruption.]* For Conservative Members to jeer at the French Government will not help. These are routine bilaterals, which often have to be rearranged at the last minute because of pressures on Ministers, and I take no offence at that. Our offices are in close contact.

The important contact between my office and others involved is not that with the French Government directly but that with the EU Commission. We should remember that France's quarrel is not directly with the UK—although, of course, we are the people most affected by it—but with the Commission. The French Government are defying an EU decision. The ban has already been lifted by 13 member states, a 14th, Germany, is in the process of doing so, and one member state, France, is not complying with what was a collective agreement.

Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (Cotswold): Does not the Minister's reply to my hon. Friend the Member for West Derbyshire (Mr. McLoughlin) merely demonstrate the French Government's arrogance? They can have no more important problem than one involving the beef trade between two major EU countries. How much longer will the Government stand by and do nothing about a trade in beef fed with sewage—something that is illegal under European law—and about a ban on British beef that has nothing wrong with it and that the committee will not be able to find anything wrong with today? Will it take months or years in the European Court? What are our farmers supposed to do?

Mr. Brown: The hon. Gentleman is wrong. I can tell him from personal experience that Agriculture Ministers have to deal with many issues, some quite difficult, at the same time, so I make no complaint about the bilateral having to be rearranged. The hon. Gentleman asks what the British Government are doing. I have just set that out. The important next step is the meeting that is taking place today of the scientific advisers to the Commission, to which the French Government will respond and on which the Commission will then act.

Mr. Clifton-Brown: Months and months.

Mr. Brown: The hon. Gentleman says months and months, but I say November. It is not right for the hon. Gentleman to say that the matter will drag on. We are looking for a speedy resolution and, after today's meeting, we expect the Commission to stand in our corner.

That brings me to the next matter to which I wanted to refer. We are similarly relying on the science and the law in respect of the use of sewage sludge in French animal feed.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Brown: Let me finish my point and then I shall give way.

I have received and published the clear and considered advice of the Joint Food Standards and Safety Group, advice which has been endorsed by the chairs of the three relevant independent advisory committees. The advice is that, although

"the practice of adding sewage sludge to animal feed is repugnant to consumers and illegal under Community law"

there is

"no immediate public health risk and therefore no basis for seeking a ban of French products at either a Community level or unilaterally".

Therefore it would be wrong, as well as illegal under EU law, to impose an import ban on French livestock products.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Brown: I intend to move on to discuss the other important issues that affect agriculture. If hon. Members

[Mr. Brown]

wish to intervene on the French attitude to our beef exports and sewage sludge, I shall take interventions now, but not later, because the debate is scheduled to discuss the important but wider problems of EU agriculture.

Mr. John Burnett (Torridge and West Devon): Did I understand the Minister to say that proceedings will be resolved by next month? If it is, what penalties does he envisage will be extracted from the French for breach?

Mr. Brown: We expect a speedy response from the Commission to the scientific evidence, and it is that that I expect in November. Of course I would prefer a quick and decisive outcome, but I do not want one that sets aside our clear rights in this matter. We have the right to offer our perfectly safe beef for sale in France.

Sir Peter Emery (East Devon): One learns that it is the French intention to attend the meeting in Brussels and give way on the understanding that certain further restrictions are placed on British beef. If that is the case—it seems absolutely unreasonable to me—what steps are the Government preparing to take to deal with that problem?

Mr. Brown: Some people have been suggesting that I should ring the French Minister and cut a deal with him. I cannot do that. The date-based export scheme is a European Union scheme that has been agreed within the EU. The Commission is the custodian of it. It is not for me to enter into separate bilateral negotiations, nor can I. I am keeping very close to the Commission, and I had two long discussions with Commissioner Byrne yesterday. I am expecting to have further discussions either today or tomorrow, but I cannot go down the route that the right hon. Gentleman seems to be inviting me to take.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Brown: I shall give way to the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Mr. Wardle), and will take all the interventions, but then the House will want to move on.

Mr. Charles Wardle (Bexhill and Battle): Is not the Minister's assurance on sewage sludge, which he has repeated, dependent on it receiving adequate heat treatment? Can he tell the House that such treatment is being given? If it is not, his assurance means nothing.

Mr. Brown: I have put the full advice that I have received in the Library. It deals with the issue that the hon. Gentleman has raised and I refer him to it so that he can see for himself what advice I have been given and why I am acting on it.

Mr. Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield): Is not the key point of the Government's position that we are acting in accordance with law and scientific advice? Would it not be the height of folly to act beyond, or in contravention of, scientific advice, as we are being urged to do by Conservative Members, and then expect the French to abide by the scientific advice that we want them to abide by?

Mr. Brown: My hon. Friend is right. We have the law and the science on our side, and I am keeping it that way.

Mr. William Thompson (West Tyrone): Why did the Government allow the French to give new evidence to the Commission? Surely the French broke the law. The law is set out, so why is another member country allowed to open the whole issue up again and delay matters, as France is doing?

Mr. Brown: The French are in breach of the law. Their explanation is that they have new evidence. That claim has to be examined before it can be set to one side. That is happening now. I have looked at what they claim to be new evidence. There is nothing new there, and I confidently expect that to be the outcome of the scientific examination that is taking place today and tomorrow.

Mr. Ian Bruce (South Dorset): I am most grateful to the Minister, who is being very courteous and answering questions directly. I congratulate him on his personal stand of not eating French food while the problem continues. That is very brave of him—perhaps braver than he expected.

If one of my farmers in Dorset decided to start feeding an animal sewage sludge and/or bonemeal and/or hormones, would the Minister's Department be able to prevent that tainted meat from getting into the food chain so that my constituents could not eat it? If it could do so, why can he not do the same to the French meat that is being produced in such a way?

Mr. Brown: We have strict controls in this country, most of which we want and some of which we have because of our special circumstances regarding BSE. In my extensive discussions with the industry, I have not met a farmer who wants to feed his livestock contaminated animal feed. British farmers want a premium in the marketplace for the quality-assured schemes that we operate. I think that the hon. Gentleman wants that as well, so I invite him to make common cause with me in supporting the Meat and Livestock Commission's assured British meat schemes.

Mr. John Greenway (Ryedale): We all hope that the beef issue can be resolved quickly, but I bring the Minister back to the meat and bonemeal question. Surely if there is a meat and bonemeal ban for our own farmers, particularly in the pig and poultry sectors, the same should apply across the entire EU. The Minister shakes his head, but what is the justification for having the ban in Britain, but not in the rest of Europe? Does not the sewage sludge issue, which I first raised with the Prime Minister in June and which has come up again during the past few days, present a golden opportunity for imposing on the production of pork on the continent the same standards that we have in this country? Will the Minister think again about that? Whatever the president of the National Farmers Union says about a trade war, the pig and poultry farmers of this country want a ban on meat and bonemeal-fed products.

Mr. Brown: It is not a golden opportunity if it is not well founded in law, and the professional advice that I

have received is very clear. As for the broader question of meat and bonemeal, the pig sector has a genuine grievance, with which I intend to deal later in my speech. I have something quite extensive to say, and I hope that the hon. Gentleman will bear with me until then.

Mr. Owen Paterson (North Shropshire): I thank the Minister for giving way yet again. Does he realise that maintaining the ban on beef on the bone hopelessly undermines his negotiating stance in relation to the French? Backed up by idiotic Labour councils such as Coventry council, which has banned all beef products, it enabled the agricultural councillor at the French embassy, Mr. Jean-Jacques Benazit, to write to this week's edition of the *Farmers Guardian* invoking the precautionary principle because beef on the bone is banned in this country.

Mr. Brown: I shall have something to say about local authorities and beef later. As for a link between the ban on beef on the bone—which is at the extreme end of the precautionary measures in this country—and the date-based export scheme, no such link exists, because the date-based scheme relates to deboned beef. There is no question of any beef on the bone going into the export market through the scheme.

I can confirm again that I have received advice from the United Kingdom's chief medical officer, Professor Donaldson, that it would be safe to lift the ban for the purpose of retail sales, including sales through catering outlets. I have made it clear to the House repeatedly that I want to lift the ban as soon as I can, but I want to do so in an orderly way throughout the United Kingdom. That will require the consent of the devolved authorities that have competence in Scotland and Wales. I hope to be able to obtain their consent soon, and in any event before Christmas.

Mr. Oliver Letwin (West Dorset) *rose—*

Mr. Nigel Jones (Cheltenham) *rose—*

Mr. Brown: I will give way to the hon. Members for West Dorset (Mr. Letwin) and for Cheltenham (Mr. Jones). After that, given the imposition of a 10-minute limit for speeches, I will make some progress in order to protect the time allowed to other Members.

Mr. Letwin: I am grateful to the Minister, who has behaved with typical courtesy. Does he appreciate, however, that Conservative Members and many of our constituents are concerned with the timetable question? The Minister lifted our hearts when he spoke of November, but if what he is actually saying is that he has no means of protecting the industry against months, perhaps years, of legal wrangling, by the time that is resolved, many of our constituents will be out of agricultural production, and the nature of our countryside will have changed. Has the Minister nothing to say about dealing with that problem?

Mr. Brown: With the greatest of respect, let me say that I think that the hon. Gentleman is overstating his case. Our remedy is through the institutions of the European Union. After all, the date-based export scheme is their scheme, and that is the right approach for us to take. All the other suggestions—including the suggestion that we should initiate a trade war by behaving illegally ourselves—seem to me to be absolutely wrong. I think that they will cause much harm and misery to many people in this country as their jobs are put at risk—and hundreds of thousands of jobs are involved.

Mr. Jones: I thank the Minister for giving way. He has made some powerful comments, and I congratulate him on keeping his head during the crisis while many others have been losing theirs.

The Minister said that France was isolated. It is, within the European Union; but the United States of America is still imposing a ban on British beef. Is the Minister engaging in negotiations with the aim of getting the ban lifted in the United States? Which does he think will happen first, the French allowing in our meat or the Americans doing so?

Mr. Brown: I do not want to set time scales, or to put events in an artificial order. I have regular bilateral meetings with our friends in the United States and with officials at the United States embassy here, and of course those matters are much discussed. Let me, however, say gently to the hon. Gentleman that the United States has some grievances about beef trade issues in regard to the European Union, and naturally we discuss those matters as well.

I recognise, and I know that the House will recognise, the real difficulties faced by agriculture and the wider rural economy as a result of the depressed level of farm incomes. In recent years, there has been a dramatic fall in those incomes, which has affected the whole industry but which is felt particularly in the livestock sector.

The reasons for the fall in farm incomes are well known: the strength of the pound; the implications of the BSE crisis for the beef sector, and BSE-related controls that have impacted on the whole of the livestock sector; and the loss of overseas markets with recession in the far east and collapse of the Russian economy.

As for the Government's response, we believe that there is a good case for a common agricultural policy in the European single market. However, as currently structured, the common agricultural policy does not serve our agriculture well. The Government's policy is to secure a more competitive and sustainable industry with a stronger market orientation. We want to reduce agriculture's reliance on subsidies based on production. We also want to encourage restructuring for long-term sustainability, and to promote development of real markets for our products, less distorted by the CAP. That was the philosophy behind the United Kingdom's support for the Agenda 2000 reform proposals.

The House should not underestimate the fact that the Agenda 2000 agreement represents an important step in moving the common agricultural policy in the right direction. The changes will help agriculture to meet the challenges of further trade liberalisation, including our ambitions for European Union enlargement and the upcoming World Trade Organisation round. A significant shift from price support to direct payments was agreed, and will reduce the economic distortions of the common agricultural policy.

We have also created an integrated European Union rural development policy. For the first time, measures for agri-environmental schemes, early retirement, marketing

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and energy crops are providing within the CAP the basis for a welcome shift in emphasis, from production support to future environmental and rural economy measures.

Miss Anne McIntosh (Vale of York): Within the framework of the CAP, and as trade barriers are lifted, does the Minister accept that meat hygiene charges are an additional burden for our farmers and a factor in making them less competitive? Other hon. Members have already mentioned the United States model of farming. In recognition of the public safety aspect of meat hygiene, the United States Government pays meat hygiene charges, which amount to $800 million annually. Might the United Kingdom Government be minded to go down that route, and recognise that, as a public safety measure, meat hygiene should be a charge on the public purse?

Mr. Brown: The Government cannot fully go down that route as, like other European Union members, we are obliged to recover some of the costs from the industry. However, some issues are unique to the United Kingdom, such as the recently created BSE safeguards. I shall say something about those issues in a moment. We are also looking very hard at the operation of the Meat Hygiene Service, about which I shall also have something to say. Although the hon. Lady is on to a very strong point, the answer is in the detail. It is not possible for me or for any Minister to waive all the charges.

Sir Geoffrey Johnson Smith (Wealden): Does that mean that there is no question of compensation being offered? I ask that because, as we know, the United Kingdom egg industry is subject to much closer and more rigorous examination than the egg industry of any other western European country. When a flock ceases being productive, for example, all the cages must be replaced, and that is a very expensive proposition. Bearing in mind the extra burden borne by the United Kingdom egg production industry, is the right hon. Gentleman telling us that there is no question of compensation to help them overcome that additional cost, so that we may at least be assured of a good supply of healthy eggs? I recall that, when it came to grubbing out apple orchards, there was some compensation for apple growers.

Mr. Brown: The right hon. Gentleman is quite right to talk about the difficulties of the egg and the poultry meat sector. As he will know, the European Union regime for both the poultry and the pig sector is a light one—in other words, it does not provide any avenue for specific support payments of the type that he described. It also—this is perhaps less well understood, but is right—prevents member states from introducing new egg regimes of their own. I shall say something later about how we should deal with those circumstances. Nevertheless, the right hon. Gentleman is on to a good point, which he raises at the right time. There is no question but that the sector is going through very difficult times.

Mr. Cynog Dafis (Ceredigion): The Minister mentioned energy crops and I have made the point before that there is an anomaly in the situation in which arable area payments can be converted into support payments for energy crops, but livestock payments cannot. That is discriminatory between sectors, and also between regions and parts of the UK. Is not that wrong; will he undertake to put it right; and how long will it take?

Mr. Brown: I cannot give an undertaking to reshape the schemes to meet the anomaly that the hon. Gentleman points out, but I am an enthusiastic supporter of energy crop production in this country. It has great potential and I shall do what I properly can to help. The rural development announcements are only weeks away and they will offer a potential way forward.

Agenda 2000 provides member states with discretion on how to implement aspects of the CAP reform agreement. That was the subject of my recent consultation. I invited views from everyone with an interest in the countryside on using the options available under Agenda 2000 to achieve a competitive, flexible and diverse industry. I am in discussions with the Treasury about the long-term future of support for agriculture in the UK in the light of the sustained problems that our farmers have been facing.

The problems that UK farmers face are problems for the whole food chain. As Minister with responsibility for both agriculture and food, I have from the outset been keen to bring together all parts of the food chain to address common problems. The different parts of the industry have much to learn from each other. The food chain group, which I set up, will report soon and I hope that its report will engender not only discussion but action—in a spirit of partnership—to address some of the issues facing the whole food chain. I am grateful for the help that has been given to that important initiative by retailers.

Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody (Crewe and Nantwich): Will my right hon. Friend the Minister please emphasise the extraordinary area of dispute caused by the appalling prices paid to the producer—who must be important in all this—by supermarkets which seem to make large profits in the middle? While those talks are taking place, would it not be a good time to point out to the distribution system that it might be nice if the housewife and the producer benefited from a more sensible system?

Mr. Brown: I am very keen on getting all parts of the industry—the retailers, the distributors, the processors and the producers—to realise that they have interests in common. I am also opposed to the improper exercise of market power to enable the strong to prevail against the less strong. The Competition Commission is now considering the issues, which include the profit margins of the retailers, their relationship with consumers, and the working of the entire supply chain. We will have to await its report, which will of course be made to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry.

I welcome the initiatives that have taken place, although more has to be done. The Government recognise that special short-term measures are needed—exceptionally—because of the current pressures. That is why I announced on 20 September extra support to hill livestock producers in recognition of the particular difficulties that they face. Some £60 million extra will be made available in 1999 and a further £60 million in hill livestock compensatory allowance payments in 2000.

The payments under Agenda 2000, from 2001, will be made on a different basis, and I expect to issue a consultation paper on that next week.

Mr. Tim Collins (Westmorland and Lonsdale): I hope that the Minister will be able to answer a specific point put to me in the past half hour by a representative of the Cumbrian NFU. It is rumoured that the consultation that the Minister has just mentioned will close on 19 November, but the paper will go out next week. Is that true, and if so, will it be possible to extend the consultation period, so that hill farmers in grave difficulty have more time to think about the serious implications of the change?

Mr. Brown: That is a fair point, but I want to reflect on it over the next 24 hours as I do not want unduly to delay making the payments. The longer the time allowed for consultation, the later the new scheme will be introduced. Both those factors must be borne in mind. There has been some discussion with farmers' representatives already, but the hon. Gentleman raises a fair point and I promise to give the House an answer within 24 hours.

In the same package, I announced the deferral of charges for inspections of specified risk material from cattle and sheep carcases until the year 2002–03, at least. That in part answers a point raised earlier by the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Mrs. Browning). In the present depressed state of the market, and given that those costs do not fall on our competitors, it is right for the Government to continue to meet the charges from public funds. Similarly, and for the same reason, I announced that the charging of farmers for cattle passports would be deferred at least until 2002–03.

The Government also have an important part to play in setting the right regulatory framework—for both the farming industry and the wider public—and in recognising the burdens that legislation imposes. I shall do all I can to relieve farmers of unnecessary bureaucracy. We have already implemented, as far as we can, the efficiency study on reducing paperwork burdens on farmers. We already seek to help farmers by pre-printing forms, for example, and we are trialling the use of electronic communication.

However, we must do more. That is why we have set in hand a review of the regulatory burdens. Also, to ensure that we tackle the matters that the industry considers to be unnecessary or oppressive, I have asked the industry to tell me of its top concerns. I have asked teams of informed individuals to look radically at the priorities chosen by the industry. Those priorities cover slaughterhouse regulation—another point rightly raised by the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton—meat hygiene rules, integrated administration and control system and inspections and the workings of the intervention system.

I have asked the different working groups to advise me of ways in which we could do things better. That is not the end of the story: other matters remain to be examined.

Mr. Paterson *rose—*

Mr. Clifton-Brown *rose—*

Mr. Alan Duncan (Rutland and Melton) *rose—*

Mr. Lembit Öpik (Montgomeryshire) *rose—*

Mr. Brown: I shall give way in turn to the four hon. Gentlemen who have indicated that they want to intervene but then, although I do not want to be discourteous to the House, I must make progress.

Mr. Paterson: What has the Minister done since last weekend's revelation that the Meat Hygiene Service, from the £40 that it charges an abattoir, gives £8 to a vet, takes £8 for administration fees, and gives £24 to private contracting companies such as Eville and Jones of Leeds?

Mr. Brown: That is precisely the type of issue that the review body is examining. However, for completeness I should tell the House that, in addition to the review body that I have appointed, the Meat Hygiene Service has also implemented an efficiency exercise. The outcome of that exercise will be reported to the main review body.

Mr. Clifton-Brown: Will the Minister ask the review body to examine a specific problem that has irritated a number of my constituents? That is that simple administrative errors—on IACS forms, for example—can result in huge and disproportionate penalties.

Mr. Brown: At present, I seem to be the review body, as hon. Members set out hard cases. As far as I can, I look very closely at such cases, as some of them seem hard to me as well. Although the European rules that constrain us are very tight, the hon. Gentleman makes a good point; I have seen some cases that I think are very hard, and there clearly would be justification in having another system to check that we were not being harder than the rules required. However, the scope for ministerial discretion is very limited.

Mr. Duncan: Farmers in my constituency try to export sheep carcases to France. That is a lucrative market when it works, but the Government requirement that the spinal column be removed does not suit the sale of such carcases. If that simple and unnecessary stipulation were relaxed or rescinded, the French market would be opened up again. That would benefit my farmers, who want only to trade sensibly. Will the Minister undertake to change the rule, as there now seems to be no need for the requirement on safety grounds, and its removal would make all the difference?

Mr. Brown: I can give the hon. Gentleman an assurance that I am looking very hard at that matter. However, the constraint is a recommendation from the Spongiform Encephalopathy Advisory Committee and the Government cannot lightly put it to one side. I am examining the matter closely, but I cannot give the hon. Gentleman the assurance that he seeks today.

Mr. Öpik: Is the Minister saying that he would be willing to reduce the amount of paperwork and inspection that farmers suffer at present, if that were to be the consensus recommendation from his experts in the review process, as it is from the industry?

Mr. Brown: I take the review process very seriously indeed. It is a joint initiative undertaken by myself and Ben Gill, the president of the National Farmers Union.

[Mr. Brown]

A range of industry interests are involved in it. I have participants to report to me crisply, and where I can I intend to act as soon as possible.

Mr. Mark Todd (South Derbyshire): Will my right hon. Friend ensure that there is an international dimension to the review? That would allow us to be aware of the performance of our competitors in ensuring that regulations are complied with, and to know the compliance costs that they commit to that exercise.

Mr. Brown: I have asked our agricultural attachés in the European Union to look at what is done in other member states. I know that the Meat and Livestock Commission has also looked at the matter closely. Both sets of information are in the public domain, and the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton referred earlier to what happened in the United States. It is right to compare our performance with that of other countries, but such comparisons serve to show that we have an incredibly good tale to tell about our domestic safeguards and our industry. I think that that tale should be told more loudly.

The initiatives to which I have referred are being undertaken over the next few weeks. I am also seeking the help of other Departments, where the concerns about unnecessary bureaucracy arise in relation to non-agricultural policies. If we can do things in a better way without endangering consumers, the environment or taxpayers' money, we will. I assure the House that, if I have to make a case for changes in law in Brussels, I will do so.

I still believe that more needs to be done. The way forward lies not in devising schemes that supplement the supply-side measures of the CAP, but in doing more work on the demand side. We must develop distinctive brands of British farm produce that meet the needs of consumers and command a premium in the market place. Yesterday, I attended the National Farmers Union's event celebrating great British food. I welcome the work that the NFU is doing in partnership with elements of the supply chain, including processors and retailers. I support the idea of a British produce kitemark. We have a good story to tell, and the pig industry provides a good example of that.

Mr. Ieuan Wyn Jones (Ynys Môn): I thank the Minister for his patience in the debate. He has given way many times, and hon. Members of all parties appreciate that. In September, he announced a tranche of aid for private storage for lambs, applicable in October. If another tranche were made available for November, it might not have a dramatic effect but it would offer some help to the industry. Will the Minister say whether the Government are likely to apply for another tranche of that aid for November?

Mr. Brown: To aid the upland industry, which was in crisis, I raised HLCAs by £60 million. I recall saying that last year's increase was a one-off, and I am obliged to say that this year's is as well. The hon. Gentleman is right to say that a very small amount of money is still available for intervention, but I cannot promise the House that I will be able to draw it down.

Mr. John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings): Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Brown: I would like to make some progress on the pig sector, which has a particular call on our support.

The British public urged Members to pass legislation outlawing stall-and-tether production systems in pig farms on animal welfare grounds. We have high health and hygiene standards, and other clear quality advantages. Not surprisingly, many people recognise that and want to buy British. Consumers should be able to do so and should not be misled by labelling.

I am particularly concerned at the development of products with labels that have British-sounding names, but which market imported pigmeat. I am determined to tackle the issue of misleading labels, and yesterday put out for consultation new, strengthened guidance to trading standards officers to act on cases of misleading British brand names or geographic associations given to imported produce.

Mr. Christopher Gill (Ludlow): Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Brown: I should like to set out my objectives, but, given the hon. Gentleman's long-standing interest in these matters, I shall of course give way to him later. He may wish to hear in full what I propose before he intervenes to accuse me of not doing what I am about to announce.

I have three objectives. I want to give clear, unambiguous information on the real place of origin, not place of processing or place of slicing; I want to clamp down on misleading place of origin descriptions; and I want to make further progress by lobbying the European Commission and other member states for a system of clear country of origin labelling. I am seeking to have this issue raised in the Codex committee on food labelling because of the international nature of these arrangements.

Although a clampdown on misleading labelling would help, the pig sector requires further assistance. I have written to Commissioner Fischler formally requesting the reopening of aids for private storage for pigmeat as well as the restoration of export refunds. It is also my intention to see what can be done about the additional costs on the industry arising from BSE-related public safeguards.

Mr. Gill *rose—*

Mr. David Curry (Skipton and Ripon) *rose—*

Mr. Brown: That matter was raised, perfectly properly, earlier in the debate, but I should like to finish my point before taking interventions.

As it stands, there is a complete ban on commercial uses of pig meat and bonemeal, which was formerly sold for use in animal feeds. The ban is in place because SEAC recommended it. I agree with SEAC—the Government's advisers on this issue—that same-species recycling is wrong. It is a positive advantage for the UK pig sector that it does not recycle.

SEAC also has justified concerns about the risks of cross-contamination and fraud if the Government were to permit the use of pig meat and bonemeal in the feed of other farm animals. I want to re-examine that issue with SEAC to see if there is any way that pig farmers can get a commercial return on their meat and bonemeal, while retaining a high level of public protection.

Earlier this year, I received assurances from retail chains that they would be sourcing British pigmeat. I want to reaffirm those commitments. Because of the grave difficulties facing the sector, I have appointed an official in my Ministry—Mike Roper—to serve as designated co-ordinator for all the efforts that my Department is making with respect to the pig sector. That will include making progress in the Ministry's pigmeat verification efforts to ensure that retail and catering suppliers are playing fair. Mr. Roper will report directly to Ministers.

I have had three meetings with representatives of the pig industry this month. I attended the Meat and Livestock Commission's British pig executive meeting this month, and will attend next month's meeting. I strongly support the MLC's British pork mark, but there is need for a renewed effort.

Members of Parliament have a particular responsibility. That is not a party political point as we also have an equal responsibility. We voted for higher welfare standards, and the higher costs that go with them. If times were good, the industry could bear the costs, but times are not good. That is why we have a special responsibility. I have written to all English major public purchasers—local education authorities, health authorities and prison wardens—to draw their attention to the high quality, hygiene and welfare standards of British pork products. My Scottish and Welsh counterparts are doing the same, as is Lord Dubs in Northern Ireland. I have also written to each Member of Parliament. I call on all Members to follow up that initiative—part of the broad campaign through which I am slowly taking us—with their local authorities, health authorities and prisons. If they receive a letter from me and the local Member of Parliament—none of us is without influence in our constituencies—there may be a real impact. I urge the House to treat my initiative in the bipartisan spirit in which I offer it. All of us can do something to help the pig sector.

Mr. Gill *rose—*

Mr. Curry *rose—*

Mr. Brown: I have more to say, and I must ask the hon. Gentleman and the right hon. Gentleman to wait until I have finished my announcements.

I have also written to all LEAs about beef, emphasising the quality and safety of British beef. Last week, I met an all-party delegation of Northern Ireland representatives—including the hon. Member for West Tyrone (Mr. Thompson), who is present, and his hon. Friend the hon. Member for North Antrim (Rev. Ian Paisley); I hope that I can describe the latter hon. Gentleman as the other's hon. Friend. *[Interruption.]* I am never quite sure. The delegation met my noble Friend Lord Dubs to hear about the particular problems facing agriculture—notably the pig sector—in Northern Ireland.

I am keen to strengthen the marketing skills of British farming and to provide much needed assistance to the pig industry. I announced in September that £1 million would be made available for that purpose, but, in view of the severe continuing crisis in some sectors, the Government are making available an additional £5 million in marketing aid. I am aware of how acute the position of the pig sector is, particularly in those parts of England and Northern Ireland where the industry is concentrated. I intend the pig sector to have a first call on that new money, and I hope that it will help to strengthen the sector's competitive position in future.

Mr. Gill: I have listened carefully to what the Minister has said about labelling, as I did when he addressed the National Farmers Union's great British food conference yesterday morning. Does he regret that while the House has the power to make legislation on animal welfare, we cannot legislate to make it mandatory for all producers to label British products as produced in this country? What does he intend to do about that? I see him going into a minefield as he tries to legislate in other ways that would avoid stating so categorically that a product was made and produced in Britain.

Mr. Brown: If the hon. Gentleman reads the statement that I have issued, which I am happy to make publicly available, he will find that I am trying to tiptoe through that minefield. I support the MLC-assured British labels, which give quality assurance. I support the NFU's idea of a kitemark. I am clamping down on misleading labelling, including on pictures or even product titles that imply that a product is British when it is not. Guidelines have been issued to trading standards officers and it is up to them to enforce the law through the courts. Tightening the guidelines to trading standards officers shows the Government's clear intention to ensure that consumers are not misled.

Mr. Curry: When the right hon. Gentleman has finished his personal boycott and can once again set foot in a Carrefour supermarket in France, will he look at the beef on sale and notice that it is all labelled "né, elevé et abattu en France"—born, reared and slaughtered in France? Would not that be a good model for British labelling? Is it legal?

Mr. Brown: There are all sorts of tempting replies to that. I am happy to look for the Meat and Livestock Commission's label in the shops and to purchase to the assured British standards in which I have confidence. I know what the beef is being fed, for example.

Mr. Hayes: When the right hon. Gentleman considers labelling, will he take into account the wholesale, catering and processing industries, among others, as well as the retail industry, which are consuming more and more pigmeat and should be brought into the examination? It is one thing if people buy pigmeat for themselves from the shops, but if they are consuming it in another context it is difficult for them to ascertain its origins. As the right hon. Gentleman knows, the Select Committee on Agriculture looked into those matters and those industries are the growth sectors for the purchase of pigmeat.

Secondly, when the right hon. Gentleman looks into marketing, will he consider the fiscal regimes that are faced by farmers? It is not merely pig but arable farmers who are in desperate straits. In many competitor countries,

[Mr. Hayes]

the fiscal regimes and hidden subsidies offered make it easy for farmers to borrow and to invest in marketing and other areas of business expansion.

Mr. Brown: On the second range of issues, if we believe that the European Commission ought to look into some matter, we draw it to its attention and it acts on our requests. On the catering sector, the hon. Gentleman is right—almost one third of all UK food is now consumed through catering outlets rather than retail sales and preparation at home. I will pay particular attention to catering in the continuing talks that I am having with the industry—the retail and catering sectors and those who supply caterers. The hon. Gentleman, although perhaps for these purposes I may call him my hon. Friend, is on to a good point and I hope that my verification officer will also be able to pay particular attention to that area.

Mr. Tom King (Bridgwater): I think that the right hon. Gentleman has completed the pig package that he trailed in the House last week, when he said that he would have something substantial to say. What forecast have his officials given him of the likely value to the industry of the measures that he has announced today? I told pig producers in my constituency that an important package was coming. The background there is that they are on a deadline and I think that substantial producers are about to shut down. If this is the total package, we are on the brink of a major collapse of the pig industry. What is plan B? Other countries would have such a plan and would not allow their industries to go like this. Among other things, the collapse of the sector would be a huge setback for welfare in the pig industry.

Mr. Brown: I entirely agree about the setback for animal welfare if we lose a significant part of the industry. As the right hon. Gentleman knows, I am constrained by the state aid rules. I am trying to do everything that I can within the rules and the law, but we will get those in our domestic industry through only if we get them that premium in the marketplace for the quality product that they produce. That is the only way forward. We have to get consumers on our side. We need to market our way out of the problem. I cannot invent supply-side measures to supplement the common agricultural policy because that would not be lawful.

I have no forecast of the impact of these measures, but I appeal to every hon. Member to try his or her best, as I am trying my best, to get the industry through.

Mr. Robert Key (Salisbury): We must also get the supermarkets on side. Will the Minister explain a little more about the interface in competition policy between his Department and the Department of Trade and Industry, with so many of our pig farmers in particular on the brink of bankruptcy? Supermarkets are in a positive frame of mind, but they have to a large extent been responsible for the type of agricultural production on which they have insisted from farmers in the name of the consumer. They underestimate their role in creating a demand for different products. If we want to create a better value product for British farmers to sell, supermarkets must abandon their lowest-cost production technique and start to market British produce at a fair price.

Mr. Brown: That is exactly why we are making extra public money available to encourage marketing and the explanation of the specific benefits—welfare benefits and quality—that sit alongside the domestic industry. I hope that retailers will be willing to help. We have a good story to tell and it is one that the public wanted us to tell. We should say so loud and clear. The Government have a responsibility, but there is also a responsibility on each and every one of us as individuals.

Mr. Paul Tyler (North Cornwall): I congratulate the Minister on this new form of Question Time that he is instituting. Seriously, does he accept that there has to be a plan B, as the right hon. Member for Bridgwater (Mr. King) said? It will not be enough to market or label our way out of the pig crisis as it is far too deep for that—it is an emergency and one that none of us has experienced before. I suggest that the right hon. Gentleman reads carefully the *Hansard* report of the debate to which his right hon. Friend the Minister of State, the Member for Gateshead, East and Washington, West (Ms Quin) replied yesterday, when a number of hon. Members put specific questions. At one meeting with sector representatives on 5 October, he said that there was a real chance not merely of Government but of European Union funding in particular circumstances when public health was at risk. That is the situation that faces the pig sector because the BSE spillover into the sector has caused it huge additional costs. That is the principal reason why pig farmers in my constituency and in many others that are represented here today are going to the wall as the right hon. Gentleman speaks.

Mr. Brown: I want to do everything that I can to help and I will not close any door until it is shut so firmly that even I cannot open it again. However, I must not hold out the prospect of hope where that does not exist. Any state help to the industry would almost certainly be struck down by the EU as an unlawful state aid.

Mr. Tyler: Why?

Mr. Brown: Because other people do not do it either. The consequences would not only be that we would have to repay the money—we would have to reclaim it from the industry, which would really impose an extra burden.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Brown: I will give way, but then hon. Members must allow me to make some progress because we are eating into the time of other hon. Members.

Mr. James Paice (South-East Cambridgeshire): Will the right hon. Gentleman explain the difference between paying public compensation for specified offal removal in pig abattoirs, which costs about £5 per pig and is done on a public health basis, and the compensation that Belgian farmers got for the dioxin crisis?

Mr. Brown: That is not the cost, but the MLC estimate of everything involved in the new meat and bonemeal

constraints that were put on the industry in 1996. The position in Belgium is different because there was a specific public health crisis that related to dioxin. That is not the case in the United Kingdom. No public health issue is involved. Essentially, the issue is one of markets. Even if I could get the money, which would be extraordinarily difficult, if I tried to introduce some new supply-side package of assistance it would be struck down under the state aid rules. That is the answer to the question.

Mr. Alasdair Morgan (Galloway and Upper Nithsdale): When negotiating country of origin labelling, will the right hon. Gentleman take a flexible view of the meaning of the word "country"? I can think of several quality exports from the Scottish agriculture sector, such as beef—and whisky, which is basically an agricultural product—whose producers and manufacturers would not necessarily think it to their advantage if they were forced to label them as the produce of the United Kingdom.

Mr. Brown: I mean this kindly—I think that we have a good regional food story to tell as well. The component parts of the United Kingdom—the regions of England as well as Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland—can all tell their own tales. I want the industry to make more use of the EU regional food description rules, so that we can boast about the things that we do well. The hon. Gentleman has a fair point.

Now, I want to make progress as I have more to say and I know that the House will be interested to know that the Government are also making available an additional £10 million for organic farming. This Government have been a strong supporter of the organic movement. We have already more than doubled support for conversion since we came to office as well as providing £2.2 million this year for organic research and development. We have found demand among farmers for conversion very strong indeed—so strong that the organic farming scheme became oversubscribed. I want this new money to help to clear the backlog of applicants waiting for conversion aid. As hon. Members will already know, the Government are conducting, with representatives of the organic sector, a review of the organic farming scheme to establish how best the Government might continue their support for farmers wishing to move into organic production methods. In the meantime, I can announce the extra £10 million.

On 7 July, I announced to the House that we were consulting milk producers in England, Wales and Scotland about extending the remit of the Milk Development Council. I can today announce the result of that consultation. A substantial majority of producers who voted favoured extending the council's remit to cover the generic promotion of liquid milk. There was also strong support from the farming unions and the dairy trade. The dairy sector as a whole has chosen to spend around £10 million on an 18-month promotion campaign. I welcome this initiative and, therefore, intend to propose the necessary changes to the legislation, once we have agreed the detailed arrangements with the dairy processing industry for it to provide matched funding. I am placing the full results of the consultation exercise in the Library of the House.

I have described a very difficult set of circumstances facing the industry. Understandably, the main public focus at the moment is on beef exports. Although it is clear that the Government must pursue that and ensure that there is free trade under European Union rules, a solution will not solve the problems of agriculture. These are deep seated. I have described a measured, realistic, Government response to the crisis. I commend it to the House.

2.42 pm

Mr. Tim Yeo (South Suffolk): It is only eight days since the House last debated agriculture—eight days in which much has happened and much has not happened. I welcome the debate. It is the first in Government time since either the Minister or I have been in our posts. I congratulate him on his speech. I want to be as positive as I can and, certainly, I welcome a number of aspects warmly.

In essence, however, today's speech is the same speech that the Minister has made to the House half a dozen times during the past year: he is sympathetic, extremely courteous and quite understanding. We get warm words in abundance, but tangible action remains, even today, scarce. He touched on a number of long-term issues that I want to follow up because great uncertainty surrounds the future of British agriculture.

Contrary to the Minister's claim on 11 March that he negotiated:

> "The most radical reform of the Common Agricultural Policy since its inception",

the reforms were so limited in their scope that the issues will certainly have to be revisited before European Union enlargement takes place, and they may barely survive the forthcoming World Trade Organisation round.

There are other issues, such as the pace of consolidation within British agriculture, the balance of power between farmers and retailers, the shift of taxpayer support away from production-related payments, and the role of farmers in looking after the environment and the countryside. Unfortunately, it is not possible to explore these important long-term themes today because British farming is engulfed in a short-term crisis. In the time available, I want to concentrate on some of the short-term issues that will determine how many British farmers survive in business long enough to be around the next time that the Government decide to call a debate on agriculture in Government time.

One such issue is labelling. I welcome the Minister's announcement of proposed new guidance, but I regret that it has taken a long time to appear. The issue has been raised in every agriculture debate in which I have taken part in the past year. The Conservative party has been calling for honesty in labelling for the whole of that time and, indeed, longer. *[Interruption.]* I was sure when I made that point that it would produce exactly the reaction that it did. Hon. Members intervene from a sedentary position and I name the hon. Member for Waveney (Mr. Blizzard), who never attends one of these debates without displaying his appalling ignorance of the facts of farming life. Such interventions simply underline how little the Labour party understands what is going on in the countryside. If there were a single farmer whom I had met in the past year who would say that he would rather be where he is today than where he was three years ago,

[Mr. Tim Yeo]

I would be delighted. I challenge those who mock what I am saying about the urgent need for honesty in labelling to find such a farmer.

Mr. Alan W. Williams (East Carmarthen and Dinefwr): Will the hon. Gentleman remind us who, in a minority of one in the European Commission, opposed the labelling of food containing genetically modified food?

Mr. Yeo: There is an old saying: when in a hole, stop digging. The hon. Gentleman has simply reinforced my point. He fails to recognise that agriculture today is in a state of acute crisis. One way of improving matters—for once, without resorting to the Treasury because no taxpayers' money would be involved—would be to introduce honesty in labelling, which we have been calling for as agricultural incomes have slumped month after month. Although I welcome the guidance that the Minister issued yesterday, it is a pity that it has taken so long to come.

Mr. Bob Blizzard (Waveney): Will the hon. Gentleman give an honest answer to this question: is he or is he not advocating that this Government break the law by imposing a ban on the importation of French meat? If he were a Minister, would he perform that illegal act?

Mr. Yeo: I shall deal with that subject in detail later in my speech.

When the Parliamentary Secretary replies to the debate, I hope that he will explain to the House the status of the guidance on labelling, what sanctions are available against those who do not follow it, whether the Government have support for their proposal from retailers and food manufacturers—given that this is not a new issue, I am sure that there has been discussion about it—and when the guidance is likely to be introduced.

Dr. Nick Palmer (Broxtowe): Will the hon. Gentleman explain the difficulties that prevented honesty in labelling from being introduced at any time during the past 20 years? He said that he had campaigned for it for several years.

Mr. Yeo: Even the Minister understands the difference. As recently as this time last year, British pig farmers were not required to rear their pigs to standards not required of pig farmers abroad. That changed circumstance alone, effective from 1 January 1999, is an overwhelming reason for what we have been calling for. Oddly enough, even the Minister would accept that.

Mr. Ian Cawsey (Brigg and Goole): Is the hon. Gentleman admitting that when his Government were in power they did not understand that their legislation would have such an impact?

Mr. Yeo: One of those who recognised the point was my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition, who made a speech on exactly that point when the measures were going through in the early 1990s. Nevertheless, if the incomes of pig farmers have collapsed, it is appropriate for us to look at ways in which the situation might be improved. I welcome the fact that the Minister seems to be doing that. I do not question the detail of his proposed guidance in any churlish spirit. I recognise that he is a decent man. He has travelled up and down the country listening to farmers in the past year, and he has charmed many of them.

Mr. James Paice (South-East Cambridgeshire): But not the Prime Minister.

Mr. Yeo: My hon. Friend anticipates me. However, I fear that, after two months in the job, the Minister suffers from two shortcomings. The first is that he no longer enjoys the support of the Prime Minister. The second is that, for all his decency and charm, he does not seem to be strong enough to do the job and stand up for British consumers and farmers who look to him for a lead. Recent events have made both shortcomings painfully apparent.

In our debate eight days ago, the feeding practices of French livestock farmers were not mentioned because hardly anyone in Britain was aware of them. Last Friday, however, we learned that some French cattle, chickens and pigs had been fed with sewage sludge. So that the House is in no doubt, let me explain that the term "sewage sludge" includes the solid waste removed by filters, material resulting from the chemical and physical processing of waste water and residues resulting from the biological treatment of waste water.

The European Commission inspectors found that in some French plants, not only animal and industrial waste but human waste was incorporated into the sewage sludge subsequently used in animal feed. The existence of that practice was brought to the attention of the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food and the Department of Health on 10 June 1999. In the four months that followed, Ministers took no action whatever to warn consumers in Britain that French chicken, pork and beef sold here had come from animals fed in that way.

Mr. Nick Brown: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Yeo: In a moment. The right hon. Gentleman spoke for almost an hour. I will let him intervene, but I want to finish this important point.

The failure of Ministers to take action is disgraceful. It is made more so by the fact that the Prime Minister himself told my hon. Friend the Member for Ryedale (Mr. Greenway) on 16 June:

"Of course we are trying to do something about it".—[*Official Report*, 16 June 1999; Vol. 333, c. 392.]

Yesterday it became clear that the Prime Minister had done nothing about it.

The Minister's silence during those four months is also disgraceful because his official advisers have told him:

"The practice of using sewage sludge is both unacceptable from the consumer's point of view and illegal under European law."

Mr. Brown: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Yeo: In a moment. I did not intervene once on the Minister and I should be allowed a few minutes to make a point.

Some, perhaps all, the British consumers who have bought and eaten illegally fed French meat in the past four months might have wished that the information that the

Minister received in June had been drawn to their attention. They might have wished it even more if they had known that Professor Hugh Pennington, appointed by the Labour Government to investigate the E. coli outbreak, believes:

"There is potentially grave danger in eating animals that have been fed on treated sewage".

They might have liked to know that Professor Mac Johnston, an adviser to the European Union scientific veterinary committee believes:

"If the French farmers are actually doing something that is illegal, then in my opinion that makes the food produced from these animals unfit for human consumption . . . I think here one has to adopt a precautionary principle, where the first thing is that you put a hold on it, you withdraw it from the food chain until you are satisfied that it is safe."

Professor Philip Thomas, the chairman of the Government's Advisory Committee on Animal Feeding Stuffs, believes:

"It is potentially possible that there could be contamination into the food chain through these sources."

Mr. Brown: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Yeo: In a moment. We are not going to leave this point. The Minister must not get too excited.

Despite that advice, the Minister did not think that it was necessary to issue any warning to consumers. Even when the scale of public concern became apparent in the past six days, he still did not feel it necessary to act. So unconcerned was he that he has not even spoken to his French counterpart during the crisis. When it was suggested to him yesterday that he might do so, he dismissed the idea as nonsensical.

Livestock farmers in Britain, almost crippled by regulatory burdens imposed on them by Brussels and Whitehall and almost driven out of business by unfair competition from abroad, might have hoped that, in the wake of the public exposure of illegal and disgusting French animal feeding practices, Britain's Minister of Agriculture would talk to the French Government.

Mr. Brown: The truth is that we are working on this issue through the Commission. The hon. Gentleman suggests that it has come as a surprise to everyone, but it was commented on in the press over the summer. Had he felt so worried about it, he could have raised it on any of a number of occasions. He has not done so. He says that I should have warned the public. He partially quotes the full advice given to me by the Government's professional advisers. I have put it all in the public domain. It is available to everyone to read. He does not quote the conclusion, which is that there is no risk to human health. It would be on such a conclusion that the Government would act.

As there is no risk to health, the Government have not introduced a ban. The hon. Gentleman is trying to distort the evidence to justify a protectionist position. That is the difference between us. He wants to use any evidence that he can find against our partners in the EU because the Conservative party is opposed to the EU and our partners within it.

Mr. Yeo: The Minister is saying that when he and his officials are warned that French meat is fed on human sewage—a practice that is unacceptable to consumers and illegal under European law—the Government should do nothing for more than four months to bring the matter to the attention of British consumers. He is saying that when British livestock farmers are struggling for survival, undermined by illegal foreign competition, the Government should do nothing to establish a level playing field. He is saying that when a leading scientist, Professor Pennington, on whom the Government rely for advice on hygiene, says that there is potential grave danger in eating animals fed on sewage, the Government should do nothing to require labels to disclose whether food has been produced illegally. He is saying that when a crisis threatens to engulf Anglo-French relations, and the French farms Minister cancels a planned visit to London to go to the Caribbean, it is not the Minister's job to pick up the telephone and have a chat with him.

The Minister stands condemned more out of his own mouth than by anything that I could say.

Mr. John Greenway (Ryedale): Apropos the question that I put to the Minister earlier, is not the case for a meat and bonemeal ban across the EU now so formidable that even if the Government are not prepared to impose a unilateral ban, at the least they should ask the European Commission to impose one? If we have to have the ban, it must be because there is a risk of cross-contamination and a risk to human health. If the problem arises in Britain, it must surely arise on the continent, especially in France, where the number of BSE cases is rising. I put that point to the Prime Minister. It justifies action by the Commission.

Mr. Yeo: My hon. Friend is right. We have clearer and clearer evidence daily that the most appalling double standards are being operated when it comes to food safety and hygiene in different countries in the EU. We know that the Government are washing their hands of any responsibility to deal with the problem. I have to say, more in sorrow than in anger, that I believe that in my constituency and those of my hon. Friends, farmers and consumers will feel badly let down by the refusal of the Minister and the Government to act.

This scandal demands a proportionate and targeted response—a precautionary ban on the import of potentially contaminated French meat until the French Government explain what they are doing to end those illegal practices and to eliminate food produced by them from the food chain.

Miss McIntosh: Will my hon. Friend help the Minister and me by confirming the fact that it is a principle of European law that, if an item has been produced by illegal means, it is illegal for that item to be available? It can thus be prohibited throughout the EU—not only in this country. Items produced by illegal means—such as produce from this disgusting sewage—should not be allowed anywhere in the EU.

Mr. Yeo: My hon. Friend is right. She raises the important question of why no one is prosecuting those French plants which are using those illegal methods.

[Mr. Yeo]

It would have been encouraging if the Minister had spent even one of his 59 minutes in telling us that he would press the EC to take such action.

Mr. Todd: As the hon. Gentleman has set out fully the selection of scientific advice that he received, will he also set out the legal advice that he has been given on the proposal that he has put before us?

Mr. Yeo: If the hon. Gentleman underwrites my costs in consulting the lawyers, I shall be happy to obtain the most detailed legal advice. It is clear to me that these illegal practices should be stopped; if the Government will do nothing about them, it may be left to organisations such as the National Farmers Union to bring legal actions. I deplore the fact that Ministers are washing their hands of responsibility for taking any action at all.

Yesterday, the Prime Minister misled Parliament when he said that the ban that we called for would be illegal. Every EU country has the power to ban imports if human health is endangered. As I have already explained, many leading scientists believe that human health is endangered.

Mr. Peter L. Pike (Burnley): On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Is it in order for an hon. Member to say that the Prime Minister misled the House—as the hon. Gentleman has just done? I thought that such an expression was unparliamentary.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): Order. It is not in order for an hon. Member directly to accuse any other Member of misleading the House, but such remarks must be taken in the context of the cut and thrust of debate.

Mr. Yeo: The precautionary ban—

Mr. Brown: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Yeo: Yes.

Mr. Brown: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way. For completeness—so that we can all understand the professional advice to the Government—I shall read it out. The advisory committee continues to advise on the basis set out—that is, the points to which the hon. Gentleman referred—that

"there is no immediate public health risk and therefore no basis for seeking a ban on French products at either a community level, or unilaterally."

Mr. Andrew Robathan (Blaby): You eat it.

Mr. Brown: It is no good the hon. Gentleman shouting, "You eat it"; he knows full well that I do not do so.

Mr. Yeo: The Minister has read out the conclusion of the advice that he received—I have a copy of the same document. My point is that, if the Government thought that human health in this country was endangered, there is a legal basis for the introduction of an import ban. The Prime Minister was wrong to say that such a ban was illegal. It would be perfectly legal to take such a step if there was a danger to human health.

Mr. John Townend (East Yorkshire): Does my hon. Friend believe that, if the boot were on the other foot and we had been feeding our cattle or sheep with food that had sewage in it, the French would take no action at all?

Mr. Yeo: My hon. Friend makes a powerful point in his own way. Many people who listen to the exchanges on this matter will ask why that process is illegal, if it is so wonderfully safe and poses no danger to health.

The precautionary ban for which we have called would have a legal basis.

Mr. Hilton Dawson (Lancaster and Wyre): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Yeo: No, I must make some progress.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Mr. Wardle) asked whether the illegal feed is heated sufficiently to make it safe, and my hon. Friend the Member for South Dorset (Mr. Bruce) asked about the Government's powers to prevent British farmers from doing what the Government think it is unnecessary to prevent French farmers from doing. The Minister's refusal or inability to answer those questions simply strengthens the case for the ban.

The Government's failure to act is leading us to the kind of trade war that they claim to want to avoid. British consumers shun French goods—not only meat—French farmers blockade British exports, while the Government do nothing. Four weeks ago, after France announced that it would continue to block British beef exports, the Minister responded—in a fashion that might be described as tit for tat—with his own one-man boycott of all French goods. Instead of a policy to deal with the problem, he has produced a feeble, ineffective and irrelevant measure—one, incidentally, that even his right hon. Friend the Prime Minister pointedly refused to support.

Mr. Brown: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Yeo: In a moment.

By contrast, the Conservative party believes that the French ban on our beef and the scandal of contaminated French meat are wholly separate issues.

Mr. Brown: The hon. Gentleman invites me to ban those products. Is he still eating them himself?

Mr. Yeo: I have made it clear that I certainly eat no French meat from animals fed with human sewage. I much prefer to eat British meat at all times, but, as the Minister is aware, those of us who frequently have to eat away from home, in catering establishments, often have no idea where the meat comes from.

Mr. Brown: My personal gesture, which the hon. Gentleman so derides, is an act of solidarity with this

country's hard-pressed farmers, who are being unfairly treated by the French. Why does not the hon. Gentleman join me?

Mr. Yeo: Because I believe that a personal gesture by the man who is supposed to be in charge of making policies to protect British consumers and farmers is a pathetic cop-out from his responsibilities.

Mr. Brown *rose—*

Mr. Yeo: No—[HON. MEMBERS: "Give way".]—No.

I have set out our approach on contaminated French meat. I shall now deal with the beef export ban. Almost a year ago, the Minister told the House:

"We have achieved a major objective of our policy towards Europe in the lifting of the beef export ban."—[*Official Report*, 25 November 1998; Vol. 321, c. 190.]

On 17 December 1998, the Minister claimed:

"That was a major breakthrough reflecting months of dialogue within the European Commission and with our European partners."—[*Official Report*, 17 December 1998; Vol. 322, c. 1091.]

Seven months later, the Minister was able to announce a date for the resumption of exports—1 August. He told us that this had been achieved by

"Labour leadership in Europe . . . our constructive approach towards our European partners has clearly been shown to succeed."—[*Official Report*, 14 July 1999; Vol. 335, c. 405.]

The Government, the Prime Minister and especially the Minister have learned that, as the Prime Minister put it so clearly yesterday, there is a

"difference between an easy headline and a good policy."—[*Official Report*, 27 October 1999; Vol. 336, c. 1011.]

Two months after 1 August, the French Government announced that they would not accept British beef. It appears that, despite the Minister's confidence about the lifting of the ban, before he made his claims in this House, he had not even bothered to check with either France or Germany that they were ready to agree to the deal. As France abstained on the matter at the November 1998 Agriculture Council, the Minister was already on notice that the French might be less than wholehearted in their support of the Commission. Against that background, any remotely competent or responsible Minister would have phoned his French counterpart. However, we know that this Minister is not in the habit of doing that—whatever the gravity or urgency of the matter.

I have traced the history in detail because, this very day, the Scientific Steering Committee is meeting to decide whether to reject the French so-called "evidence" on which their decision to continue blocking British beef exports is based.

We read in the press of a possible compromise: France may drop its illegal ban on British beef if we accept yet more controls on British cattle and British slaughterhouses. I make it clear that the Conservative party believes that demands for more controls are outrageous and unjustified. Under no circumstances should Britain accept any further intrusion into the way that British beef is produced. Our cattle are among the most carefully scrutinised creatures on earth and, if the British Government allow any tightening of the way in which beef production is regulated, they will prove once again that they do not have the guts to stand up for what is right. Weakness on this issue, at the very time that France has been exposed as being guilty of disgusting and illegal practices in its own backyard, would simply add insult to injury.

Mr. Blizzard: Even given all that the hon. Gentleman has said, will he accept that we are much further forward than his Government reached with their ridiculous policy of non-co-operation in Europe, which got us absolutely nowhere? As things stand, the ban has been lifted in the European Union and all but one country are observing it.

Mr. Yeo: I will not make the mistake of giving way to the hon. Gentleman again.

During Agriculture questions last week, the Minister said:

"Under the Conservative Government's stewardship of this issue, Britain was isolated within Europe. Under our stewardship, France is isolated within Europe."—[*Official Report*, 21 October 1999; Vol. 336, c. 573.]

For the sake of Britain's beef farmers, I hope that the Minister is right. I suggest, again for the sake of our beef farmers, that the Minister should boost confidence today in their product by taking the advice of the chief medical officer in London and lifting the ban on beef on the bone. Why is the Minister too weak to do that? Why do unelected bureaucrats in Edinburgh and Cardiff now make the policy for England? Does the Minister not understand that his Labour Government kept telling us that devolution would mean different policies in different parts of the United Kingdom? When will he understand that, if the British Government have less confidence in honestly grown British beef than in meat from animals fed with human sewage, it is not surprising that the French Government take the same view?

Mr. Thompson: Is it not a fact that, if the Minister lifted the ban on beef on the bone in England, other countries would quickly follow suit?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. Before the hon. Member for South Suffolk (Mr. Yeo) responds, I must point out that there have been many interventions this afternoon. Many hon. Members wish to speak in the debate and, if there are many more interventions, a lot of hon. Members will be disappointed.

Mr. Yeo: I shall try to speed up my remarks.

The crisis in the pig sector is so urgent that there is a danger that our industry will disappear. The size of the British sow herd is declining while the Danish, Spanish, German and Dutch herds are increasing. United Kingdom pigmeat imports from the European Union are rising and Britain's pig farmers are losing £3 million a week. I welcome the Minister's allocation of £5 million in marketing aid and his public support for the Meat and Livestock Commission's pork mark. The Minister has recognised that offal disposal regulations are an extra cost on pig farmers of about £5 per pig, which is not borne by our competitors abroad.

Given the severity of the crisis, I hope that the Minister will find a way of absorbing some of those extra costs into the public sector—bearing in mind that they arose originally because of BSE. The Minister also recently showed his willingness to absorb cattle passport charges

[Mr. Yeo]

and specified risk material removal charges for a limited period. I hope that he will do the same with offal charges for pig farmers.

Conservative Members often refer to public sector purchasing. I believe that all public sector meat purchases should come exclusively from sources that match British production standards. I was shocked to learn that the Liberal Democrat-controlled Devonshire county council is still buying French chicken burgers to feed to the children in its schools. That is in marked contrast to the Conservative-controlled Kent county council, which acted promptly to look after the interests of the children in its schools.

Mr. Burnett: I do not believe that a United Kingdom company tendered for the Devonshire contract. Is the hon. Gentleman aware of that?

Mr. McLoughlin: Well that's all right then.

Mr. Yeo: Exactly. I am not sure that the lack of a United Kingdom company tender will necessarily reassure those parents who now know that their children are being fed products that were produced illegally in another country.

On 1 July, the Minister said:

"I have on my desk draft letters waiting to go out to the major public authorities . . . urging them to source products of the highest welfare and animal hygiene standards".

I asked the Minister last week how many letters he had sent and how many replies he had received. I hope that that information will not be too difficult to come by: if the letters were ready to send on 1 July, some replies must have been received by now. I hope that the struggling pig farmers who are keen to be reassured that the Minister is doing all that he can will hear now that those letters have been sent.

Mr. Brown: I have only just sent the letters because I wanted them to be part of a concerted campaign that we have launched in discussion with farmers and the industry. As I said in my address, we all have a part to play. I invite the hon. Gentleman, in a completely bipartisan spirit, to join me in the campaign to urge public authorities to purchase British because of the welfare and production advantages of so doing.

Mr. Yeo: It is a question not of my joining him but of his joining me. We pointed out last November in our document "A Fair Deal" that one of our four key aims was to raise public sector purchases of meat to that standard. The Minister has just revealed the sequence of events. On 1 July, he said:

"I have on my desk draft letters waiting to go out".—[*Official Report* 1 July 1999; Vol. 334, c. 422.]

I reminded the Minister of that response last week. We asked him whether any letters had been sent, and his reply was evasive. I assume that the letters were not sent until he was prompted to do so by the Opposition. He delayed for almost four months after giving that assurance at Question Time.

Mr. Brown: I have already explained that I wanted to send the letters as part of a concerted campaign with farmers. There has been a range of discussions about this matter, and I invite the hon. Gentleman to join me in the campaign. The hon. Gentleman claims that it has been his policy since last November. What public authorities has he written to and what responses has he received? Let us do this together.

Mr. Yeo: The facts will speak for themselves and the record is now clear: the Minister would have done nothing if he had not been badgered, week after week and month after month, by Conservative Members.

Mr. Gill: It may assist my hon. Friend to know that the Minister gave that answer on 1 July because, in frustration, I had asked him what he had done or what influence he had with his colleagues in the Department of Health and the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, to whom I had written in my capacity as president of the British Pig Association weeks before that exchange in the House of Commons. So the situation is much worse than my hon. Friend describes.

Mr. Yeo: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that information. I agree entirely with the verdict of my right hon. Friend the Member for Bridgwater (Mr. King). Those pig farmers who are calculating from week to week whether to stay in business or to close down will be very disappointed with the overall impact of the Government's announcement today. The Minister must understand that there is a strong possibility that his tenure at the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food will cover the period when a large chunk of the British pig industry closed down. Thousands of small businesses, which have been built up through years of hard work, will be destroyed.

I shall leave to my hon. Friend the Member for South–East Cambridgeshire (Mr. Paice), who will wind up the debate for the Opposition, our concerns about dairy farmers, bovine tuberculosis and the difficulties that have been imposed on Milk Marque by the Government's dogmatic decision not to allow it to invest in processing until it has been broken up into smaller units.

I shall pass over our concerns about last week's reports about the Cabinet Office paper recommending that prime agricultural land should no longer be maintained in food production. I am not sure what message that sends about the Government's long-term intentions for agriculture. I shall also pass over our concerns about the proposal to add burdens to farmers in the form of a pesticide tax and a climate change levy. Those measures will not achieve the environmental gains that are claimed for them, but they will certainly help a few more farmers to go out of business.

The Government's announcement about organic production is extremely welcome. I welcome the fact that the Minister has responded to the heavy demand by organic farmers for assistance with conversion in the current year. That will be appreciated by everyone who is interested in organic food.

I was concerned by the rumour yesterday about a U-turn on the timetable for the commercial planting of genetically modified crops because that seemed to be a tactic to divert attention from the main issue of the day. If the Government have seen the light on GM crops, I welcome that. I support any decision to delay the commercial planting of GM crops until the research that

is under way has demonstrated that those crops are environmentally safe. A designated period of three years would be artificial; we need to proceed on the basis of sound science. I urge the Government to increase significantly the buffer zones that surround trials of genetically modified crops to protect neighbouring conventional and organic farms.

British agriculture is in crisis. The Government's response has veered from irrelevance and hostility at worst to complacency and inaction at best. The Minister has lost the confidence of the Prime Minister and it seems, from the almost empty Treasury Bench, that not many members of his Cabinet support him either. For all his sympathetic manner, he is in danger now of losing the confidence of the farmers too. His speech, which lasted almost an hour, contained little of substance that will reassure consumers or producers in this country that their interests will be protected.

The Government will have the full support of Conservative Members whenever they act in Britain's interests, but as long as they continue to let down Britain's farmers and fail to protect British consumers, they will stand condemned not only by all those hon. Members who are concerned about the future of the countryside, but by all the British people.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Before I call the next speaker, I remind the House that Madam Speaker has placed a 10-minute time limit on all Back-Bench speeches in this debate, and that that applies from now on.

3.23 pm

Mr. Russell Brown (Dumfries): I am grateful for the opportunity to take part in this debate on an issue of great importance to my constituents. There is little doubt that most hon. Members, especially those who represent rural constituencies, are concerned about the difficulties facing the agriculture sector.

My constituency lies in the region of Dumfries and Galloway, where a third of the population lives in wholly rural areas, compared to some 10 per cent. of people in Scotland as a whole. That is reflected in a heavy reliance on agriculture, with an agriculture work force of more than 7,400, which is four times greater than the Scottish average. Subsidies to Dumfries and Galloway are four times higher than the Scottish average. About 25 per cent. of the part of the gross national product that comes from Dumfries and Galloway is produced by the agriculture sector.

Since 1981, however, there have been almost 1,500 agriculture job losses in the area. Not only have farmers in my constituency had their incomes fall by up to 75 per cent. in real terms over the past two years, but several sectors have been affected at the same time. As we well know, sheep farmers have, as a result of over-supply, seen the market price fall dramatically to as little as £1 per head. Dairy farmers continue to watch milk prices fall. The pig sector, as we have heard this afternoon, has declined by 12 per cent. over the past year, and there has been continued downward pressure on prices as other European Union herds expand. The beef industry still suffers prices that are 20 per cent. below pre-BSE levels.

When the agriculture industry faces difficulties, so does the wider rural community. There is an impact on the oft-forgotten low-paid agriculture workers, local shopkeepers in our villages, small firms who supply our farms, agriculture engineers, auction markets and vets. We need to be clear that the causes and, therefore, the solutions, are more complex than some Conservative Members might try to make out.

I have met farmers in my constituency regularly, and they know that they face a combination of unprecedented factors such as the collapse of markets in south-east Asia, the fall in the value of common agricultural policy support payments, the over-production of certain commodities in much of Europe, cyclical downturns and, of course, the aftermath of the Tory BSE crisis. The Government often have little control over those factors.

I welcome the fact that throughout these difficult times the Government have made a realistic level of assistance to farmers one of their priorities. I said that my constituency relies heavily on agriculture. By definition, therefore, it benefits substantially from any support that the Government give the industry. On three occasions since the general election the Government have given the agriculture industry in my constituency substantial additional aid.

Mr. Hayes: Will the hon. Gentleman give way on that point?

Mr. Brown: I should like to give way, but I must move on because time is short for everyone this afternoon.

In February and November 1998, support worth more than £10 million came to Dumfries and Galloway. The region is set to receive a further £7.5 million from the aid package announced by the Government on 20 September, which is almost 5 per cent. of all the moneys and 20 per cent. of Scotland's stake. Farmers in my constituency are grateful for that support, which they would not have received from the Conservative party.

The Government's support for the industry contrasts sharply with the policies being pursued by the Leader of the Opposition, which have fallen off the back of a lorry and are part of his right-wing revolution. They include his calls for a ban on French chicken, pigmeat and beef, not on health grounds but simply because they are French. If the Tories are not prepared to listen to scientific advice when making their decisions, why should they expect the EU Scientific Steering Committee on food and animal health to do so today?

Mr. Peter Luff (Mid-Worcestershire): On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. The hon. Gentleman said, quite reasonably, that he would not give way because of the 10-minutes rule, but I understand that the clock is stopped to permit interventions during speeches made under that rule. Is that the case?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: The clock is stopped for the duration of the original intervention, but is started again when the hon. Member who is on his feet replies.

Mr. Brown: The Tories' policy would lead to a trade war, destroy thousands of jobs and put at risk our multi-billion pound a year exports to France. Ben Gill, the president of the National Farmers Union, described that

[Mr. Brown]

policy as illegal, and Jim Walker, the president of the National Farmers Union of Scotland, described it as outrageous. I suggest that not even the Leader of the Opposition's own party can stomach it.

I have here a copy of my local newspaper, the *Dumfries and Galloway Standard*, from Wednesday 27 October. The headline says,

"Council says 'non' to ban on French beef".

A motion was put before the council on Tuesday which called on the council to consider banning French goods. Councillors rejected the very call for a ban by some people. The Tory group on the council said that any boycott or ban would mean that

"the only losers would be Scottish farmers."

Yesterday, *The Herald* featured an article by Struan Stevenson, who was the Tory candidate defeated by myself and the votes of people in rural Dumfries.

Mr. James Gray (North Wiltshire): On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Is it not odd that in a debate in which Back-Bench speakers are under such pressure, as you have already pointed out, a Member for a Scottish constituency should speak first from the Back Benches on matters that are properly the responsibility—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. It is not for the hon. Gentleman to challenge the Chair's selection of speakers.

Mr. Brown: I was explaining that Mr. Struan Stevenson was defeated by myself and the voters of rural Dumfries at the election. As his punishment, he finds himself a Tory agriculture spokesperson in the European Parliament. In his article in *The Herald*, he does not hide his complete contempt for the policies of the Leader of the Opposition, and warns:

"In our enthusiasm for kicking the French, we seem to have forgotten that they are perfectly capable of kicking us back."

Mr. Stevenson also calls for cool heads to sort out the French ban on British beef, which certainly rules out the right hon. Member for Richmond, Yorks (Mr. Hague), and makes it clear that the responsibility for taking action against the French rests with the European Commission.

The immature nonsense of the Leader of the Opposition yesterday showed that the Tories have learned nothing from the BSE-inspired war on Europe three years ago. Then, they promised to block treaties and directives, but the only thing that they blocked was the lifting of the export ban on British beef, demonstrating Britain's lack of influence in Europe under the Conservatives.

As for the Tory party's other policies on agriculture, its call for more labelling is already being pursued by the Government through the implementation of tough new laws. Indeed, more were announced yesterday by my right hon. Friend the Minister. They will ensure that shoppers can tell clearly whether the products that they buy are British, and that consumers may show their support for British farmers, as I do, by purchasing their products.

Also somewhat belatedly, the Tories have called for reform of the common agricultural policy, something that is already being pressed for by the Labour Government, and which, during their 18 years in power, the Tories made no serious attempt to achieve.

If we were to embark on the trade war that the Tories are advocating, perhaps an Opposition Member could suggest how I would explain to workers in the slaughterhouse that is less than three miles from my home that we were closing down the marketplace in France—that same marketplace on which more than 90 per cent. of their lamb production and their very livelihoods depend.

3.32 pm

Mr. David Curry (Skipton and Ripon): Small foreign wars have always been a traditional distraction from large domestic problems. The French conflict is one such matter. It is an illusion that we are about to bury the French market under thousands of tonnes of beef, ban or no ban. If the problem were solved today, or had never begun, it would have no immediate impact on problems in the United Kingdom.

The French have dug a pit for themselves and fallen into it, and I have precious little sympathy with them. We should concentrate on isolating them, piling the pressure on in the European Union and making their position untenable.

I have no sympathy for the call for a ban on French products, and I shall tell the House why. I cannot imagine a single action more calculated to extinguish the last flicker of life in hill farming in north Yorkshire than encouraging a trade war that puts at risk £136 million worth of live lamb exports to France and leaves the farmers' ferry—a courageous initiative among British farmers to export their lambs—vulnerable to pressure. We should not be in the business of trying to out-gun *The Sun* when it comes to attacks on our European partners, however wrong they are in this instance.

We have not helped our cause by maintaining the beef on the bone ban. The Minister must knock some heads together in Scotland—I know that he would like to do so—because, otherwise, the tail will be wagging the dog. The ban is a wonderful pretext for the French.

The article in the *New Scientist* about contamination of carcases by brain tissue during slaughter did not help either. It was, of course, faithfully reproduced in the French press. Meanwhile, the *Daily Mail* says that we are heading for "a stitch-up". I hope that it is right, because a stitch-up is better than a shoot-out in practically all circumstances.

Two years ago, I said that the hills in my constituency were bleeding. That haemorrhage has not stopped. I shall refer to Skipton auction mart, because I have taken the trouble to find out what is happening immediately and locally.

The first big gimmer lamb sale of the year—for those who do not know, a gimmer is a female sheep—is in September. In 1997, gimmer lambs were fetching £74 a head. In 1998, they sold for £46 a head. At the most recent sale, they fetched £25.13 a head. The hill farmer is the one who suffers. His draught ewes—ewes that have had three or four crops of lambs—are usually sold down the hill to the lowlands, where they may continue productivity in slightly easier conditions. Three years ago, they sold for between £50 and £60 a head. Last year, the price was £35 a head, and today it is £20 a head. Shearlings—sheep that have been sheared once—were fetching £60 in 1998, but now sell for £38.

At the end of September, 659 old ewes were sold but 689 were given away. In one pen, in which there were 41 ewes, one was sold for £1 and the other 40 were given

away free with it. The problem is the requirement to split sheep. Ewes could be worth £8 to £10 for export without that requirement which we have imposed. I hope that the Minister will review that urgently.

I took the precaution of talking to the man in my constituency who probably knows most about cattle—the knackerman at Bentham. He has an enormous constituency of his own, which covers north Lancashire, Craven and Cumbria, and even stretches into Scotland. Normally, at this time of year, Mr. Robinson is called out for the casualty kill of about 200 calves a week. At the moment, he is being called out for about 530 to 600 calves a week. Of course, those calves are shot for nothing. The knackerman takes them off and gets a fiver for the hide, and the farmer puts them down as stillborn because there is no price for them. A few—the better end of the Friesians—are kept on.

As for the sheep, some are taken by traders to the ethnic markets in west Yorkshire, where there is a demand. Others are shot for £8 on the farm and thrown straight into specified risk material because there is no market for them.

Bentham mart is tiny; we would normally expect about 150 calves a week to go through it. At the moment, 30 are going through. The mart is in the habit of paying farmers' sons about £4 an hour to help manage animals. Now, farmers who are 50 years old and more are queueing for those jobs in order to supplement their incomes because they are receiving so little from their stock.

Nationally, one would reckon at this time of year that about 13,000 calves a week would be presented for the processed aid scheme—that was last year's figure. Now, if we estimate that perhaps 7,000 are retained on the farm and about 3,000 are going into veal, that leaves 3,000 to 4,000 that are being killed on the farm because there is no future for them, and farmers do not want to pay the cost of tagging such animals.

At this time of year, cull cows are put forward. Under the maximum weight of 560 kilos, they are fetching 51p a kilo. So the maximum price for a calf culled from—probably—one of the suckler herds is £285.60.

Seven dairy herds in my constituency have been sold at the Skipton mart alone since mid-summer. The smaller farmers are selling weekly as the animals calf. Because it has been a good year for forage, grass has been good and the quality of feed high, people have overestimated quotas of milk production, resulting in 1 million litres of milk being sold a few days ago at Skipton mart. It was leased for an average of 6.53p a litre, rising to 7p. That is for farmers who will receive perhaps 17p a litre for the finished product.

As my hon. Friends have said, the situation is worst in the pig sector. I have talked about livestock because such production is the predominant form in my constituency. There are offal and bonemeal disposal costs. I am pleased that the Minister is seeing whether he can return some value to that product.

The threat of the new integrated pollution prevention and control regulations has been mentioned. By charging for the new sheep-dip regulations, the Environment Agency is already making itself extremely unpopular. We have been told that a unit of 2,000 finishing pigs or 750 sow places could cost £12,000 a year in inspections, with a registration fee of about £18,500. I hope that the Minister will be able to give some indication of what is intended, and, even better, that he will defer whatever he was intending in that regard.

We ought to be careful in one regard when talking about pigmeat. It is true that pigmeat is imported, but the largest supermarkets that are importing almost invariably require the same conditions in the pigs imported as they do for those that have been raised in the United Kingdom. We should not give a false impression that, somehow, every pig that is imported has been raised in ghastly conditions, but that every UK pig has been living in pristine surroundings. The salmonella count might correct that.

What is the Government's response? The Minister, like some slightly unctuous parson from a Jane Austen novel, wrings his hands over the open grave and tells the family how he quite understands their grief, but that, at the end of the day, we are all in the hands of the Lord—or at least the Treasury.

Government action has been largely to defer new burdens on farmers—such as abattoir charges or cow passports—to defer cuts in support, which, admittedly, the Minister increased, but which he would otherwise have decreased, and then to brandish the new burdens. It hardly relieves a farmer's present hardship to be told that an extra burden will no longer be imposed.

I mention, simply for the record, that so far the cost to the public of the BSE inquiry is £32 million, half of which has come from the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food budget. Where it will end, no one knows. I shall be interested to see what the positive outcomes of that are.

We accept that there are things that the Government cannot be held responsible for, or cannot influence. The level of the pound is a major handicap to the industry. We can talk ad infinitum about the Government setting out their perspective on economic and monetary union, but we have had that debate before and it obviously will not coax them into more positive action. What can we do? It is important to lift the beef on the bone ban, because by doing so we remove the last pretext for those who do not wish to import our beef. We must also make it clear that no new charges will be imposed in the present crisis.

The Minister should end the requirement to split sheep carcases. He should also pursue his inquiries about the means of helping the pig producer by giving some value to the products that he now has to discard—offal and bones.

We need to know—I am pleased to hear that we shall shortly hear—how the Minister proposes to remodel the hill livestock compensatory allowance, the upland payments that make up the entire net farm income in my constituency. I hope that he will also consider company specification in the pigmeat sector, which his officials have discussed, and whether it would be more transparent to move to a national specification so that farmers at least know what is happening to their pigs in the slaughterhouses.

As I am sure the Minister knows, a way of life is under threat. Farmers in my constituency are, by and large, over 50. They have no heirs, or no heirs who want to take up the business. They have precious few skills. It is illusory to talk about bringing new businesses into that

[Mr. David Curry]

environment. It is a particular environment—a very special environment; if we do not have the farmers to maintain it, the ultimate—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. The right hon. Gentleman must resume his seat.

3.42 pm

Mr. Alan Simpson (Nottingham, South): I confess that I have been boycotting French beef for about 20 years—but as I have been boycotting everyone else's beef for about the same period, I am sure that the French will not take it personally. In so far as the Minister may be moving in the same direction—towards non-meat consumption—I would welcome that, but it does not bother me if he is not.

The important aspect of all this is that, really without our permission, the United Kingdom is now well and truly involved in a long-overdue debate about safe food. In only the most perverse sense is it to the credit of the Tory party that we are holding this debate. We need to remind ourselves that, for all the attacks that are made on the Minister, he was not in office at the start of the BSE crisis. Labour was not in office at the start of that crisis. The only credit that the Tories can claim is that they were, and that they got us into the mess. For all the mock anger and furore that they throw at the Labour Government, we would not be in this mess had it not been for the catastrophe of the Conservative party's approach to agriculture.

Those who proclaim a new-found interest in the precautionary principle could not be seen for dust when that principle should have been applied to the process of questioning what we were feeding livestock in the UK. At that time, the Tories were involved in little more than a dash for crap that they could feed to cattle as long as there was a cash return at the end of it. That is why we are now paying such a huge cost.

As a consequence of that period, we must now completely reassess our agricultural and safe food agenda. The British public have a right to demand that of us. It is important to set down the benchmarks—not the costs of moving from where we are, but the costs of getting out of the mess that we have got ourselves into. Already, the crisis in relation to BSE has cost us about £4.6 billion and about 40,000 jobs, and has had an unquantifiable cost in the loss of more than 40 lives. No one is prepared to put a ceiling on how many lives that disaster will take, but everyone knows that there will be significantly more.

Mr. Paterson: May we get it on to the record that there is no proven scientific link between BSE in cattle and new version CJD in human beings?

Mr. Simpson: I remind the hon. Gentleman that it was a Conservative Minister who admitted in the House that that was the most likely cause of the BSE crisis. The House would do well—

Mr. Paterson: It was not proven.

Mr. Simpson: It is all very well for Members to shout from a sedentary position that it was not proven. They are now, belatedly, saying that the precautionary principle should drive our policy. I favour the precautionary principle, but they have caught up with it a bit late in the game. Had they applied it, we might not have been in this situation.

I hope that there will be a willingness to apply the precautionary principle in relation to another aspect of the debate—the desire of the food biotechnology industry to transform the agricultural system, not necessarily to feed the world but to take ownership of the food chain. I remind the House that, of those who would seek to regulate the development of GM crops, the Labour Government and Labour Ministers have been the most committed to introduce a regulatory framework where none previously existed.

Mr. Hayes: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Simpson: No. I do not think that I can give way in a 10-minute time space.

I want to give positive support to two aspects of the Minister's speech. I welcome the support for organic farming but, if we are to refocus the food debate to catch up with the public, who are leading it, we must set ourselves more ambitious targets and more generous budgets for that transformation. The sums allocated have already been taken up. That problem is a measure of the popularity of the Minister's intervention, and that problem is in fact a success story.

As I understand it, about 100 farmers a month are offering to convert to organic farming, at about the rate of 10,000 hectares a month. They are dead keen to produce foods that the public are dead keen to buy. When we are on such a winner, we would be well advised to go with it. Doing so would require additional funding from the Treasury or, at least, a relocation of the current subsidy system, which would allow us to take some of the £3 billion a year that we put into agricultural subsidies—especially those parts that we pay for a pause in an unsustainable agricultural system—and redirect it into the creation of a sustainable agricultural system.

If the Government are serious about that, I urge the Minister to read the Organic Food and Farming Targets Bill, presented to the House on 26 October. It suggests that it is quite feasible for the UK to set targets for 30 per cent. of farmland and 20 per cent. of food consumption to be taken up by organic farming processes by the year 2010. That would cost about £150 million a year—about 5 per cent. of the current subsidies to agriculture through the common agricultural policy system. That shift would be welcome in general policy terms and overwhelmingly welcomed by the public.

I congratulate the Minister on his part in supporting the Prime Minister in discussions about a moratorium on commercial approvals for GM seeds and GM crop production. That is extraordinarily important, but it is equally important to ask the Minister to consider the framework within which the moratorium will apply. I know that he is still keen for field and farm trials to take place, but I ask him to examine carefully the research published first by "Newsnight" at the end of September, then by Friends of the Earth, which showed that the current buffer zones of 50 m are simply nonsensical. It was shown that airborne GM pollen from oilseed rape had migrated 495 m, and that it had been carried 4.5 km by bees.

The prospects of genetic pollution must be taken seriously and must be reflected in the buffer zones set for the trials that continue. It is extremely important that the Minister adds Government support for the public action that is leading the refocusing of the safe food debate. The issue affects not only existing organic farmers, but all the farmers who seek to convert to organic farming, as they are asking how they will be able to assert that the crops that they produce are GM-free, when neighbouring fields and farms are involved in GM trials.

If the Minister would re-examine my Bill from the standpoint of GM foods and producer liabilities, he might pre-empt the discussions that some of us are already holding with civil liability lawyers, and tell us that it is not necessary for us to go down the path of class actions for damages, driven by the public and the private sector. Safe food policy should be driven by Government lead, rather than by public lead.

I hope that the Minister will be enthusiastic about catching up with that momentum. We should extend the safe food agenda into local areas, perhaps through local food commissions. We should extend kitemarks to allow us to identify organic foods and targets, and we should reward those who shorten food miles, strengthen product accountability and give us food that the public consider safe to feed their children.

3.52 pm

Mr. Colin Breed (South–East Cornwall): It is said that a week is a long time in politics, although I have not found that to be true. A week ago, hon. Members in all parts of the House expressed their deep concern about the escalating crisis in all sectors of the farming industry, yet matters have only got worse since then.

Prices have fallen further, and more farmers have gone out of business or are considering doing so. France is engaged in deeply damaging illegal action, which not only has the potential to escalate into a full-blown trade war, but is undermining the confidence of consumers in countries that have lifted the ban in accordance with European Union scientific advice.

Politically, it would be attractive to catalogue events over the past 10 years, to remind ourselves of the context of the present position, to indulge in the exact science of hindsight, and to rehearse once again the breathtaking inadequacy, complacency and sheer incompetence of some Ministers and officials during those years of the Tory Government.

However, third and fourth-generation farmers in my constituency are going bankrupt, losing their business, their livelihood and their homes, and not only making themselves redundant, but putting their family members out of work. I, for one, am not prepared to stand in the Chamber and score petty party political points, or to jump on the nearest Euro-sceptic bandwagon in an effort to use this tragedy to fuel your own prejudices—*[Interruption.]* I deplore those who try to do so, and I hope that the constituents who are listening to you—*[Interruption.]* will recognise—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I cannot let the hon. Gentleman go on making accusations about what my policies might be.

Mr. Breed: I hope that the constituents of hon. Members will listen to all that they say. It is a pity that we did not hear more of the common-sense approach of the right hon. Member for Skipton and Ripon (Mr. Curry). In his 10-minute contribution, he spoke volumes more than the official spokesman for the Opposition.

Despite the great scope for pessimism and the disastrous lack of confidence that abounds, we in the House should be giving hope to our farmers and taking the lead to generate the conditions that will enable the industry to trade its way out of the present crisis.

It is important to make it clear that agriculture has been, and will continue to be, a vital economic and social activity in this country. It provides the home-grown food that has sustained the country for centuries, and it will continue to do so if we tackle the crisis urgently.

At a time when the pig industry is on the brink of collapse, with prices below break-even level since April 1998—

Mr. Burnett: Does my hon. Friend agree that the charges for offal removal and the costs to the pig industry are directly related to BSE, and therefore that some form of compensation should be available to the pig industry as a direct result of that?

Mr. Breed: I strongly agree. The point was made earlier, and I endorse it.

The egg sector faces a bill of £625 million to meet new UK standards, only to have its produce rejected in favour of cheaper, lower-grade produce. The beef industry is still facing an illegal French ban. Nevertheless I, and I hope other hon. Members, remain adamant that we are not prepared to see the industry wither away under unfair and illegal competition. Nor do we want to see it limp from one crisis to the next, for ever seeking special treatment or emergency aid.

The industry needs a clear strategy for each of its sectors, to provide short-term stability and long-term security. If we expect our farmers to stay in agriculture, we must offer them a future that will be worth fighting for and investing in. Without that, more and more farmers will simply leave the land voluntarily, and get out while they still have some capital left. That will further reduce our productive capacity and invite ever more imports. The decline will accelerate and the disastrous downward spiral will be difficult to halt.

With regard to short-term stability, we cannot continue to load on to farming costs—my hon. Friend the Member for Torridge and West Devon (Mr. Burnett) provided an apposite example—that it cannot support, however well intentioned and whatever the merits.

Some of the quality assurance hurdles and inspection systems that we have imposed must be re-examined in the light of present trading conditions and the post-BSE era, to see whether they can be undertaken more economically or whether they are needed at all, always ensuring that compliance with requirements continues.

We need to review farm inspections. Why do several different inspectors call on our farmers almost every week for one inspection or another? Why cannot one inspector perform multiple inspections?

We need to re-examine the Meat Hygiene Service, to see whether the system can be made more efficient. I welcome the Government's action to secure relief for the low-throughput abattoirs from the need for veterinary

[Mr. Breed]

supervision at post mortem inspections, but we should consider whether more can be done, especially to save those low-throughput abattoirs. To force them to close would be no real economy. It would just mean greater transport costs for farmers. Furthermore, we would lose the facilities to produce specialist goods, which fetch a premium in the marketplace and should be encouraged.

I am pleased that there will be an investigation into the operation of the MHS. When it reports, we must ensure that costs are kept to a minimum. In the wake of the Pratt report, we must ask why our costs are at the top end of the scale.

We must remove the threat of the re-introduction of charges such as those for cattle passports. I welcome the fact that those will not be considered until at least 2003. I hope that that will instil confidence for the future. In the mean time, we should review the figure of £7 per passport. Should it cost that much?

We must address the over-capacity in some sectors. Price stability in the market must be restored. A calf disposal scheme or a properly funded scheme to produce home-grown veal, as proposed by the hon. Member for West Dorset (Mr. Letwin) last week, is needed to address the bull calf problem. We cannot continue to sit by and expect our farmers to shoot their calves.

The banks must play their part, but before they can do so they, too, need some confidence in the future. They need to believe that agriculture has a future and that the Government will support it now and in the long term. Many bank managers have provided sympathetic support, particularly as they still believe themselves to have some security but, the more the overdrafts rise, and the more land values fall as receivers move in and put farms on the market, the more there will be no alternative but to call in the loans.

I welcome the labelling regulations that are to be introduced. I do not want to go into that, only to say that the supermarkets have made a business of undermining brands. They have increased their own brands to about 40 per cent. of sales. Ask any manufacturer of branded goods what they think about supermarkets selling their brands. In the long term, I agree with the Government that the strategy must be based on demand. To continue to bolster up the supply side is not a long-term solution.

Sir Robert Smith (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Breed: I would rather carry on so that other hon. Members have a chance to speak.

The long-term strategy must be, first, to reinforce success, and, secondly, to develop new initiatives to build upon existing markets and develop new ones.

Clearly, organic production has been a success. It is one area in which premiums are being paid and sales are increasing, but we still import more than we grow. This is a sector which demands much more support, investment and encouragement, and I am delighted that the Government are providing that. Such support is not a subsidy but a true investment, which will yield real dividends for agriculture, the environment and the country.

Many anxious farmers, such as Jim Candy in my constituency, are in the middle of their conversion, and more are just about to start. They need to know urgently whether they are eligible for the additional funding. I hope that the Minister will be able to provide detailed advice as a matter of urgency. The Government's announcement is a positive start, but it is unlikely to be enough. The present scheme is massively oversubscribed as, I suspect, will be the next tranche.

It would be unwise to increase production rapidly because of the possible effect on market prices, but I suspect that there is a long way to go yet before we reach that position. Where there is an obvious demand, we must ensure that there is a potential British supply.

Farmers markets, of which I was an early supporter, are another part of the way forward. I am delighted that they are growing in number and frequency, but they are still in a fledgling state and largely run on an ad hoc, semi-craft basis. That is not acceptable for the future. If they are to be part of the long-term strategy to improve the demand side, they must be much more robust. It is important that farmers markets become a real source of competition to the fresh meat and produce counters in the local supermarkets.

When I published my report on supermarkets last year, it was abundantly clear to me that it would be impossible to take on the might of the supermarket sector, but it would be possible to attack selected departments of those stores by appealing to the consumer in a sophisticated way and through direct marketing. Marketing is crucial. We welcome any money that the Government put into helping farmers to market their produce, in particular the significant increase to £5 million, but I hope that farmers will be able to get at it. One farmer told me that he found it difficult to obtain and complete the forms. Often, money is made available through schemes, but it is still difficult to get it to those who need it.

Farmers markets offer the opportunity to win back consumers to local quality produce, but that will not be achieved through selling on trestle tables in village halls every other Saturday morning. The aim must be to create a small parade of shops or a viable street market selling genuine local produce, properly presented, complying with all the necessary food standards and health and safety regulations. That would be a real challenge and an alternative to the local supermarket. Meat from locally reared cattle; organic vegetables with the soil still on them, picked that day instead of sterilised, shiny, vacuum-packed produce that looks good but tastes of nothing; British pork that we know is British, not just packed in styrofoam here; and fresh eggs from hens kept in conditions that we know are acceptable could all be sold.

I suspect that local authorities will have to set up and run such markets, but they will need legislative support and, undoubtedly, some assistance with the capital requirements, but if we are to offer a real future to our smaller family farms and local producers of fruit and vegetables, we must provide the means for that to happen. Markets are too fragile and rely too much on individuals' good will to survive in the long term. Supermarkets will never provide such a market. Their distribution network is alien to that.

As the Minister said, the catering industry is a significant purchaser of fresh and processed food, and we need to win it over to the benefits of quality,

British-produced food. The restaurant and pub food business is expanding rapidly and consumers should be able to know what food they are ordering. When ordering a steak, they should be able to ask its origin and demand information about where other food on the menu was grown or produced. Descriptions of food on menus must be accurate.

I have already called upon local authorities and Government Departments to insert clauses in their future contracts requiring them to source meat and meat products which meet the UK's standards for quality, hygiene and animal welfare. We cannot insist that they buy British because that would be anti-competitive in European terms, but we can demand that they source their products according to certain standards. That would boost domestic production and encourage European competitors to raise their standards if they wished to be considered for such contracts.

It is strange that, while there is a constant stream of cooking programmes on television and cookery books are always among the best sellers in the book lists, fewer and fewer people are cooking and eating at home. We need to look at what we are teaching in our schools. I hope that the Minister will have a word with the Secretary of State for Education and Employment. Food technology may sound far more important than cookery, but we need to remember what is important. Eating is supposed to be one of the pleasures of life, yet we confine food to a science subject, and seem to accept that stuffing a hamburger in one's mouth while walking down the road is all that we need to know about eating as an experience. It may be a matter for the long term, but we need to educate our children about food and how it is produced so that future scientific reports, from wherever they come, can inform the decisions of sensible people, not act as titbits to hungry tabloid scaremongers.

We must help farmers to develop additional forms of income, and tourism is an obvious one. Planning regulations are not helpful in developing farm tourism. We should be fighting for a fairer share of the rural development funding available under the common agricultural policy. At present, we receive 3 per cent. of the budget, the equivalent of Portugal, while France and Germany enjoy 16 per cent. each. We have fallen to 15th in terms of spending per hectare, so we receive £12 per hectare while countries such as Finland receive £175. That funding could support a number of new rural initiatives and bring real additional income to farmers, particularly those family farms under such enormous cash flow pressures. There are so many positive ways in which to look to the future of farming and change things so that crises, such as the one that we face, do not recur. We need long-term, positive solutions.

Before I finish, I must pause to reflect on the events of the past week. This week has been one of great negativity. The farming industry has faced more blows—things have only got worse, Minister. The news of sewage sludge in French feed seemed to add insult to injury to Britain's farmers. I make no bones about condemning those who have used this foodstuff, which is not only repugnant, but illegal. We need to be more honest about what is going on. It is not just France that is affected. Products from animals in contact with this feed are also being supplied by Belgium, the Netherlands and Germany.

The EU has been far too timid. Where it issued recommendations to France that such producers should be stopped, it should have issued directives. The 15-day period within which to remove such feed from the food chain should not have been recommended but insisted upon. We should have been informed that the EU veterinary committee had condemned France for its lack of risk assessment. If we are to restore consumer confidence, we need to be more open in sharing information between all European Union states. We also need more rational consideration of the facts.

The French beef ban continues despite the fact that our beef has been cleared. We have invested money and brought up our standards. Before the BSE incident, the majority of our exports to France were beef on the bone from cows over 30 months old. We are not asking the French consumer to buy such beef again—our date-based export scheme rules out that possibility. The scaremongering must stop. The panic should be over. Patriotism is about supporting British agriculture, not alienating its customers.

I return to the point that I have been making all along: we need to be long-termist and positive. We cannot go around inciting trade wars and imposing unilateral bans. We need positive measures to promote the high standards that Britain's farmers already meet and we should do that by insisting on clear labelling of origin and content, fair inspection costs, direct marketing to consumers, encouragement for thriving sectors such as organic farming and new initiatives, aided by research and development for sectors such as the pig sector, to exploit emerging markets such as fast food and convenience meals.

Last week, we all agreed that time was of the essence. I remind the Minister that another seven days have elapsed, confidence is even lower and losses are mounting. If the Government are to act, they must certainly do so now.

4.11 pm

Joan Ruddock (Lewisham, Deptford): I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Minister on the sensible stance he has taken on the French beef crisis and the many helpful statements he has made today about support for farming.

Mine is an inner-city constituency where few people have direct experience of either farming methods or farm animals, yet in common with people throughout the country my constituents are deeply concerned about the food they eat. Anxiety about genetically modified foods is as strong in Lewisham, Deptford as it is elsewhere. On a recent official visit to my local Tesco store, I learned that it has the fourth-highest sales of organic food for that company in this country.

Concern about what we eat is primeval. Most people have an innate sense of what is good, but what exercises them now is their sense that, despite higher standards of hygiene and packaging, some forms of food production have become so unnatural as to create serious potential risks to human health. The catalogue of disasters that culminated in BSE has changed public perceptions for ever and resulted in an unprecedented exercise of consumer power.

The desire to avoid genetically modified food has given an enormous boost to organic produce and there has been a 40 per cent. increase in sales over the past year.

[Joan Ruddock]

The revelations on the feeding of French cattle will only increase that pressure for organic produce. If there is a crisis in agriculture, there is also great opportunity. That is why on Tuesday, with 11 all-party sponsors, I presented the Organic Food and Farming Targets Bill, which would place a duty on the Government to draw up targets to ensure that, by 2010, 30 per cent. of agricultural land and 20 per cent. of food consumed should be organic.

Given that only 1.5 per cent. of land is currently in organic production, those targets could appear to be wildly ambitious. They are not. The Bill was drafted by the Soil Association, which is the acknowledged expert in this field, as part of a coalition including Friends of the Earth, the Henry Doubleday Research Association, the Pesticides Trust, a number of unions and others. Furthermore, within a day of presenting the Bill, I was contacted, unsolicited, by Sainsbury, which pledged its support for the Bill, adding that organic food was its fastest-growing area with 500 lines already developed. It added, as is the case with all supermarkets:

"The company would like to offer its customers more British organic products but is unable to because of the shortfall in UK supplies."

This morning, Waitrose pledged its support, saying it believes that it is in the best interests of consumers and agriculture to develop organic farming.

These market opportunities must, I believe, be underpinned by Government targets. I am sure that Ministers have taken note of the recommendations of the House of Lords inquiry report, "Organic Farming and the European Union". The report, which is otherwise very supportive of organic farming, rejects targets as being too much outside the control of Governments. I trust that my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food will comment on that point when he replies to the debate, because I believe that it is mistaken. Some of the most important factors influencing the development of the sector are in the control of the Government, namely agricultural policy, the percentage of the total agri-environmental budget spent on organic farming and the amount spent on organic research and development.

On the external factors, I believe that we should expect the Department to make a considered judgment, as is done in other Departments when they are seeking to build a sector of the economy. We know that demand has increased 40 per cent. in the past year, and we can expect it to continue to grow, and that 70 per cent. of organic produce is being imported by suppliers. Countries as far afield as the United States and New Zealand are developing organic production specifically for the European market. European competitors have overtaken us: Austria already has 10 per cent. organic production, and the figure is 50 per cent. in certain sectors; Denmark has set a target of 50 per cent. by 2010; and even the newly created Welsh Assembly has a target of 10 per cent. by 2005.

This year alone, twice as many farmers registered for the Government's organic conversion scheme as could be funded by the whole of the 1998–99 and 1999–2000 budgets. I am absolutely delighted, as I know so many people throughout the country will be, that my right hon. Friend has confirmed today that an extra £10 million is to be put into the scheme while the review is under way. I encourage him to seek substantially more funding during that review, because I am certain that the money will run out as so many farmers are prepared to convert. We estimate that about £30 million is required to meet demand for the organic farming scheme and that about three times that amount would be needed to meet the targets in my Bill.

The Soil Association estimates that overall expenditure of about £150 million a year over 10 years would enable targets to be met for the UK to convert and have 30 per cent. of land in organic production. That represents a huge increase on current support but, if put into context, only a small sum. The annual cost of UK agriculture is put at about £3 billion, but if we apply joined-up Government thinking, for which we are becoming famous, the overall cost of conventional farming becomes much higher and the cost of support for organic farming conversion and maintenance becomes more attractive.

Conventional farming is one of the major sources of pesticide pollution of drinking water and its removal costs about £120 million a year. No Member of the House needs reminding that BSE costs us £4 billion and about 37,000 jobs. Increasingly, health problems are being traced to pesticide pollution and food poisoning incidents continue to cost millions every year. Antibiotic resistance and allergenicity are other major concerns to be weighed in the balance.

Organic farming methods and certification guarantee that no artificial pesticides, fertilizers, hormones or antibiotics are used in food production. The list of prohibited substances for animal feed under the organic rules makes chilling reading as someone somewhere—not only in France, but, I believe, in the United States—thinks these substances suitable for animal feed. The list includes:

"Materials which have been subject to solvent extraction . . .

Animal by-products or manures . . . meat, offal, feather meals, poultry manure . . .

Sawdust"

and urea. The list goes on, and it is horrifying.

I believe that the post-war consensus on farming and food production has broken down, and that a new framework for sustainable agriculture is long overdue. I also believe that the Government's reforms provide the basis for a much-needed way forward. The advantages of organic farming methods lie not only in the quality and safety of foods produced, but in better animal husbandry, reduced damage to the countryside and increased rural employment. I am confident that the Organic Food and Farming Targets Bill campaign will gather support throughout the country—and in the House, as early-day motion 902 is already. I trust that my right hon. and hon. Friends will continue to engage in their valued dialogue with the Soil Association and others, in order to explore every possible means of increasing organic production.

4.21 pm

Mr. Stephen O'Brien (Eddisbury): Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for giving me the opportunity to make my maiden speech in this important debate on agriculture. The subject is critical to vast numbers of my Eddisbury constituents whose lives are, directly or indirectly, wholly dependent on agriculture and its future.

First, let me pay a warm tribute to my predecessor Sir Alastair Goodlad, who represented Eddisbury from 1983, and before that, from February 1974, the old

constituency of Northwich. Over 25 years, he served his constituents and the House with dedication and great distinction, most notably as Chief Whip in the last two years of the previous Administration—a testament to his skills, and to the significant contribution that he made as an effective parliamentarian.

I am in no doubt about the fact that Sir Alastair inspired the respect and affection of the House in the fullest measure. As he now prepares to take up his appointment as the United Kingdom's high commissioner in Canberra, I know that I am joined by all the many Members on both sides of the House who knew him well in wishing him and his wife, Lady Cecilia, every happiness and success in Australia as they serve our country on an even wider field.

The name Eddisbury is taken from Eddisbury hill near the famous Delamere forest. Eddisbury is, in fact, the name of the original Hundred which, in part, covered my constituency, the largest seat in area in Cheshire. Subject to the Library's verification, I believe that Eddisbury may be the only "live" seat that is exclusively named by its original Hundred. It is to be distinguished—I say this most emphatically, as a Member who has only just arrived—from the Chiltern Hundreds. I am proud to have the opportunity to serve all the constituents of this special seat.

The constituency, which is effectively south-west Cheshire, with its 67,000 electors mirrors in many ways the interests of the country as a whole. Nearly half its electors are in the town of Winsford, a third are in the rural villages and the remaining sixth are in the agricultural communities. For my family, it is a wonderful part of the country in which to live, and for me it has provided a welcome return to the county where I was raised and, at various times, educated.

Winsford is by far the largest town. It has expanded rapidly over the last four decades, and continues to expand, with many people coming to live there from the nearby large cities of Liverpool and Manchester. It is, rightly, a proud town, famous for its rock salt mines; and it is now dependent on many small and growing businesses.

I dare say that all Members arriving in the House hope that their experience on the outside, as it were, will be of some value to the House over time. Those of us who had the opportunity before entering the House of having industrial careers—in my case, centred on the built environment and transport sectors, here in mainland Britain, in many countries around the world and, most proudly, in Northern Ireland—and those of us who are now of the generation that is luckily unblighted by the travails of the 1960s and 1970s workplace, have come to know what makes prosperity, and what destroys it.

As I visit the many small and medium-sized businesses in my constituency—notably in Winsford—my own experience is reinforced. The prosperity of those businesses is primarily dependent on less government, less tax, less interference and, above all, a release from the stranglehold of regulations, choking as they do a business's ability to compete and an entrepreneur's incentive to take the risk, and sapping the morale of those who work in such businesses. It is a free framework that Winsford, its people and its enterprises need, and in which it will thrive.

Beyond coming to this House with an industrial background, there is no higher forum than this Chamber in which to nurture my passion for our country's constitution and its traditions. I believe that those traditions are worth conserving. Without, I hope, straying into controversy, is it not a sad irony that, having arrived in the Palace of Westminster, I found myself spending Tuesday night at the Bar of the House of Lords witnessing the closing of a 700-year chapter of its unique quality, character and inestimable service to the proud independence and wise government of our nation?

I am proud and humbled to be wearing my remembrance poppy as I speak for the first time in this House—the very House that is proof, above all other, of the freedom for which my great-grandfather and countless others fought and gave their lives in 1916 on the Flanders fields. The legacy of his sacrifice, and of all those who have died fighting for our country's liberty during this century, is the reason I—we—can be here today.

Let me now come to the subject of the debate. I recall vividly seeing, as a boy, the horrendous sights across the Cheshire plain—and the stench—of the burning pyres of foot-and-mouth diseased dairy herds. Our farmers have suffered grievously in the past, but is not today's farming crisis, the plight of farmers as individuals, and the plight of their families, on an altogether different and desperate scale? Knowledge that there is a crisis—and hon. Members on both sides of the House acknowledge that—is surely no substitute for an understanding of the current appalling plight of beef and sheep farmers, dairy and pig farmers, farmers with laying hens, arable farmers, hill farmers and all the ancillary businesses and activities that support farming. Only a true understanding will lead—urgently—to a reverse in the precipitous decline of the agriculture sector.

To put it most simply, what farmers in my constituency are crying out for is not special pleading. They want to be freed from red tape, burdensome regulation and form-filling. They want a level playing field in relation to their competitors, both from within the European Union and outside it, so that there is a prohibition against unfair imports of food that do not match the standards of rearing and processing that are legally expected of the farmers and processors in my constituency.

Eddisbury's farmers are surely typical of all British farmers whose commitment to, and attainment of, product quality is second to none. In relation to pig farming, I associate myself wholeheartedly with what was said by my hon. Friend the Member for North Norfolk (Mr. Prior), who led yesterday's Adjournment debate on the British pig industry. I have now read the report of the debate in *Hansard*, and apologise for not being present to hear it.

All families are affected by the crisis, including mine. My brother-in-law is a cattle and sheep hill farmer, on the most marginal land, on the very edge of the heathland of Dartmoor. I know of the intense pressure that he faces every day for the survival of his meagre livelihood to support his young family.

As I mentioned earlier, my constituency is characterised by its grasslands, farmed since time immemorial. I share with my hon. Friend the Member for North Shropshire (Mr. Paterson) the largest milk field in Europe. Is it not right for us to challenge the justice for those dairy farmers of the, at most, 18p a litre they receive for their milk at the farm gate—that litre is sold for 54p in Tarporley high street—while a litre of bottled water sells for 76p? Dairy farm incomes in my constituency have fallen by at least a third in cash terms in the last two years.

[Mr. Stephen O'Brien]

On publication of the Monopolies and Mergers Commission report on milk in July this year, at the very beginning of my by-election campaign, the Government's acceptance of the argument that milk prices had been kept artificially high by the operation of Milk Marque beggared the belief of Eddisbury's dairy farmers. That is not the reality on the ground. I also believe that farmer-controlled milk co-operatives should be allowed to integrate vertically, as in the rest of Europe, by investing in processing facilities that enable value to be added to the basic product.

I am aware that the Government have rejected that argument, but in today's—not yesterday's—circumstances, I ask the Minister what assurances he can give dairy farmers in my constituency that he is listening to them, that he is reconsidering the actual circumstances of today, and that he is prepared to review urgently the Government's decision to deny a competitive opportunity to Milk Marque and, now, to its successor bodies.

Eddisbury typifies the danger of us all being over-sentimental about the countryside, which is a delicate balance between nature and the economy. The arguments that surround the countryside need also to be balanced, not hijacked by single-issue interest groups. If we are honest with ourselves, the countryside idyll—for visitors, an idyll it is—is rightly treasured. However, those idyllic rural areas are no accident; they are almost all influenced, if not wholly fashioned, by farmers. In using the term countryside, are we not in danger of slipping into the dreamworld of a chocolate-box picture?

The hard truth is that Eddisbury—like so many other areas of the United Kingdom, represented by hon. Members from all political parties—has a hard-nosed, hard-pressed rural economy, with cash flows, balance sheets, and profit and—now all too familiar—loss accounts. The health of Eddisbury's rural economy starts and finishes with farm incomes. If they are not viably sustained, the knock-on damage to our whole rural way of life—which is surely a very British way of life—will be untold.

I conclude by asking the Minister, in his reply, to say what assurances he can give to the farmers of Eddisbury now to alleviate their current plight.

4.31 pm

Mr. Bob Blizzard (Waveney): I am very pleased to follow the hon. Member for Eddisbury (Mr. O'Brien), and congratulate him on a very high-quality maiden speech. I congratulate him also on his by-election victory in July. He and I have at least one thing in common—we both have fairly obscure constituency names. My constituency was named after a river, whereas his was named after a hill. I had the pleasure of spending several days in his constituency just before he was elected, and hope that he has now settled in to a delightful area and made the transition from Chichester.

A Government's mettle is tested in times of crisis, when it is very important to keep a clear head, to show resolve and to stay calm. That is exactly what our Government are doing. Their actions in dealing with France, its beef and our beef ban have been exactly right. If a country wants to be taken seriously and to uphold its credentials as a constitutional democracy, it should stay within the law, and its decisions should have a sound basis. In the current case, that basis has to be found in science. Using the twin pillars of law and science, we shall achieve consistency. That is what the Government are about.

Today, the official Opposition are publicly advocating law-breaking and disregarding science. However, if we take a pick-and-mix approach, we shall only lose credibility. The official Opposition's proposals have not impressed the National Farmers Union, and have shown the official Opposition, in their actions, to be no better than the French. Moreover, in yesterday's Prime Minister's Question Time, I noted that the Leader of the Opposition lacked the spine to admit, in full public glare, that he was advocating law-breaking.

Why are we having a debate on such an issue? It all stems back to BSE. When that crisis started, the then Government showed us precisely how not to handle such an affair. They tried, first, sweeping the matter under the carpet. Secondly, they warned people that there might be a problem—then that there might not be a problem, and then that there probably was, but then again, and so on. All that did was to protract the crisis, permitting a long period in which so-called experts argued it out on the media, leading to uncertainty and a loss of confidence both in British farmers and in the previous Government. Eventually, when the revelations were made, the home beef market collapsed and a worldwide ban was imposed. It is no wonder that Conservative Members have today said that they do not like the official BSE inquiry.

Let us compare the previous Government's approach in addressing such issues with that of the current Government. When the current Government received evidence that there was a risk, albeit a small one, of eating beef on the bone, they acted swiftly and decisively. Beef sales were hardly dented, but a strong message was sent that the Government take food safety seriously. In my constituency, the main concern of the independent butchers who came to see me was that they should be able to cut beef off the bone in their own shops, as they have been able to do. I have had very few complaints about the Government's action on beef on the bone, other than from some fox hunters, who tried to link the issues of fox hunting and beef on the bone.

Mr. Letwin: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Blizzard: No, I cannot; I am sorry, but I have only 10 minutes.

The way in which the current Government have been acting in lifting the European and worldwide beef ban also contrasts starkly with the behaviour of the previous Government. The policy of non-co-operation in Europe not only isolated us, but failed. The policy was also exploited by anti-Europeans, who wanted the previous Government to adopt a position forcing them either to back down entirely, or to withdraw entirely from the European Union. That is a stark contrast with the skilful and successful negotiations conducted by my right hon. Friend the Agriculture Minister—who, but for the deviousness of the French, would have succeeded completely.

Nevertheless, without the European Union machinery, we would not be able to tackle France. Without that machinery, unilateral action could break out across

Europe. Without it, we would have no rules to enforce, only chaos. The official Opposition have demonstrated that they want to encourage that chaos. The road that they want to take would involve more law-breaking and a trade war that would be in no one's interest.

Ever since I was elected to the House, Conservative Members have tried to portray themselves as the farmer's friends. However, farmers themselves know where Conservative policy on the beef ban would lead, and that that policy would not be in their interest. Farmers tell me that they are in favour of joining a single currency, although not at the current rate—whereas the Conservative party would completely rule out joining, for an arbitrary period. The whole drift of Conservative policy points to a withdrawal from the European Union—from which farmers, certainly in my part of the country, gain great benefits in markets and payments.

Conservative Members are so proud to have negotiated the so-called rebate. That is fine, but, in farming debates, they fail to say that British farmers suffered for that rebate, which makes it harder for British than for other European farmers to draw down agrimonetary compensation.

The official Opposition also pretend that farming problems started in May 1997, whereas, as we all know, the real start of our problems was the BSE crisis. The cost of some of the controls necessary to get us out of that crisis has been causing competition problems for our farmers. Conservative Members also do not say that pig welfare legislation was passed, albeit on a cross-party basis, by the previous Government. Furthermore, the United Kingdom has long had the structure—which my right hon. Friend the Agriculture Minister is now tackling—that enables supermarkets to enjoy huge mark-ups, but which means losses for farmers.

We should realise that farmers around the world are having problems. This summer, I spent some time in the United States, which we tend to think of as consisting of large, prosperous farms. However, that is not so. I met people from Iowa who told me of the dire straits in which farmers in that very agricultural state find themselves. Farmers in the United States are taking the same action as our farmers, encouraging people with slogans such as, "Eat the pork produced in our county". The United States also has a national campaign to promote "the other white meat"—although American consumers buy mostly beef and chicken, farmers there are promoting pork.

The most amazing thing I saw in my trip was a television programme, called "Farm Aid", devoted to the plight of the state's farmers. Just like "Children in Need" and other British aid appeals, the programme invited people to telephone and make a pledge, in this instance to help farmers. Although I do not know how many people made a pledge, or how many would do so in the United Kingdom if we had such a programme, it demonstrated that there are problems in the United States, as there are around the world.

As has already been said, the BSE problem has so far cost £4 billion, and the figure is rising. However, at least we have now installed the controls to give us an opportunity to make a return on the outlay. We have the safest and best-quality farm produce in the world, and we must capitalise on that fact in the home market. Today's announcement on new, clear labels will give us the opportunity to promote British farm produce and to promote a recovery.

Today is a critical day. The integrity of the Scientific Steering Committee of the European Union is at stake, as is the European Union's machinery in its response. I hope that the French will see sense. People in this country are incensed. I am, and I have not been eating French food. I support the approach taken by my right hon. Friend the Minister, which is not inconsistent with the Government's. The Government should not break the law, but individuals can exercise consumer choice. We should not hide our feelings.

What the French are doing is in no one's best interest. It is not in the interests of the European Union and is condemned by everyone in this country. However, the French are doing what the Opposition would like us to do—take a pick-and-mix approach to Europe, full of opt-outs, inconsistencies and disregard for the law, that would undermine order and create chaos in Europe.

4.41 pm

Mr. Peter Luff (Mid-Worcestershire): It is a great privilege to be the first Conservative Member to be called to speak after the maiden speech by my hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury (Mr. O'Brien). By any standards, it was a fine maiden speech and we all look back on our own and wish that we had done half or quarter as well as he did today.

I speak today as Chairman of the Select Committee on Agriculture and also as a Back Bencher. I hope that it will be clear when I am wearing which hat. I am sorry that we face a 10-minute rule, because as Chairman of the Committee I feel a certain obligation to touch on all the issues facing farming, much as the Minister did in his opening speech, but I do not have that opportunity. I also apologise in advance for the fact that I will not be able to give way or respond to interventions.

In the Agriculture Committee's first report of this Session, published in December, we highlighted the crisis in farming, which was then the worst since the 1930s and was, uniquely and disastrously, affecting all sectors of farming. Sad to say, our report published today can note only that the situation has not improved. The desperate downturn continues. For example, I attended a meeting in the Vale of Evesham last week, where I was told by one of the country's leading apple growers that he expects half of all English apple growers to go out of production next year. What a sad way for horticulture to celebrate the next millennium.

We all know—or should know—about the dramatic collapse in farm incomes of some 75 per cent. over two years. It cannot be said too often that the minimum wage applies only to farm workers, not to the farmers themselves. If it did, they would not be allowed to continue in business.

I am glad to say that the Agriculture Committee has had several opportunities to praise the Ministry in the past year. I had intended to speak at some length on those issues, but the 10-minute rule has got in the way. However, I can say that the Committee will welcome many of the things that the Minister had to say in his opening speech.

We should highlight the action that has been taken on bovine tuberculosis. The Committee was impressed by the resolve shown by MAFF in taking forward the Krebs report and in seeking a rational, scientific basis on which to build a policy for the control of TB in cattle. I have to

[Mr. Peter Luff]

say to the animal rights lobby that if badgers have rights, so do cows. They have a right to be protected from bovine TB and a premature death. Farmers also have rights—the right to a policy, based on science, that will reduce or possibly eliminate the scourge of bovine TB, which continues to increase day by day.

It was not an easy decision for Ministers to accept the Krebs recommendations and we congratulate them on doing so. We offer our continued support to Baroness Hayman, who is now the Minister in charge of that policy area, in the difficult task of implementing the field trials. A democratically elected Government pursuing the right policy, as the Government are doing, must prevail over the violent protests of misguided extremists.

The Agriculture Committee has also found much common ground with the Minister on his ambitions for CAP reform. The Agenda 2000 negotiations earlier this year presented an opportunity to reform the CAP to create a system more appropriate to the needs of farmers and consumers and taxpayers of the 21st century, and one capable of withstanding the World Trade Organisation negotiations, which are the most important issue for British agriculture's long-term future today. Sadly, the opportunity was lost. The protectionist instincts of certain other EU states overcame the more reformist views of others, including the Minister and the European Commission itself. In my judgment, the action by Jacques Chirac in Berlin was much more damaging to the long-term future of British and European farming than France's illegal folly over British beef exports. We will live to regret Mr. Chirac's behaviour for much longer. It was particularly disappointing to see more milk quota going to the other side of the Irish sea, while none came here. Dairy farmers are saddened by that.

The Committee's current inquiry is into the marketing of milk. I see that inquiry as being important not only to dairy farmers and the dairy industry, but to the whole of farming. Perhaps unwittingly—and we will discover the truth when the Minister appears before us in a few weeks' time—the Government have sent a message to farmers that they will not tolerate vertically integrated farmer-owned co-operatives on the same scale as seen in the rest of Europe and, indeed, the world. I hope that the whole House agrees—and the Minister said as much in the Chamber earlier this week—that the future of farming lies in much closer co-operation and in helping farmers to capture more of the added value that currently goes to other participants in the chain.

Talking of the need for co-operation leads me logically to pigs. Much has been said, rightly, about the pig industry today and we all welcome the Minister's remarks today. However, I do not know whether his proposals will be sufficient to address the crisis in that industry. The pig industry needs to co-operate more, because it is too fragmented and that has been one source of its difficulties.

A year ago, we were just beginning our inquiry into the pig industry. In January, we published our report and the Minister will not need to be reminded that we were not entirely happy with the Government's initial response to that report. Unusually, we published a special report criticising that response, but if he had come forward then with the proposals he made today, we would have been much happier.

Today, the Agriculture Committee published a report about MAFF itself. There is perhaps some poetic justice in the fact that MAFF is in considerable financial difficulties of its own. I am still worried that further cuts in MAFF's programmes are a real possibility. Will the extra money announced today for at least two specific programmes come from new money from the Treasury, not from MAFF's current budget?

Mr. Nick Brown *indicated assent.*

Mr. Luff: I am relieved on that score. In our report, we highlight the fact that cutting research and development expenditure seems a perverse reaction when we are fighting to increase British competitiveness, maintain food safety and reduce animal disease. I am concerned by the rumours of the break-up of MAFF, or at least the transfer of its functions to other Departments. We need a strong voice for farming, especially in order to address the WTO negotiations effectively.

I draw the House's attention to paragraph 17 of our report, which deals with the Ministry's attitude to competitiveness. We recommend an audit of regulatory activity, and I came under some pressure from Labour Members to include that recommendation. It is essential that we regulate carefully the burdens we impose on British agriculture, and the Committee is not convinced that MAFF has always been effective in doing so.

I must address the subject of beef exports. I have talked to several farmers in my area recently and they are not very keen on the idea of a trade war. They say simply that the French are better at them than we are and that we have a lot to lose. We must prevent the import of products only when we are on the surest scientific ground. A trade war could undermine our claim to be behaving with absolute integrity in the beef dispute. If France is to be made to play by the rules, we must do so too. Trade wars are also likely to be counterproductive. If the French farmers took to blockading other British exports, such as sheep, the effect could be disastrous for British farmers, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Skipton and Ripon (Mr. Curry) made clear.

I think that the Government could have done a bit more. I know that the date-based export scheme is about de-boned beef, but Lionel Jospin said on television that the ban on beef on the bone was one reason for the behaviour of the French. Ministers must accept that it is a real factor in the current dispute.

If the Minister has scientific advice that the ban on beef on the bone can safely be lifted, I wonder whether he is on safe legal ground in continuing it. Devolution arguments have also been advanced, but devolution is about the differences between countries. That is one reason why I was worried about it in the United Kingdom context, but in this respect I say, "Vive la différence."

My second complaint is about the Government's confused response to the crisis. The word "confusion" has appeared in many press reports describing the Government's response. My hon. Friend the Member for South Suffolk (Mr. Yeo) dealt with that in his opening remarks, so I shall not labour the point now, save to say that it is regrettable that there has not been greater clarity.

It is important to emphasise that the economic significance of the beef export ban must not be overstated. Of course we must lift it and of course the French are

wrong, but the Ministry has set a very modest target for the recovery in beef exports. There is a risk that the Franco-Britannic squabble could obscure the truth, which is that farming faces much more fundamental problems than this little local difficulty. The Minister is optimistic about the matter, and I hope that events will bear him out. I look forward to discussing that and other matters with the Minister when he comes before the Agriculture Committee the week after next to discuss the crisis in the livestock industry.

A great deal more should be done to safeguard the future of British farming. It needs a more strategic approach than has been managed so far. That approach should be based on securing added value for the farmer, developing new skills in farmers, freeing farmers from production-related support, maintaining competitiveness by avoiding regulation, moving away from commodities and into brands, encouraging co-operation among farmers, and on empowering consumers to make better informed choices. That is the sort of agenda that needs to be developed for farming.

I shall conclude with a more partisan note. The one thing that we do not need to do is ban fox hunting. Not only would that be bad for the rural economy, the environment and the social lives of farmers, it would be bad for farmers themselves. The Ministry rightly encouraged farmers earlier this year to use hunt kennels to get rid of their fallen stock. My own hunt kennels have experienced an increase of 100 per cent. in the culling that they are undertaking. It is regrettable that farmers, who are faced with so many great problems, should have to cope with that added insult.

4.51 pm

Mr. Desmond Browne (Kilmarnock and Loudoun): I, too, congratulate the hon. Member for Eddisbury (Mr. O'Brien) on his by-election victory and on a very fluent maiden speech. Like my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Mr. Blizzard), I also visited that constituency for a couple of days before the by-election. It is an interesting part of the world, and there is a remarkable coincidence between the geography of Eddisbury and that of my constituency in Ayrshire. I listened with some care to the hon. Gentleman's remarks, and was not surprised to realise that his constituency and mine have similar rural economies. The people of Eddisbury are friendly and welcoming, and I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will enjoy his time there. I look forward to many more interesting contributions to our proceedings.

I shall keep my contribution brief. I trust that Opposition Members will be able to stand yet another Scottish voice in the debate. I have become used to the little Englander mentality of some Conservative Members, but I was shocked at the nadir that that mentality reached today, when a Scot who represents an English constituency—the hon. Member for North Wiltshire (Mr. Gray)—sought to undermine another hon. Member's contribution on the basis of the geographical origin of the person who made it rather than on its content.

I welcome the announcements that my right hon. Friend the Minister made today with regard to the agriculture industry, as will many farmers in my constituency. I also congratulate him on the law-abiding stance that he has adopted with regard to the beef dispute. The Opposition spokesman, the hon. Member for South Suffolk (Mr. Yeo), was asked for legal advice by the hon. Member for Vale of York (Miss McIntosh). Remarkably, he was unable to cite the legal advice that apparently supported his position. If I understood correctly what the hon. Gentleman told the House, he said that he had received no such legal advice and that no such advice existed to support the position adopted by the those on Opposition Front Bench.

In any event, I know that the approach adopted by my right hon. Friend the Minister enjoys great support outside the House. Only yesterday, I had one of my regular conversations with a certain constituent of mine. He was at his home back in Scotland, and we were discussing the Government's handling of the current beef crisis. I asked him what his views were on the confrontational approach advocated by the Opposition.

My constituent said to me that the last thing that we needed was a trade war banning any French food or livestock products. He recognised that that would be illegal, and said that it would inevitably lead to reciprocal action. As other hon. Members have pointed out, the French are better at such action than we are.

My constituent is a knowledgeable individual, and said that a ban would do no good. Scotland exports about £3 billion of manufactured goods to France each year. A total of £316 million of that amount is accounted for by food and drink exports, and two thirds of that consists of exports of whisky. He added that it was obvious that Scotland and its agricultural economy needed this trade, and that any move to jeopardise it would be madness. That constituent is Ian Kerr of Woodhead farm. He is particularly knowledgeable about agriculture because he is the milk committee chairman for the Scottish National Farmers Union.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Dumfries (Mr. Brown) said, we cannot overestimate the importance of agriculture to the Scottish economy. In fact, about one job in 10 in Scotland relies on agriculture. The landscape, traditions and rural way of life—*[Interruption.]* I wish that the hon. Member for North Wiltshire would contain himself instead of making observations from his sedentary position. Perhaps if he listens, he will find out what this has to do with this place. The landscape, traditions and rural way of life are sustained by our agriculture industry. Agriculture has shaped and managed the Scottish environment, which in turn is the bedrock of a £2.5 billion Scottish tourism industry.

Farming is important to the economy of my constituency. Dairy farming alone contributes about £58 million a year to the Kilmarnock and Loudoun economy. Our 200 dairy farmers produce about 10 per cent. of the total Scottish dairy production. Over the past few years—stretching back beyond the tenure of the current Government—they have had it hard. There were a few good years because of pricing, but they have had it hard, as they knew they would. Dairy farmers have suffered a further milk price reduction of about 8p a litre, a decline in the value of their animals when they are sold off at the end of their productive life, and a fall in the value of calves to nil from £120 per beast in 1996.

The cumulative effect is to reduce total farm income in my constituency, by £12 million, which also removes that money from the local economy. Farmers short of cash have no money for repairs, and that has a detrimental

[Mr. Desmond Browne]

effect on all other rural businesses. One agricultural engineer in my constituency has seen his annual turnover drop from £600,000 to £100,000 in just three years. The loss of secondary business has particularly affected the town of Galston and the villages of Newmilns and Dunlop.

When farmers have money they invest it, and that is obvious when one drives through the rural environment. In Kilmarnock and Loudoun, it is obvious that dairy farmers are no longer able to invest in the upkeep of their farms. The storm damage of last year remains unrepaired. Many farmers had made savings and were uninsured.

The countryside environment is deteriorating. The countryside premium scheme was introduced to help farmers—for example, to fence off ditches and make other environmental improvements to the countryside. Many local farmers considered the scheme and were attracted to it, but, as it involved a considerable capital outlay, shied away from it.

Dunlop is a typical example of a village significantly affected by the slump in agriculture. The major employer in the town, an agricultural contractor, is doing so badly that few jobs remain. That affects not only the economy of Dunlop but the whole life of the village.

Behind every one of these facts are individuals and families who are struggling to cope. I meet these farmers and their families regularly. They are not unappreciative of what the Government and the Scottish Executive have done for them. The additional aid that has been secured for them has been welcome, and despite the fact that dairy farmers still face immense problems, they do not hark back to the past. They realise that they live in changed circumstances, and they welcome the challenge that that brings. They want to work with the Government in creating the environment that will allow them a sustainable future. In the context of both Scotland and the United Kingdom, they tell me continually that it is a change to have Ministers who listen to them and respond to what they say. Tory Members may shake their heads at that, but they are welcome to come with me to meetings with farmers who tell me those things.

Dairy farmers know that circumstances have changed. Perhaps they could have coped with a strong pound, and perhaps they could have coped with a market dominated by strong buyers who effectively dictate the price, whatever the Competition Commission may say about the sale of milk; but they find it impossible to live with a combination of the two.

On behalf of those dairy farmers, I ask the Minister to hear the following points. First, if the exchange rate remains as it is until the end of the year, the dairy sector will be eligible for agrimonetary compensation thereafter. The dairy farming community expects that the Minister, who has a full appreciation of their current plight, will, when the time is right, ensure that they receive every penny of their entitlement.

Secondly, since the calf-processing aid scheme ended, dairy farmers in Kilmarnock and Loudoun have been left with calves and no market for them. Ironically, the scheme itself killed off that market. However, there are potential markets in the east of Scotland and in England where there are farms that have the ability to rear those calves. There needs to be some development of this market. The farmers have spoken to the Meat and Livestock Commission, and they want assistance with that.

Finally, Milk Marque, in setting milk prices for England and Wales, effectively set the floor price for milk in Scotland. In response to the Government's acceptance of the Competition Commission's findings in the inquiry into the marketing of milk, Milk Marque intends voluntarily to split into three regional co-operatives. There is real concern among dairy farmers in my constituency that, without Government supervision of the process of disaggregation, dominant buyers will exploit their already powerful position and force further reductions in the price of milk for the producer.

With that transition from a unified body to three regional co-operatives, dairy farmers in my constituency are concerned that the consequent level of uncertainty will further weaken the price of milk for producers. I am sure that the Minister is aware of those concerns and intends to keep a close eye on the process. I would ask him to do so on behalf of the farmers in my constituency.

5 pm

Mr. John Townend (East Yorkshire): Everyone accepts that agriculture is in the worst state that it has been in for many years, certainly since I entered Parliament. The big difference this time is that, previously, when one sector has been on the floor, another has been profitable; at the moment, practically nothing is profitable.

My constituency is one of the major pig producing areas of the United Kingdom and is therefore suffering greatly. Even the most efficient and successful producers are losing tens of thousands of pounds every week. Unless action is taken immediately, there will be a large drop in the size of the UK herd, many pig men will go bankrupt and out of business, and the UK will become more dependent on European imports, which is what the continentals want.

The major problem is that, even though our best pig farmers are the most efficient in the world, they cannot compete because there is not a level playing field. The major responsibility for that lies with politicians of all parties. They have become obsessed with hygiene and welfare standards and have imposed a greater burden on our industry than is carried by our EU competitors.

First, sow stalls and tethers have been banned in this country, but they have not yet been banned anywhere else in Europe. I talked out the original Bill introduced by my hon. Friend the Member for Boston and Skegness (Sir R. Body) to implement that measure, but the Government of the day, with the unanimous support of those in opposition, brought it back through regulations. At the time, I said that implementation should be deferred until our major competitors had similar regulations or there would be disaster for the industry, but no one listened.

Secondly, as colleagues have mentioned, since the BSE crisis, hygiene costs—especially in abattoirs—have been greater here than elsewhere. If we want higher standards than the rest of the world, we should not put our industries in jeopardy but pay the cost out of general taxation.

Thirdly, our producers are not allowed to castrate, so the demand for large pigs has to be met by imports. Fourthly, our producers cannot use bonemeal, whereas

every other country in the Community can. In addition, our producers have had to carry the burden of the Government's annual penal increases in the tax on fuel, which has put up their costs.

It is time for Government action if we are to prevent the destruction of a large part of our industry. It is wrong that pigmeat, especially bacon, that has been produced under food safety and animal welfare regulations that would make it illegal here should be allowed to be imported into this country,. We should ban all imports that do not come up to the standards that we require. Then our competitors' costs would rise to our level and the crisis would be over.

The Government will say that that is against European Union rules, but I say, "Tell that to the French." We seem to be the only suckers in Europe who put the rules before our national interests. We have not started a trade war; it is the French who are breaking the regulations. No one suggests that because they are doing so they will leave the EU. Labour Members have the nerve to say that what my hon. Friend the Member for South Suffolk (Mr. Yeo) said from the Conservative Front Bench would result in our leaving the EU—that is absolute nonsense.

The Government say that we have, at enormous expense, dealt with the BSE problem—I think that a figure of £4.5 billion was mentioned—and had the ban lifted by the EU and that we must build confidence in our exports. We would all agree with that. But, as has been pointed out by other colleagues, how can we expect the continentals to be convinced that British beef is safe if it is illegal for us to buy beef on the bone, yet it is legal to buy French beef produced from animals that have been fed sewage?

I understand that the English scientific advisers to MAFF say that there is now no health reason for the ban to continue, but they cannot get the agreement of the Welsh and Scottish. That is the result of devolution. It is improper that the English beef industry should be penalised because of what officials in Scotland and Wales think.

The French and German refusal to lift the ban is unacceptable. What do the Government do in retaliation? Nothing. They say that we must obey all the rules and leave it to the European Union to sort out. It will be most interesting to hear what the Government will say if the EU does not sort it out today. While the French prevaricate and keep our beef out, our export market is unable to recover.

We must admit that the French are dishonest about agriculture. In France there have been lots of cases of BSE, or, as French farmers call it, the JCB disease. When they identify a cow with BSE, they bring in a JCB, dig a big hole, bury the cow and do not report the case. Now we find that they have been introducing human excrement into the animal food chain. This revolting practice—I cannot think of a better word—could well carry with it health risks. Until we are certain of the implications, we should use this opportunity, which the French have given us, to ban the import of French meat.

Of course, the Prime Minister has refused to act in this way to help our agriculture industry. Why? Because his priority is to be a good European and popular in Brussels. He has not even got the guts to back the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food who is personally boycotting French produce. Unlike my Front-Bench colleague, I congratulate the Minister on making this stand on behalf of British farming and British interests. I am doing the same, although it hurts me greatly not to drink French wine at home.

Why does the Prime Minister not do the same? Why does the whole Cabinet not set an example to the British people? It is because the Prime Minister no longer sees himself as a Briton; he sees himself as a federal European. After devolution for Scotland and Wales, and once we have joined the single currency and he has made sure that this country is one of many provinces of a federal Europe, his ambition is to be President Blair of Europe. He calls Conservative Members extremists, but he is the extremist—the extreme European who ignores the interests of British agriculture. To curry favour with Europe at our expense will cost him dear. The more he acts like this, the more likely it is that he will lose the referendum on the euro.

Finally, the French are taking illegal action against British beef. The retaliatory boycott by the British public of French produce is legal. We, as individuals, are simply exercising our freedom of choice. The subsequent retaliation by the French against that legal action—they are stopping British lorries illegally and examining their loads—is unacceptable. The French police, as we saw on television, stood by and did nothing. When reporters asked the French policemen whether this action was not illegal, they said, "Je ne sais pas." Do we really want to be part of a federal Europe with a federal police force which acts like that?

In the latest report, we learn that the French will offer a so-called compromise today. There will be a fudge. It will not benefit British agriculture one iota. It will increase the burden on British farmers, with more restrictions and tests, and at the same time it will not enable us to rebuild our beef export trade to France. It is all aimed at saving the Prime Minister's face and keeping alive his dream of bouncing us into the euro, to show that we will be part of the great European drive to political union.

My message to the Prime Minister tonight is, "When are you going to be like the French and start fighting for our interests rather than European interests?" My message to the British public is, "Continue to support our farmers and continue to boycott French produce" because, whatever happens, the French public will continue for many years to boycott British beef.

5.10 pm

Mr. Mark Todd (South Derbyshire): Naturally, this debate has been dominated by consideration of current events. I do not wish to dwell long on them, but it would be wrong not to comment briefly. I am clear that, in our dispute with the French, we have law and science on our side. Peremptory, ill-conceived bans will only threaten our £10 billion-worth of exports of food and drink to the European Union.

I have written to the Minister urging assistance to deal with the extra burdens facing the pig sector on offal disposal. I believe that the steps that he has announced today of further investigating the potential for lifting part of the ban through the Spongiform Encephalopathy Advisory Council is commendable. However, yesterday and the day before, I had the pleasure of attending events hosted by the National Farmers Union and the Meat and

[Mr. Mark Todd]

Livestock Commission, at which the tone was forward-looking about the future of British food and farming.

Several key factors were rightly addressed. The first was the critical importance of quality of produce. The second was the ability to supply consistently to meet a market need. The third was the need to improve the range of produce available from British farms. It is alarming to read in today's *Financial Times* that Whitbread's Beefeater chain claims that it can source only 50 per cent. of its beef requirements from British producers and has to supplement the balance from Argentinian suppliers. It worries me, bearing in mind the beef crisis here, that we are not able to meet the demand of a key retailer.

A representative of Geest who spoke at yesterday's NFU event drew attention to the fact that its garlic requirements were not being met by British suppliers and that it had to import. We have heard the story of organic produce. The purchaser from Sainsbury's made it clear that 70 per cent. of the organic produce that he was in charge of purchasing came from foreign sources. Clearly, we must improve the range of produce available from our farming communities to meet customer demand.

Another issue is the behaviour and performance of our processing sector. We have to search for greater efficiency. I will not repeat the points that I made in last week's debate about the dairy sector, but they could be applied equally to other parts of our processed foods sector. There is evidence that we have an elongated supply chain that is relatively inefficient compared to that of many of our competitors. We have to integrate that supply chain better. I commend the initiative that my right hon. Friend the Minister has made so far to examine the totality of the food supply chain rather than purely the farm end of the problem.

In retailing, we need to meet the need for clear labelling. The purpose of yesterday's conference was to seek a clear branding of British food. I commend that initiative. It is right that suppliers in all parts of the food chain are undertaking it jointly rather than relying on the Government to put it together. The initiative should be producer and retailer led and focused on customer need, not bureaucracy.

We need to see more product development in the retail sector, too. It is clear that the customers of retailers are moving ahead of the provision that is available in the shops. We continue to find shortages in some areas, possibly due to a failure adequately to identify customer trends. Better quality presentation in shops of goods from British suppliers is of critical importance. Clarity of branding is most important; items should be consistently presented so that it is clear where they come from and what quality can be expected. We should build on the strengths of some of our regional brands—another issue that I touched on during last week's debate, so I will not expand the point today.

The importance of partnership was another key point that came through at the conference. I have never run a business in which I thought it a good idea to abuse my customers, yet the food sector adopts a curious approach, in which mutual abuse between those involved in different parts of the food chain is still a regular feature—one that is repeated and amplified in this House. I have never found such an approach to be helpful.

There are faults in the retail sector—the supermarkets have much to answer for as a result of the way in which they have dominated the food chain. I cite a voice that is relatively familiar to Members of this House:

> "We (The multiple retailing) industry has also lost valuable friends, including the British farmer. They are in crisis and we have to say—what have we really done to help? The bitter truth is not a lot."

That was said by the hon. Member for Tunbridge Wells (Mr. Norman), who also holds a position with Asda.

There is room for significant improvement in retailer performance, but that can best be driven by partnership with the producer sector. Specifically, retailers must lead in product development—in developing strong, meaningful brands. They should consider partnership funding on organic conversion, and not merely guaranteed longer contracts, which they have—admittedly—offered to those seeking conversion. There is no reason that they should not directly fund additional assistance. Government must facilitate such partnerships, and ensure that we place no greater burdens on those sectors than do our competitors. I dwelt at length on that point in last week's debate; I shall say no more about it now.

MAFF should ensure that the food sector is fully represented in regional initiatives. I shall dwell on one feature of the Select Committee report—the Chairman of the Committee, the hon. Member for Mid-Worcestershire (Mr. Luff), has already spoken eloquently on much of its content. From my experience in the east midlands and from comments that I have received from elsewhere, it is clear that MAFF has not fully participated in the development of economic strategies in the relevant regions. Indeed, the Committee's inquiry and our questioning of the Permanent Secretary revealed that MAFF conceded that point. That problem must be addressed. The food sector is a critically important part of the economic base of every region of this country—especially my own. To miss the opportunity to develop that important sector and to integrate it more with the performance of other related industries is foolhardy in the extreme. We should not continue to miss that opportunity.

Farming and food have a great future in Britain, although it is hard to say that at present. However, I believe that some of the earlier contributions to the debate would delay the delivery of that future through their narrow-minded protectionism—we should avoid that.

5.18 pm

Mr. James Cran (Beverley and Holderness): I am grateful to be called to speak in the debate, in view of the crisis in farming, especially in the pig sector. That crisis is acute in my constituency—particularly in Holderness. The Minister knows that area well; he knows what I shall be talking about. I am deeply disappointed by this afternoon's announcement on the pig sector. I know perfectly well that pig farmers in my constituency will echo my disappointment when I meet them tomorrow.

The Minister told us that he was aware of the problems of agriculture. He is an honourable man and I believe that he is aware of them—of that there is no question. However, this afternoon, he tried to anaesthetise the House; that was the aim of the exercise. As far as I could tell, he agreed with everyone. In effect, he said, "More needs to be done; I am looking at everything; there will be less bureaucracy; I have teams looking into this,

that and the next thing; and arching over all that is Agenda 2000, which, tomorrow—somewhere down the line—will solve all the problems of British agriculture."

The problem is that the situation is getting worse. A pig farmer in my constituency, Mrs. Dianne Brockhurst of Burstwick, anticipated the Minister's speech today when she wrote in a letter to me:

"Nick Brown is certainly full of 'tea and sympathy' type platitudes but no solid action has been forthcoming. I now wonder if this Government is quite happy to see us 'go to the wall' rather than 'ruffle any feathers' abroad."

Whatever one thinks about the latter remark—I may agree or disagree—my constituent is undoubtedly correct: the Minister has given the impression to farmers in my constituency and throughout the United Kingdom that his approach is all "tea and sympathy". If I have one message, it is that that simply will not do. Solutions must be actioned today—that is how serious my pig farmers' problems are. Even as I speak, farmers are going out of business. The Minister's words this afternoon rang hollow and I am disappointed. It makes one almost cry to hear the sort of complacency to which we have been forced to listen this afternoon. It is simply shocking.

I welcome the Minister's comments about labelling, but we had better look at the small print because the devil is in the detail. Apart from labelling, I fear that the package will be virtually worthless to my constituents. If I have got it wrong, I look forward to an explanation, in the winding-up speeches, of why I am wrong. Although £5 million is welcome—I do not deny that—it will not help any of my constituents now.

The Minister may recognise the depth of the agricultural recession, but I fear that he is doing absolutely nothing to solve it—at least, not in my neck of the woods. I keep in close touch with the NFU in east Yorkshire and I asked it to report on the current situation. I will not quote from its response extensively, but I must put some of it on the record because I suspect that non-farmers do not understand what is happening in the British countryside—especially in east Yorkshire. Farmers in east Yorkshire are suffering the

"Worst Agricultural Depression for decades."

They are not my words but those of the NFU, which clearly I must heed. I read that, on Wednesday last week at the Beverley market, calves were sold for £1 a piece—to be fair, two were sold for £2 and another was sold for £3. *[Interruption.]* I do not know about you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, but I do not find that amusing—I do not think that any hon. Member should—particularly when I recall that calves were sold for £100 each a couple of years ago. Is it understood in this country—especially by the Minister—that the tags on calves are worth more than the calves? The Minister must know that. We must also take account of rearing costs, auctioneers' costs and other associated costs.

The price of milk has dropped from 24p or 25p a litre to 17p or 18p a litre. How can people make money under those circumstances? They cannot. It is no use the Minister of Agriculture and his team saying, "We understand it, but we are prisoners." Farmers will not put up with it for long. The NFU and farmers in Yorkshire and Holderness are not making political points: they are telling it like it is. It is a tragedy for the people whom I represent. They are not militants; they do not march through the streets—at least, not until recently. They are just hard-working, honest people, who ask for little and get nothing. The Minister knows that the pig sector gets nothing, and, in the circumstances, that is simply appalling.

All those farmers ask is that they can make a little profit, but they are not making anything. There is not a lot of profit in the land. I can see the Minister nodding his acceptance of that. I fear that the Government are transforming those ordinary, decent people into a pack of militants, and that is tragic. They are beginning to say to themselves that they must follow the French example of direct action. Whether or not I agree with such action is neither here nor there.

So desperate are some of those farmers that, yesterday, outside the House, I saw the truly pathetic sight of pig farmers hauling two sows up the middle of the road in an effort to get publicity for their parlous situation. They have found it exceedingly difficult to get publicity, or be listened to, and that makes it all the worse that the Government have failed to recognise their dire straits.

My problem is how I can convince the Minister of their case. I have concluded that he will not listen to me. He would say that I am an Opposition Member and obviously I have a political axe to grind. I shall not do that, but, even at this late stage, I shall try to convince the Minister that what he has done today is totally inadequate, by quoting from a letter that I have received. I could have brought with me 200 or 300 such letters, but I have brought just a few.

A letter from Mr. Mewburn, the managing director of Dacre Pigs Ltd. in Brandesburton in my constituency, states:

"Two years ago my son and I undertook a redevelopment programme to enable us to comply with the stalls and tether ban and to produce efficiently without the use of in-feed antibiotic medication."

That cost a cool £480,000. A swift intake of break is needed. As far as I can tell from what he has told me and from what we have heard this afternoon, that is money down the Swannee.

Mr. Mewburn says that happily,

"we are not dependent on our pig business for our livelihood, for had we been so, we would now be on the verge of bankruptcy."

As it is, they are now faced with deciding whether they should continue and sustain losses. Why should they continue? As it is, Mr. Mewburn will probably decide to get out of the pig industry, and the business will effectively be exported to another country. Where, in heaven's name, is the sense in that?

Mr. Mewburn ends by saying:

"The only financial assistance I would request would be the removal of the so called 'BSE' cost imposed on pig producers."

How small a request to make in such dire circumstances. As I said, I have many more letters from which I could have quoted.

I repeat that the problems in my constituency are happening now. Bankruptcy is happening now; unsustainable losses are happening now, and something must be done now.

5.28 pm

Mr. Alan Hurst (Braintree): It is a pleasure to follow the eloquent speech of the hon. Member for Beverley and Holderness (Mr. Cran), whose remarks have done a good service to his constituents.

[Mr. Alan Hurst]

I do not intend—apparently it is against the rules of the House not to do so—to refer to France. Others have done so, and the matter has been well and truly covered. I shall stick to my plan, notwithstanding the words of wisdom uttered by the hon. Member for Mid–Worcestershire (Mr. Luff), who, in a speech that covered every subject in the "Encyclopaedia Britannica", managed to finish on the subject of fox hunting, which I shall also avoid.

I want to say a few words about milk, which has already been referred to in other speeches. My hon. Friend the Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Mr. Browne), in particular, addressed his remarks to that area of farming. I have always been at a loss to understand the illogical motives behind the breaking-up of the Milk Marketing Board in 1994. I know that it might be argued that we jumped before we were pushed, but I suspect that the push was quite a way off when we decided to jump. I can trace—at least in my own mind—many of the origins of the plight of dairy farmers to that decision in 1994.

From the very beginning, Milk Marque was hobbled. In what is supposedly a competitive world, it was running with both legs tied together. The restrictions and obligations placed on it in effect made it uncompetitive in the world that it faced. The first such restriction, which is beyond my ken, is that milk farmers were not allowed to process the product. As several hon. Members have said, the secret to successful marketing and business is to add value to the product; to be able to take the product through the chain so that maximum profit can be gained from it. All that milk farmers can do is sell the raw product, leaving others to take the added value and profit.

Then, there is a restriction that could be from a satire: milk farmers were not allowed collectively to advertise the product. That was almost creating the free-market economy of the Soviet Union. Milk farmers could not say, "Drink a pint of milk a day", or "What a lot of bottle", or even present dancing milk bottles to the public to illustrate their sound product.

The annual advertising budget for milk of £30 million a year in today's terms came to an end—when consumption was falling and dairy companies were amalgamating, gaining larger and larger shares of the market. Farmers were cherry-picked as the dairy companies sold them initial premiums in order to push Milk Marque into a weaker and weaker Celtic twilight—if I dare say that in the presence of Celtic Members. Milk Marque was pushed into the remoter parts of the country, where, naturally, transportation charges were greater and economies of running operations were smaller. As a result, dairy operators have gained the best markets and Milk Marque has increasingly been pushed into areas where it is difficult to compete.

Amazingly, at the same time, a Monopolies and Mergers Commission report stated that Milk Marque was undertaking uncompetitive practices. It would be reasonable to conclude that, since the inception of Milk Marque, dairy companies have been gunning for it and looking for an opportunity to hobble it even further. If we end up with weakened co-operatives competing against one another, and if, for some amazing reason they do not have the opportunity to establish a processing wing, the dairy companies will corner the whole market.

My hon. Friend the Member for South Derbyshire (Mr. Todd) takes new Labour policy a little too far for my taste in the abolition of a conflict theory of economics. We do not want to go too far into such a theory, although we readily understand that diary companies, supermarkets and producers do not necessarily have the same interest when it comes to who makes the profit in a declining market.

I welcome today's announcement that, in a ballot, farmers voted for corporate, generic advertising—selling the product as a whole. They will of course have to pay for that themselves; the money will come from their own contributions, which I suspect will be hard to find. I welcome my right hon. the Minister's statement that he will facilitate progress in such advertising. I am a little concerned that the dairy companies 50 per cent. contribution is voluntary and will need to be worked out. I am sure that my right hon. Friend will put all good pressure on them to ensure that they co-operate in a campaign, even though the budget will be only 25 per cent. of that previously operated by the various milk marketing boards in selling the product.

Milk farmers are competing in a very unequal market. We all know that when David squared up to Goliath, he eventually won, but he was helped by having a few stones in his hand at the time.

5.34 pm

Mr. Cynog Dafis (Ceredigion): I appreciate many of the remarks that have been made about the milk industry. The hon. Member for Braintree (Mr. Hurst) made a compelling analysis, and I endorse all of it—except the references to the Celtic twilight; I do not approve of that kind of thing.

I want to speak about short-term measures and longer-term strategy. The start of my speech is anecdotal. At the end of August and the beginning of September, when the story about sewage getting into the food chain was hitting the headlines in the French press, I was in Brittany, on a twinning visit. I had a long conversation there with a Welsh dairy farmer—a neighbour of mine—and a Breton dairy farmer.

The Breton milk producer had anxieties about the future. He was producing about 250 litres per annum. He could see a trend towards larger units, and he was trying to decide whether he should join that trend. Despite his anxieties, the differences between his circumstances and those of my Welsh neighbour were striking. He was getting about 20p a litre for his milk; my neighbour was getting 17p. Both of those prices, of course, are now decreasing.

Why did the two prices differ? I identified two elements. The first was the strength of the pound against the euro. I am told that the pound is up by 7 per cent. against the euro since January—and the pound has strengthened 30 per cent. in the past three years. The other factor was the strength of the vertically integrated co-operative to which the Breton farmer belonged, which gave him strength in the marketplace. In addition, he had the advantage of being able to sell his calves and his barren cows for a good price, so he could say that he was making a good living, although it was a hard living. He was making about £20,000 a year. The contrast perfectly illustrates the appallingly unlevel playing field on which United Kingdom dairy farmers have to play.

The Welsh and the Bretons are cousins, and we do not want to hear any anti-Gallic xenophobia in this place—that is the last thing that we want to feed into the situation. The UK Government are far from powerless. The high pound is, to a large measure, the outcome of UK macro-economic and fiscal policy, which is hammering the north and west of the UK—not only in agriculture, but in other sectors—and most of Wales. The UK Government could, if they wanted to, change direction on that, and they should do so. Roll on the single currency, say I.

On the sale of calves, it is time to push hard for the resumption of live exports. There is no ethical justification for not doing so. That subject is not on the immediate agenda, but it is time to open that discussion. I hope that the Minister will tell us the Government's position on that. Concurrently—they are not mutually exclusive options—we need a strategy for a UK-based and a Welsh-based welfare-friendly veal production and marketing system.

The problem of barren cows is obviously intractable, but I want to hear the Government's views on when we start to make good use of, instead of destroying, that resource. On the powerful integrated co-op, the Government's action on Milk Marque has been the opposite of helpful, as has been said. That is water under the bridge, and we must try to build on what is available to us.

When, in addition, the Meat and Livestock Commission contends that UK meat inspection charges mean that the British meat industry is seriously disadvantaged by higher costs, we start to understand why farmers are so angry—why they feel that they are treated so unjustly. All that they have been saying about the unlevel playing field in recent months is vindicated by the facts.

I shall now discuss longer-term issues and the need to lay the foundation of a new sustainable farming industry, specifically in Wales. I shall be very specific about one issue. Enlightened opinion is unanimous that the way ahead for agricultural policy is the decoupling of support from production, and the use of environmental management payments to encourage good practice and strengthen family farms. Both can be done if the schemes are properly designed, with modulation. The Minister spoke about that.

Since 1992, Wales has had an agri-environmental scheme, Tir Cymen, which is widely regarded as one of the best in Europe. However, it was available only on a pilot basis and only in some areas. It has now been replaced by an integrated national scheme called Tir Gofal, which brings together and supersedes all the agri-environmental schemes, including Tir Cymen, the environmentally sensitive areas—ESAs—and others. Properly implemented and funded, Tir Gofal could, at an annual cost of £60 million to £65 million per annum—quite a lot of money—provide a lifeline for many Welsh farmers at a time of crisis, and play a key role in laying the foundation for a sustainable future.

Professor Gareth Wyn Jones, the author of Tir Cymen and one of the great experts in the field, suggests that a full-blown Tir Gofal could bring in as many as 60 to 70 per cent. of Welsh less-favoured area farmers, and somewhat fewer in other areas. It could create 1,200 new jobs, plus a multiplier effect. By bringing on-farm woodlands into management, it might help to create several thousand jobs in hardwood extraction, processing and manufacturing.

Tir Gofal could significantly strengthen green tourism strategies. It could help to improve animal husbandry and lamb quality, and be an important asset in promoting a Welsh quality product in the marketplace. Marketing quality is vital. Tir Gofal would cover part of the cost of fulfilling national—by which I mean Welsh—and UK obligations under the habitats and birds directive. It would encourage positive management of special areas of conservation and special protection areas, and protect sites of special scientific interest. With those multiple benefits, the environmental gain would be significant.

The problem, of course, is cash. The current intention is for £20 million to be allocated to Tir Gofal by 2002–03. Currently, fewer than 500 farms have been accepted into the scheme for next year, when we should be aiming at 1,500 farms per annum. European funding equivalent to 50 per cent. of the cost of the scheme should reduce the cost to the National Assembly Budget from £20 million to £10 million. However, that will not happen, because the European moneys are not additional to the Welsh block; they end up in the Treasury. The money is paid from the Intervention Board to the Countryside Council for Wales, from the CCW to the Welsh Office, and from the Welsh Office to the Treasury.

Moneys that should have been available for a vital project for Welsh farming and rural areas are being appropriated by the UK Treasury and used for general Government expenditure. The same is true of all European moneys allocated for Wales since 1992 for all other purposes, and unless things change, the same will remain true of the £1.2 billion of objective 1 money allocated to Wales for the next seven years—and objective 2 and objective 3 money also. It sounds bizarre, it is outrageous, but it is true.

In relation to Tir Gofal, we could at the same cost to the Welsh Budget—£20 million—spend £40 million and double the number of farmers coming in, but the position is better, or perhaps worse, than that. From January 2000, 50 per cent. of Welsh land area will be objective 1 designated, and thus eligible for 75 per cent. European contribution to Tir Gofal.

I must cut a long story short. Gareth Wyn Jones, in his excellent paper entitled "Funding, Fairness, Farming and the Future"—which I commend to the Minister and particularly to the Chancellor of the Exchequer—calculates the potential loss to Wales of non-additionality in this single scheme, leaving aside other accompanying measures. He calculates that in 2002 the loss will be about £40 million. Over the seven-year structural funds period, it will be about £240 million.

Gareth Wyn Jones asserts that additionality would apply in most, if not all, other European countries and regions. For example, it would certainly apply in one of the German Länder, which develop such schemes, draw down European funding and thereby increase the number of schemes that they can implement. In the UK we do not have additionality for that purpose.

Additionality is certain to become a major political issue in Wales over the coming months. It is still not properly understood, but as it becomes more widely understood, it will become a more significant issue. If the Government want to retain political credibility in Wales, they must address it.

[Mr. Cynog Dafis]

With the agricultural crisis biting ever more viciously into the economy of rural Wales, I appeal for it to be addressed urgently—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael J. Martin): Order. I call Mr. David Borrow.

5.45 pm

Mr. David Borrow (South Ribble): Two weeks ago, with my hon. Friend the Member for West Lancashire (Mr. Pickthall), I held a public meeting in the village of Rufford in my constituency to discuss the rural audit carried out by the Labour group of rural MPs. As one would imagine, it was a lively meeting, probably half of which was dominated by agricultural issues. However, unusually, the time discussing livestock issues was relatively short, reflecting the nature of that part of Lancashire. There is livestock production—mainly lamb and beef—and some dairy farming in South Ribble, but horticulture is dominant, particularly glasshouse and vegetable production. That particular sector does not, and did not in the past, rely on subsidies from Europe or anywhere else. It has always been driven by market forces, and many of the problems now faced by that sector are the result of those market forces.

A number of issues were discussed at the meeting which had been raised with me previously and which I wish to mention now. The horticultural sector has grown extensively during the past 10 years. United Kingdom production has increased in value from £463 million to £655 million, but, significantly, £500 million-worth of produce is imported. The proportion of imported horticultural products consumed in the UK has increased rather than reduced, and one issue that we need to address is the role of Government in enabling the horticultural sector to increase production and become more competitive.

Mr. Wardle: Bearing in mind what the hon. Gentleman has just said, what does he think the climate change levy will do to the competitiveness of those growers?

Mr. Borrow: If the hon. Gentleman will allow me to continue with my speech I shall deal with various issues.

During my time in Parliament, agricultural debates have been dominated by livestock issues, perhaps reasonably given the particular problems of that sector. However, in the villages of Hesketh Bank and Tarleton in my constituency horticulture has long been a major employer, and, although there has been consolidation within the industry, a number of key issues need to be addressed. One concerns the Government's taxation policy.

If the Government levy a tax they must be clear whether it is to generate income or to tackle a problem. I remain unconvinced that increasing the pesticides tax will have the desired effect of reducing the amount of pesticides used, rather, it is only likely to increase the amount of cheaper pesticides used at the expense of better and more environmentally friendly pesticides. It is important that MAFF and the Treasury should decide whether the purpose of the proposed pesticides tax is to increase tax revenue or to tackle an environmental problem.

The climate change levy poses a particular problem. In order to compete abroad, growers need to be able to heat their glasshouses. If a levy is imposed, it will do a great deal to unbalance the level playing field. Growers in my constituency have said time and again that they would welcome a free market, because that is what they are used to, but they want fairness in the EU in terms of the pressures on them as producers compared with those on the competition. They have suffered significantly from competition from Spain and Holland in recent years and they have pointed out to me examples of where the tax and support regimes in those countries differ from those in the UK. Those issues need to be tackled by the Government.

Twenty-five years ago, horticultural production was largely dealt with through the wholesale market system and the town of Preston had one of the strongest wholesale markets in the UK of market gardening produce. However, much production now goes straight from the grower to the supermarket, which creates an imbalance in the market. Although the industry is beginning to tackle that issue, and has done so quite successfully in certain sectors, we need a better marketing strategy and a coming together of producers, perhaps through the co-operative system, if the horticultural sector is to compete and even up that part of the playing field.

There is a direct role for the Government in the horticultural sector, as in other sectors, and they could help it to market itself, not only in the UK, but in the rest of Europe. One of the problems with UK agriculture is that it has always aimed at the domestic market rather than competing in Europe. Every other EU country sells a significant amount of agricultural production outside its domestic market, but the UK does not. We need to seize the opportunity. If we are to make beef a premium product, there is scope in the horticultural sector for achieving the same status and competing for a niche market across Europe. The Government should recognise the need to do that and perhaps give more attention to the horticultural sector.

I am concerned about the extent to which training and education in the agricultural sector is becoming dominated by classroom teaching in colleges. Myerscough college, which is in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Lancaster and Wyre (Mr. Dawson), has a base in Hutton in my constituency. It is a fine college and I visit it regularly, but we need to recognise that a lot of agricultural training needs to be carried out on the job and on the farm and we need the right training to be available locally. It is wrong to assume that people can travel 20 or 30 miles to an agricultural college to do all their training. That is a myth—it will not work.

In my constituency, Lancashire Growers, which is a consortium of farming businesses, has put together a training agency. It has done excellent work over the years, but I am concerned about the extent to which such industry-based training agencies are being sidelined and not recognised as being important. The danger is that more training will go from the farm into the classroom. There is a role for both, but if we are not careful we will fail to recognise the importance of farm-based training. That could happen because the agricultural sector tends to be dominated by small companies and their opportunities

for putting their case to the Government are limited compared with those of larger companies. The same is true of any sector of the economy, but it is particularly so in agriculture.

I would like the Government to consider going into listening mode and giving more of a voice to the smaller farmers who operate in some of the niche markets. The battle in this place over the past week has been dominated by the livestock sector, which has meant that the other key agricultural sectors have tended to miss out. They are just as important and have just as big a role to play, but if we fail to listen now they could face major problems in the future.

5.55 pm

Mr. William Thompson (West Tyrone): I welcome the opportunity to highlight yet again the particular agricultural difficulties that we experience in Northern Ireland.

I am glad that the House as a whole now recognises the serious state of the whole agriculture industry in the United Kingdom. Many Members have drawn attention to difficulties in their areas. We in Northern Ireland have those difficulties as well; indeed, we have them to a greater extent, in terms of percentage and the fact that we have more farmers per head of population. A total of £572 million has been removed from the Province's economy over the past five years, and the annual total farm income has plummeted by 75 per cent. to £82 million in that period. The agri-food industry in Northern Ireland is its largest single industry, accounting for 10 per cent. of civil employment and 7 per cent. of gross domestic product.

In 1997, the average net farm income was only £3,093, 75 per cent. of farms had a net income of less than £10,000, and 38 per cent. of farms made a loss. Farm incomes in Northern Ireland are falling at twice the rate of those in the United Kingdom. There is clearly a tremendous problem in Northern Ireland. The banks are owed some £520 million—not to mention what the feed suppliers are owed.

The Minister recently received a deputation from Northern Ireland, and I welcome that. Someone mentioned tea and sympathy; we were certainly given tea, and indeed we were given sympathy. Moreover, we were given promises that something might happen, and that something might be said today. Of course, something has been said. We find that there is to be £5 million for marketing, and that a greater incentive is to be provided in regard to labelling. Although those developments are welcome, however, they are not adequate to deal with the problems of the Province.

There is still a big problem in the beef industry, although the ban has been lifted. Because of strict procedures, very few cattle are available for export. It would be helpful if the beef on the bone ban were lifted as well. The Minister says that the advice from the hygiene point of view is that it can be lifted; indeed, he says that he would lift it if he had the support of the environmental authorities and the Parliament and Assembly in Scotland and Wales. I say this to the Minister: lift the ban immediately. If he does so, he will surely find that Scotland and Wales will follow suit very quickly. They could not possibly continue the ban in their countries if it had been lifted here. The ban has been a stick to beat our backs with. The French Government say, "They have banned their own beef; if they do not eat their beef, why should we buy it?"

I sympathise with what the hon. Member for Beverley and Holderness (Mr. Cran) said about the pig industry. He expressed precisely the feelings in my own constituency. Although his comments related to pig farmers and the pig industry in his constituency, they apply equally in mine. Unfortunately, however, the pig price in my constituency is between 10p and 15p less than it is on the mainland. We also have additional costs in importing grain and in pig production generally.

I had hoped that Ministers would today announce that they are doing away with the offal disposal regulations. Such action would make a significant difference to many pig farmers, providing them with another 5p to 6p in the sale of each pig. Although it would not enable farmers to make a profit, it would help them to pay for the meal being consumed, and allow some of them to stay in business until the day comes—we hope that it will come—when they are able to make a profit.

When we met the Agriculture Minister, he told us that he will approach the Spongiform Encephalopathy Advisory Committee. He said that again today. We want to know when he will do that and when we will see some action. We have promises, but we want action.

Many farmers in my constituency, especially pig farmers, have made great capital expenditure to build new premises to meet the new regulations banning tethers and crates. Farmers have gone to banks and borrowed money, but now are unable to pay back interest or capital. They are desperate.

If the Government introduce safety regulations that are different from those applying elsewhere in Europe, farmers should be entitled to Government compensation for the additional expenditure. When pig farmers come to me, they simply say, "All we want is a level playing field." It is all right having a common market and doing everything in common, but an uneven playing field negates the argument in favour of such a market. On behalf my pig farmers, I plead for a level playing field.

The incidence of BSE in Northern Ireland is the lowest in the United Kingdom. This year, we have had only five cases. The Republic of Ireland has twice as many cases of BSE as Northern Ireland, but, unlike Northern Ireland, it is able to export cattle. Northern Ireland should also be able to export. We should be recognised as an area with a low incidence of BSE, so that many of the restrictions may be lifted. Although I realise that such a move may not go down well in some parts of Britain, given our very low incidence of BSE, there is a strong argument for it.

The Government have agreed to request the provision of £129 million that is available from the European Union's agrimonetary compensation scheme in 2000 and 2001. The United Kingdom also has the option of providing a matching amount, but, to date, there has not been such a commitment. Even if all possible funds were made available, that would still result in a decrease in the levels of all CAP premium payments in Northern Ireland. I ask the Government to provide the £120 million matching funds in 2000 and 2001.

I understand that a proportion of the agrimonetary compensation agreed in 1997—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order.

6.5 pm

Mr. Hilton Dawson (Lancaster and Wyre): It is a pleasure to take part in the debate and I shall stick to five minutes to allow other hon. Members to contribute. It has been an excellent debate, and the scene for it was set by the typical calm, dignity and good sense of my right hon. Friend the Minister in his introduction. Hon. Members on both sides have addressed themselves seriously to this very serious issue. The only exception was the hon. Member for South Suffolk (Mr. Yeo) who, with his arguments shot away and the scientific and legal basis for what he was trying to say foundering, sailed on towards the French to try to start a trade war. He is a farcical Lord Nelson for our time.

We can quote all the statistics we like, but I know that agriculture is in a serious state because I have seen the effects on people in the past couple of years. We have a fine farming community in Lancaster and Wyre, full of decent people, many of whom have been marked by desperation and despair. I think of a chap whose family has owned his farm for 200 years, but now sees it all going and thinks it is all his fault. I know a farmer who has had to spend his retirement savings on propping up the business. Now he is growing older and more tired, but he can see no way out of unremitting physical toil. Some families want to ensure a future for their children in agriculture, but that possibility is disappearing. Such people have been driven into despair because their income is being driven down.

Of course farmers have to produce safe, good quality food efficiently in a competitive environment. We also have the problems caused by the collapse of markets, the strength of the pound and the legacy of BSE. Even in a context of considerable assistance to agriculture, the supermarkets and dairy companies seem to be able to dictate the price that they will pay, without passing on lower prices to the consumer. Our efforts to produce quality food to high standards of animal welfare are undermined if we do not use every legitimate and scientific means to ensure that poorer quality imports do not hit the streets; if consumers do not have the benefit of accurate labelling; and if large concerns constantly have to be cajoled and persuaded to emphasise quality, freshness and animal welfare over the lowest common denominator of price. We have talked much about what the farmers and Government need to do, but less about what the supermarkets and dairy companies need to do to emphasise the quality of British produce to consumers.

We have to consider ways to develop effective co-operatives and marketing strategies. I was pleased to hear about the countrywide approach to marketing that is being further developed, but we need to emphasise regional and local distinctiveness. I want to see a made in Lancashire label attached to all sorts of quality produce, not just traditional agricultural produce. Our local farmers market, for example, has ostrich—produced by local people—on the menu, as well as selling the finest pork burgers available. We need to build on such innovation.

The Government are giving tremendous support to agriculture. My right hon. Friend the Minister listens, cares and approaches the issue properly, but we need to do more. We need to look to the future. If we are going to have to have bigger farms, we should have a retirement scheme so that people can leave the industry with dignity. We need greater emphasis on co-operatives and collaboration. No more obstacles should be placed in the way of Milk Marque and other producer organisations, and an enabling and supportive culture should be fostered in the Ministry.

I believe that the rural community is strong and resilient. The Government have a real stake in this country's agriculture, and farming—and the young people going into it—have a real future.

6.10 pm

Mr. John Burnett (Torridge and West Devon): I apologise for my brief absence from the debate, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I have been able to establish that, contrary to what I understood previously, a United Kingdom company was the source of French chicken burgers, worth about £40,000, that were used in Devon's schools. I apologise for my earlier intervention being therefore incorrect.

However, I must add that every year Devon county council buys food worth about £1.8 million that is produced by west country suppliers. It will be of interest to hon. Members and their local authorities that Devon county council has taken a number of constructive measures to assist agriculture. First, it has established, and is financing and supporting, the organisation Devon Food, by means of which local farmers are linked with local consumers, to whom they sell their produce. As a result, 13 new businesses and 35 new jobs have been created.

Secondly, the county council has set up and is supporting the "Made in Devon" scheme to promote local producers. Thirdly, the council has invited the National Farmers Union to join it in scrutinising Devon's purchasing agreements, and in examining ways in which quality and welfare conditions can be incorporated to ensure that our farmers operate on fair terms with their European counterparts.

The Parliamentary Secretary will be aware of the parlous state of agriculture. Last year, I thought that things could not get worse but, to my regret, they have. Time is short for many farmers throughout the country—they are either insolvent now, or on the brink of insolvency. Earlier, I asked the Minister about the timing of the proceedings that the European Union is likely to take after today's meeting. I hope that the Parliamentary Secretary when he winds up will answer the following urgent questions.

How long will it take before the EU proceedings are resolved? Is there a fast track for such proceedings? Would it be in the interests of our farmers for the United Kingdom also to take separate action, concurrent with the proceedings envisaged to be undertaken by the EU? Finally, the French have taken unilateral and illegal action: what penalties will be sought for that breach of the law and of good faith?

6.13 pm

Mr. Gareth Thomas (Clwyd, West): I am pleased to contribute to a debate on a subject of crucial importance to my constituents. The hon. Member for Eddisbury (Mr. O'Brien) spoke earlier, and I congratulate him on an interesting and well delivered maiden speech. His constituency on the Cheshire plain is close to mine, but hon. Members will know that the land rises the further west one goes towards the Clwydian range. My constituency is therefore in what is regarded as a less favoured upland area, where the only sustainable form of

agriculture is the raising of livestock. There are no fewer than 900 farms in my constituency, and the people engaged in that hard business are admirable and hard working. Agriculture has a particular resonance in Wales. Relatively speaking, many more people are employed in agriculture there than in other parts of the UK. Wales is more rural.

The Welsh language is particularly strong in rural Wales, which may account for the emotional charge about this issue in Wales, although that is also true of other parts of the UK. One acknowledges the strong attachment to the landscape in places in England and Scotland where farms may have been in the same hands for many generations or centuries. One pays tribute to the wonderful English landscape. The issue is charged emotionally as well as economically, but we must adopt a rational, clear headed approach to the combination of difficult problems that the Government have inherited.

I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food for keeping his head and adopting a rational approach to the crisis. I congratulate the Government, too, on the steps that they have taken to ameliorate the situation. We must not forget that £5 billion a year is being paid directly to UK farmers under the common agricultural policy. The Government have made extra payments of £742 million, including higher hill livestock compensatory allowances and aid with meeting the costs of inspection and the extra charges resulting from BSE.

In the extremely limited time available to me, I want to concentrate on a few points. I warmly welcome the Government's embarkation on an industry-led review of the regulatory burdens on agriculture. That is a particular source of grievance among farmers in my constituency. One source of particular frustration is controls on sheep carcases, which have to be split so that specified risk material can be removed. If the Government could move on that point, it would go a long way towards improving morale.

I stress the importance of the EU's rural development regulation. Many people in agriculture believe that it has tremendous potential to improve the long-term prospects of agriculture and the rural economy. One thinks of agri-environmental schemes, steps towards proper early retirement schemes, aid for young farmers, marketing and processing grants. Unfortunately, the regulation is not properly funded in the UK. Of the available EU budget, only 3.5 per cent. has been allocated to the UK. I agree with what many commentators—including the Country Landowners Association and the Council for the Protection of Rural England—that that is ludicrously low.

I should like the Minister to address two questions: what representations have the Government made to increase that figure to somewhere near the EU average, and if that is not possible, can he suggest how resources might be shifted from market support subsidies to the rural development regulation? Under EU regulations, particularly the Amsterdam treaty, that is possible up to a ceiling of 20 per cent., and I should like to hear the Government's views on that point.

The National Assembly for Wales has had a shaky start, but it is determined to adopt a consistent and clear strategy. It seems to me and to many others—I agree, for example, with my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Joan Ruddock)—there has been a recent collapse in the post-war consensus about farming. We need clearer objectives for the industry if it is to have a sustainable future and to give hope to generations of farmers to come.

Mr. Hayes: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Many hon. Members have not been able to speak in this debate. Given the nature of the crisis in my constituency and elsewhere, would you consider extending the debate beyond 7 pm to allow those hon. Members to speak?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I am bound by the rules of the House and we cannot extend the debate beyond 7 pm.

6.20 pm

Mrs. Ann Winterton (Congleton): First, I warmly congratulate my new neighbour, the hon. Member for Eddisbury (Mr. O'Brien), on flying over the first hurdle in his parliamentary career with great style by making such a splendid maiden speech.

Since the Government came to power, farm incomes have fallen by three quarters, hill farmers are having to shoot their own sheep, there is no market for calves, and dairy farmers have seen milk prices fall to their lowest level for 11 years. As for British beef farmers, the situation gets worse every day.

The Scots and Welsh are refusing to lift the ban on beef on the bone and, in doing so, are placing enormous pressure on the new devolved machinery. Is it not a little ironic that the lifting of that ban throughout the United Kingdom has been trapped in the devolution doldrums? How can we expect other European nations to accept our beef products, when we in the United Kingdom continue to refuse to allow our own people the freedom to enjoy beef on the bone, against the advice of the chief medical officer.

The Minister should take his courage in both hands, give a lead and take action on behalf of England. As the hon. Member for West Tyrone (Mr. Thompson) said, the others would fall in and follow that lead. The French and Germans are following suit in this nonsense and, in the process, laughing at the European Union which sits idly by as British farming goes deeper into the mire.

Justifiably, British farmers are outraged by the unilateral ban imposed by the French Government on the import of our beef, in direct contravention of the EU ruling to lift the ban in August. What is even more scandalous is that while those countries continue the ban on quality British beef, the European Commission has exposed France and Germany as nations where animal waste and possibly human and veterinary waste have been routinely and illegally used in animal feedstuffs.

Earlier today, my hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield (Mr. Winterton) gave me a note of a UECBV Secretary General's meeting held in Brussels on Tuesday 28 September—a mere month ago—which states:

> "In discussion it emerged that in Germany all dead animals were collected and rendered under local authority supervision, but rendered material, including pets faeces and gut content went into animal feed. This was causing concern and conflict among meat processors and the medical profession, not least because dead animals might contain medicines or poisons used in lethal injections."

That makes disgusting reading.

[Mrs. Ann Winterton]

The UK Government might be wasting time in seeking redress, but the British public are doing their best and doing the job for them by refusing to purchase French produce and standing up for British interests.

Mr. Hayes: I know that my hon. Friend takes an enlightened and open-minded view of Europe. Perhaps she will comment on what she thinks European Governments would do if British farmers were found to be doing the sort of thing that she has described. Those Governments would use it as a way to stop British imports into their countries.

Mrs. Winterton: That is a good point. Of course, we all know precisely what they do because we have seen France in action on many occasions. They would take the action that was in their best national interest and twiddle with the rules later. That is the answer, and my hon. Friend, the House and everyone in the country knows it.

Having said that, I commend the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food on his personal action in not eating and drinking French produce. It is sad that his stance is undermined because he does not have any support from any other Minister, including the Prime Minister, which shows precisely what this Labour Government think of our farmers. The Government have done virtually nothing. Let us flip the coin. To return to the intervention by my hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr. Hayes), other Governments would act completely differently.

Our farmers have waited patiently for three and a half years to get top-quality British beef back on the menu across Europe. Having put our house in order and having done more than has been asked of us as a beef-producing nation, why should our beef producers suffer any longer in the face of this thinly veiled attempt by France at protectionism?

By putting off any decision on the illegal ban of British beef exports, the European Commission is colluding with French and German delaying tactics. Ever since the Prime Minister claimed to have lifted the EU ban on British beef, France and Germany have deployed a variety of delaying tactics to ensure that the ban remains in place. The situation displays much of what is wrong in the EU and certainly shows its weakness in dealing with any issue.

In the face of this inaction, we have scenes just across the English channel of a few French farmers blockading the channel tunnel and flagrantly breaching the law by breaking Customs seals on lorries, while the French police look on with inactive complicity—what an absolutely dreadful state of affairs.

The Government have also blocked Milk Marque, our largest dairy co-operative, from investing in processing. My hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield and I represent a goodly part of Cheshire, where dairy farming is extremely important. Delays in releasing the Monopolies and Mergers Commission report on the future of Milk Marque and the United Kingdom dairy industry have created considerable uncertainty for all involved in milk production and processing.

Hon. Members on both sides agree that the dairy industry is experiencing a crisis. Incomes are lower than they have been for 60 years, with farmgate milk prices having fallen by nearly a quarter over the past two years. As a child I was told about dairying in the 1930s, when my grandparents were involved in it. I know precisely what the situation was like then. It is shocking that we are repeating that history at the end of this millennium.

The MMC report leaves dairy farmers with key questions unanswered. It based its conclusions on Milk Marque's market share in 1997, which was 49 per cent. of Great Britain's market. Its current market share is 39 per cent. British dairy farmers do not understand why the Government have placed restrictions on Milk Marque based on out-of-date figures in the report, which risk leaving the United Kingdom dairy industry at a disadvantage compared with its competitors overseas.

Dairy farmers' co-operatives have large market shares and are common in other parts of Europe and the world—for example Sweden, Denmark and Holland. They all have vertically integrated co-operatives with more than 50 per cent. of the market. The MMC report says that our consumers pay more for milk than they should as a result of Milk Marque—try telling that to a dairy farming family who have seen the price they receive for milk drop by more than a quarter in the past two years.

All this exacerbates the disastrous common agricultural policy reform negotiations, when Ministers agreed to give four EU countries, including Ireland, extra milk quota next year while mainland Britain's quota is frozen until 2006. What price, then, the cosy relationship between Government and the EU? It simply is not delivering. It means that increased milk imports from Ireland will further undermine British dairy farmers, and although Britain has some of the best dairy producing land in Europe, our farmers are prevented by quota limits from meeting home demand. Ireland, by contrast, already produces more than four times its domestic needs.

Further, the termination of the calf-processing aid scheme in August has resulted in a collapse in the calf market. The Government should introduce a calf disposal scheme, operating to high welfare standards, to put a floor in the market as a short-term relief. The industry itself is actively exploring the development of existing and new markets for calves, and there is a small market for the better beef calf. What could be more devastating than for a farmer to stay up for three quarters of the night to help a cow safely deliver—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I call Mr. David Drew.

6.30 pm

Mr. David Drew (Stroud): I shall keep my remarks short as we are approaching the summing up. I wish to make some positive comments in what has generally been a good debate. I start with two quick observations. We could all spend many hours debating the situation in the milk industry. I am pleased to see the hon. Member for North Cornwall (Mr. Tyler) in his place. He has said many times that no one would have started in the present situation because the conflict between Milk Marque and the dairy companies was always unsustainable.

We have heard many theories about how BSE has caused many of the difficulties that we face. My understanding was that the ban on beef on the bone was imposed because the BSE prion was present in the dorsal root ganglia and could be present in the marrow. I hope that there will be good news and that that is confirmed

not to be the case, but it took some time for science to come up with clear answers. It was right to impose the ban rather than take risks. If we believe in the precautionary principle, we should apply it.

I wish to make some positive comments about how we can take the agriculture industry forward. We have to be careful with the words that we choose, but I recognise that one of the factors that has caused so much difficulty for farmers is the loss of consumer confidence matched by excessive supply in all manner of sectors. We cannot by debating restore that confidence, but we could make it worse. I hope that the speeches made tonight have not done so, but I fear that some may have. We have to rebuild that confidence by recognising what consumers are saying. They want more access to local produce, and they certainly want organic produce. That is why the £10 million announcement by the Government is greatly to be welcomed.

Consumers also wish to know that labelling and other ways of genuinely telling what one is eating are as they should be rather than how they have been perceived in the past. On the producer side, farmers are looking for guidance and new directions. The farmers to whom I talk largely welcome the implication that they will have increased environmental responsibilities, but they want to know the detail and the amount of money that will be provided, as I said in the Liberal Democrat Opposition day debate.

We have to be clear. My hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd, West (Mr. Thomas) referred to the importance of the rural development regulations. The amount of money that can be allocated to Britain is far too low and we have to find a way of increasing it. Farmers will judge the effectiveness of schemes not just by how much money goes into them but by the psychology that backs them up, how important people will therefore perceive them to be and what they say about the direction in which the Government want farming to go.

We must look for new forms of production. Mention has been made of energy crops and reafforestation. They are important in their own right, but we must seek ways in which farmers can collaborate and, dare I say, co-operate. I stress that I am a Co-operative Member, and it is up to the co-operative movement to take a lead, but it is for all others to join in so that co-operative methods of production become the norm, in at least some sectors, rather than abnormal.

I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister will take up the point that I raised last week. The most vulnerable group is almost certainly tenant farmers. I make no apology for raising again the possibility of particular help for them through the county farms, to ensure that rents are not raised or even to reduce them so that farmers can continue. We must ensure that we get it across to our neighbours across the sea, who have no knowledge or understanding of tenant farming, how important this form of production is, not just to our agriculture but to our countryside. If we take nothing else from today's debate, we should take that point: those farmers are under the greatest attack and they need the most support. On that point, I am happy to end my speech.

6.35 pm

Mr. James Paice (South-East Cambridgeshire): As has been pointed out from both sides of the House, the debate has been heartfelt: no one could conceal the crisis in agriculture. However, first I must refer to a highlight in the debate—the maiden speech of my hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury (Mr. O'Brien). He showed the warmth and humour that we have already come to recognise; he also demonstrated his business experience and his belief in the freedom of businesses to prosper. He acknowledged, as I hope we all do, the debt and the duty that we owe to those who have gone before. He referred to the importance of the dairy industry and expressed his support for vertical integration, as did his constituency neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Mrs. Winterton). He brings a wealth of knowledge, objectivity and ability to the House, and we are the richer for it. We welcome him.

The crisis in agriculture has many causes. The Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food recounted them and I shall not repeat them. Of course, they are not all the responsibility of the Government—the economic consequences of events elsewhere in the world cannot be laid at the Government's door. However, the Government are responsible for some of the causes; furthermore, it is incumbent on them to do all that they can to mitigate the effects of matters for which they are not responsible. We are in a desperate situation which requires desperate measures.

The Conservatives support the Government's encouragement for the demand side, and my hon. Friends will lend their support for public purchasing, as the Minister requested. However, it would be much better if Labour-controlled local education authorities were already using British beef. It will take time to improve the demand side, but our farmers do not have that time. At present, the Royal Agricultural Benevolent Institution—an excellent charity which I know well—is receiving calls for emergency hand-outs at levels not seen since the 1930s. The charity's spending on emergency aid is already double what was budgeted for this year and is rising steeply.

Farmers are proud and independent. They work hard for long hours. They are used to facing difficulty. However, few Members of this House can understand the anger and the shame that farmers feel at asking for charity—as ask they now must. Farming cannot be immune to economic change, or from the changing needs of society and the consumer. Farmers need to work together to improve their marketing, but they deserve a chance to change. Plain common sense says that they cannot compete or be expected to thrive if they are confronted with crippling costs and regulations not faced by their competitors.

We need to know more about the Government's long-term objectives. They talk about restructuring and less subsidy, but we hear nothing about their objectives for rural communities. Does the Minister want to find a way for small family farms to continue in some of our most rural and fragile areas? He is aware that, on their own, under their present conditions, they cannot be economically viable. If they are to be supported, how is that to be done?

Some people ask why farmers should be treated differently from other industries. In an ideal world, that might be a fair question, but farming takes up more than 70 per cent. of the land of England. The landscape has been fashioned by farmers: features such as hedges, stone walls and vernacular buildings have come about because of farming. Of course, we can point to excesses—the loss

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of habitat and of some species—but is it not better to help and encourage farmers to maintain and improve the countryside, rather than to drive them away from it? We would be left with ever larger farms, less able to justify expenditure that does not generate an income. We want a shift away from production support towards targeted payments for specific purposes—environmental, social or other. The Minister is holding consultations; we hope that he will soon announce the results.

Several hon. Members, including my right hon. Friend the Member for Skipton and Ripon (Mr. Curry), and—outside the House—the NFU have referred to a trade war. The Minister is the only person practising such a war. There are two separate issues. The issue of French meat and meat products imported into this country is a food safety issue. It is about protecting the British consumer from an illegally produced product that it should be illegal to sell. That is wholly different from the French refusal to lift their import ban on British beef. We support the Government as far as they have gone with regard to that problem, although we are concerned about Commissioner Kinnock's remarks on the radio this morning that the legal process could take some years. The Minister is probably not yet aware that Downing street has suggested that the Government might not follow the legal process.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Skipton and Ripon referred to the BSE inquiry, which has cost £32 million. Although he did not say it—but I am sure that he would agree—it is rapidly becoming clear that it is a total waste of money because Government Members have closed minds. They have spent this debate, as they spend every other, blaming the Conservative party for BSE. Why have the Government bothered to hold an inquiry at a cost of £32 million if their minds are made up?

I turn to the export ban and beef on the bone. Last Wednesday, the Minister said:

"The fact is that beef on the bone has nothing to do with the export of British beef".

He repeated that claim today.

The Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mr. Elliot Morley): It is right.

Mr. Paice: The Parliamentary Secretary agrees. If the beef on the bone ban is not connected with the French ban on British exports, why did the agricultural counsellor from the French embassy write what he did in last week's *Farming News*? He wrote:

"The decision of the French government invoking the precautionary principle is not the result of political manoeuvring, nor commercial protectionism. It is worth noting that the British Government adheres wholly to this precautionary principle, judging by some recent rulings, such as the ban on beef-on-the-bone."

Does the Minister not understand that maintaining the ban on beef on the bone creates the perception at home and abroad that we are not entirely happy with our own product? I suspect that the Minister understands that but is not allowed to admit it.

The Minister said that he recognised the problems experienced by sheep farmers yet, during the recess, he blamed sheep farmers for creating their own problems. It is easy to say that they were unwise to retain so many cull ewes last year, but what would the Minister or any other hon. Member have done when faced with the alternative of giving them away or selling them for £1 each?

Several hon. Members referred to the problem caused by the removal of spinal cord in sheep. Last week, the Minister said:

"I shall take a hard look at what can be done".

The Minister said "I shall", so he is referring to a future action. It is interesting to note that in that same debate last Wednesday he said on six different occasions that he would take a hard look at six different issues. We wonder what will happen. When referring to pigs, the Minister said:

"I am working very hard on it, and hope to have something new and comprehensive to tell the House in a matter of days."—[*Official Report*, 20 October 1999; Vol. 336, c. 454-67.]

I suspect that my hon. Friend the Member for Beverley and Holderness (Mr. Cran) does not want to return to pig producers in his constituency to tell them that they have £5 million for marketing and that is it.

In the meantime, sheep producers face a bill for £1.2 million from the Environment Agency for groundwater regulations. We are told continually about joined-up government. It must amuse outsiders to hear that: has nobody told the Environment Agency or the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions? What about the pesticide tax, the climate change levy and the integrated pollution prevention and control charges? They are extra costs levied on agriculture when it cannot afford it.

My hon. Friend the Member for Mid–Worcestershire (Mr. Luff), the Chairman of the Agriculture Select Committee, referred to tuberculosis. It is two years since Professor Krebs reported, and in those two years the incidence of TB has exploded by about 40 per cent. a year and into new areas of the country. Even now, only five of the 10 triplet study areas have been identified. Professor Bourne, who is in charge of the studies, has said that the last one will not even start until 2001. We know that there are problems with intimidation and obstruction, and we condemn them, but we want to know what is happening.

I wrote to the Minister on 16 September asking for an update in the light of media stories about trials being abandoned and the testing of badger carcases being stopped by the Health and Safety Executive. Six weeks later, I have not received a reply. How many staff have been put on to TB work? Is that number higher or lower than a year ago? What is the Minister doing about farmers outside those study areas who will see no action at all for another six years, while the NFU estimates that it costs an affected farm £3,000 a month?

Does the Minister realise that the abolition of the calf-processing scheme removed the only outlet for calves from a herd under TB restrictions? Farmers who are facing huge losses cannot afford to keep animals that they would otherwise have sold, so those animals too are being shot. Will the Minister tell the House what is going on?

Even the arable sector has not escaped. It is faced with prices that are 30 per cent. lower than they were three years ago, although I accept that that has much to do with the strength of sterling. However, farmers cannot buy pesticides in Europe, where they are up to 30 per cent.

cheaper than in this country because of British regulations. They are aghast at the price that they pay for machinery, compared to prices in other countries. It has been drawn to my attention that in Tasmania one can buy a combine harvester that was built in Europe for half the price that it costs in this country.

To add insult to injury, this autumn farmers are to have their acreage payments abated by 14 per cent. because of the strength of sterling. It is true that the amount will be made up in February, but they will suffer cashflow problems in the meantime. Unless the Government act, next year the payments will be only half made up, and the following year they will not be made up at all.

The last week has proved right farmers' suspicions. Everywhere I go in this country, farmers tell me that they think that the Government want rid of them and that they have no place in Labour's modern Britain. I fear that they are right. Every recent Government announcement or paper about the countryside has virtually ignored agriculture and concentrated on other businesses, leisure and the environment. Yes, there are many rural businesses other than agriculture, but most of them—the shopkeepers, the vets, the builders, the machinery dealers and the rest—depend on farming for their trade. Only last Wednesday, the Minister talked about the opportunities for regional tourism, and I am sure that we would all support that industry, but that was on the very same day that the Cabinet Office proposed a tax on tourists.

It is tempting to feel sorry for the Minister. He has been abandoned by the rest of the Cabinet, and Downing street is constantly briefing against him. Yesterday, at Prime Minister's Question Time, despite the fact that the right hon. Gentleman was directly mentioned by my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition, not once did the Prime Minister express support for his Minister. It is no wonder—the Prime Minister knows when he is on to a loser, and he has fingered the Minister to be the fall guy.

I can only repeat the words of the highly respected agriculture journalist David Richardson, who in last week's *Farmers Weekly* said:

"In spite of Nick Brown's sympathetic sounding speeches and his ability to persuade an audience of farmers that he means to try to help them, he has not delivered. Nor does he appear likely to do so."

The Minister's record of achievement is woeful. He has lost the Prime Minister's support; he has lost his way in Europe; and it seems that he has lost even his telephone. He has lost the confidence of the British farmers which he set out to nurture so carefully. It is time that he went.

6.48 pm

The Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mr. Elliot Morley): This has been an exceptional debate, with the possible exception of the speeches of Opposition Front Benchers, including the hon. Member for South Suffolk (Mr. Yeo), who apparently, in agriculture debates, cannot see a top without going over it.

The hon. Member for Eddisbury (Mr. O'Brien) made a well-balanced and reasonable maiden speech. He expressed the concerns of the farmers whom he represents, which we well understand. He referred to Milk Marque. I point out that the report by the Office of Fair Trading was independent. It was not a Government report; the Government had to respond to it. The Government are in favour of Milk Marque going into processing. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry did not accept the report's recommendation to break up Milk Marque, but he gave Milk Marque time to decide how it wanted to reorganise itself, and it has done that. Having reorganised, it will be able to invest in processing, in line with the OFT report.

My hon. Friend the Member for Braintree (Mr. Hurst) also raised the point. He mentioned marketing, too. I am very pleased to say that, as my right hon. Friend the Minister said, there will be a marketing scheme for milk to the value of £10 million, which comprises contributions from both sides of the industry.

The hon. Member for Ceredigion (Mr. Dafis) mentioned milk—which is very important to his constituency—as did my hon. Friend the Member for Lancaster and Wyre (Mr. Dawson) and the hon. Member for Torridge and West Devon (Mr. Burnett). The hon. Gentleman also asked about proceedings on the beef ban. There are no fast-track proceedings. Legally, we do not rule out any approach, although I should emphasise that we want a speedy resolution to the issue. In fact, we expect it to be resolved as quickly as possible.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Mr. Drew), who also mentioned milk, rightly raised the issue of tenant farmers and their particular problems, of which we are well aware. We have regular meetings with the Tenant Farmers Association. The hon. Member for Congleton (Mrs. Winterton) also mentioned milk, which is of course very important to her constituency.

No one is denying that farming, especially in the livestock sector, is in particular difficulty. My hon. Friend the Member for South Ribble (Mr. Borrow) mentioned other sectors, such as horticulture. He also raised the pesticides tax and the climate change levy. We understand that, if such financial measures are introduced, there will be an impact on the industry. We are talking to those in the Treasury about such impacts, which we of course take seriously.

We also recognise the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for South Ribble about small farmers and their needs. Indeed, I recently met members of the Small Farmers Association in the west country, and have invited them to see me in London to talk about some of their concerns and plans.

I was surprised that the hon. Member for South–East Cambridgeshire (Mr. Paice) accused my right hon. Friend the Minister of not delivering very much. My right hon. Friend has negotiated with the Treasury a package that is worth more than £500 million over the next three years. That is new money for the farmers and a very important boost. It involves such things as the rolling over for a second year of the hill livestock compensatory allowance, despite the outgoing Conservative Government making no provision for doing so. We have found that money, which I know is of particular importance to my hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd, West (Mr. Thomas).

We are aware of the issue on spinal cord and are concerned about it. We have negotiated the possibility of the export of whole carcases to French slaughterhouses. There are limits, from which we want to expand.

The European Commission has made available a 3.5 per cent. contribution to rural development regulation, but I must point out that that is based on historical spending. One of the reasons why we have an unfair contribution is the record of the previous Government and their lack of

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spending on rural programmes. We are paying the price of that. I am glad to say, however, that we have managed to agree with the Commission that the contribution will be reviewed. We shall have the chance to make our case for an increase and a fairer contribution toward the rural development programme.

The aid package also absorbs the cost of specified offal removal and the cattle passport scheme.

Several hon. Members, including my hon. Friend the Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Mr. Browne), mentioned agrimonetary compensation. I am pleased to announce that we have just heard that the Commission has approved a package worth £170 million, which is more than we were expecting.

Mr. Gareth Thomas: I am glad that the Minister accepts my case that rural development regulation is seriously underfunded. He has gone some way to giving assurances on that. On the second point that I raised, does he concede that it would be possible directly to shift money from price subsidies to RDR?

Mr. Morley: My hon. Friend is talking about modulation. We have consulted on modulation regarding the Agenda 2000 package to farmers and we are giving thought to the operation of modulation and how we can put extra money into the rural development package. That includes schemes such as agri-environment programmes, which are very popular with farmers, and which I know that they want increased.

In addition to that new money, considerable resources—nearly £3 billion in total—are going into the agricultural sector. About £700 million is going to upland livestock. Of course, £4 billion is being spent to meet the cost of BSE measures. I know that hon. Members do not like it, but we inherited that problem. It is a shadow cast over the whole livestock industry and is the root of many of its problems.

Nevertheless, the beef ban has been lifted. The French position is inexcusable; they are wrong, and they are isolated. The news on sewage sludge adds insult to injury, although the allegation received widespread publicity in June. I do not know why the hon. Member for South Suffolk did not notice that. In fact, the report followed from the news in June, and the Commission has been investigating the matter. The report said that the practice was not widespread but that it was illegal and unacceptable. However, as we have heard from my right hon. Friend the Minister, it does not give us a legal basis to ban meat. A trade war is not in our interests. I fail to understand why the Conservative party seems to think that the way to deal with those who are acting illegally is— *[Interruption.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Member for North Wiltshire (Mr. Gray) is shouting across the Floor. He must not do that. Mr. Gray, you seem to be very guilty of speaking while you are sitting there, on the Benches. You should not do that.

Mr. Morley: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

I fail to understand why Opposition Members think that acting illegally ourselves is the right response to the fact that France is acting illegally. I am glad that several hon. Members, such as my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Mr. Blizzard) and the hon. Member for Mid-Worcestershire (Mr. Luff), agreed with me on that, as did the right hon. Member for Skipton and Ripon (Mr. Curry), in a very sensible speech. The Conservative party's chances of being electable are limited as long as people of the quality of the right hon. Gentleman are kept off the Front Bench because of the party's extreme policies. *[Interruption.]* I am just trying to help the chances of the right hon. Member for Skipton and Ripon, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

It was also said that Conservative Members were trying to out-Sun *The Sun* in their arguments for a trade war and a beef ban. They are much more extreme than *The Sun*; whose editorial opposes a trade ban and has supported the Government position. I was also pleased to see that this week "White Van Man", which I of course read assiduously, has been replaced by a guest, "White Tractor Man", who has given his full support to the position of the Government and my right hon. Friend the Minister. It seems that Conservative Members cannot even be in tune with the popular opinion of *The Sun*, which has never been slow in putting its finger on the issue.

The pig and poultry sector is in real trouble. However, there is support. There is an extra £5 million for marketing in addition to the £1 million already made available. That is very important to that sector, which we very much wanted to help.

We are considering the issue of meat and bonemeal, which is a burden on the industry. As my hon. Friend the Member for South Derbyshire (Mr. Todd) and the hon. Members for Beverley and Holderness (Mr. Cran) and for West Tyrone (Mr. Thompson) said, labelling will certainly help. Our pig industry was obtaining a significant price premium, and marketing can help to improve those prices.

I am also very pleased about the £10 million to be spent on organics. That is very important. Members have asked about those who are in the process of conversion. We were going to deal with those hard cases even before the £10 million was announced. Our policy has been a great success.

I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Joan Ruddock) for the campaign that she has been running. It is important, and the targets are important. I believe that we shall discuss targets further because it is important to ensure that we meet the demands of the marketplace without setting an arbitrary target that is too high or too low.

It has been a good debate, in which hon. Members have advanced a strong case on behalf of those whom they represent. However, I was sorry about one thing. My right hon. Friend the Minister invited the hon. Member for South Suffolk to join him in a joint campaign. That invitation was rejected by the hon. Gentleman, who was more interested in making partisan points than in addressing the needs of British farmers. That will be recognised by farmers, as will the hypocrisy of an Opposition who demand labelling, yet voted against it when they had an opportunity to introduce it, and who criticise the French for illegal action, yet propose illegal action themselves. The farmers will notice who represents their interests.

It being Seven o'clock, the motion for the Adjournment of the House lapsed, without Question put.

Women (War Memorial)

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mrs. McGuire.]*

7 pm

Mr. John Grogan (Selby):

"Let the women of Britain come forward"

was the clarion call of wartime Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, and come forward they did, in huge numbers.

A total of 640,000 women served in the armed forces during the second world war, and 55,000 served with guns, providing critical air defence of the United Kingdom in the darkest days of the war. Thousands more served in the Land Army, ensuring that sufficient food was available to keep our forces well fed. Others flew unarmed aircraft, as replacements for our Air Force. Amy Johnson was lost on such a flight. Other women spent hours dedicated to breaking enemy codes. More women worked behind enemy lines, helping to organise resistance groups and placing themselves in great peril. Many other women worked as air raid precautions wardens, munitions workers, ambulance drivers, Women's Royal Voluntary Service volunteers and nurses.

That was a huge social change. The exigencies of war meant that women were serving their country in roles that had traditionally been the preserve of men. Perhaps, all in all, more women than men were involved in the war effort. Two of those women were Edna Storr from Selby and Mildred Veal from Clifton in York. Almost 50 years after the war, they and many of their colleagues met at a wartime reunion, and swapped stories of memorials that they had seen on holiday—in Canada, Australia and New Zealand—all honouring those countries' women who contributed to the war effort in the second world war. The latest such memorial is the one at the gates to the Arlington national cemetery in the United States, which was unveiled in 1997. As a result of those reunions, the charity called simply Memorial to the Women of World War II was born.

Mildred Veal was denied entry to the Women's Royal Air Force because of her eyesight, but joined the Army on 19 February 1941, a date that she remembers clearly to this day. She was assigned her first gunsight in early 1942 and was soon gunner-in-charge of a radar station in Plymouth before and after D-Day. Later, she went to London to help in the fight against the destructive power of the V1s and V2s.

Edna Storr volunteered at the age of 17½ and was soon an anti-aircraft gunner. She was a height-finder, initially using equipment that dated back to the first world war. She also recalls doing guard duty from dawn to dusk, armed not with a rifle but with flashlights and determination. Edna recalls that because of her youth, her parents were worried that she was out on the streets after midnight. She commented to me:

"When the alarm bell rang, you forgot that you were afraid of the dark above all. You just went to your instrument and did your job."

Half a century later, Edna was asked by my local newspaper, the *Evening Press*, why there was a need for a specific memorial to the women of the second world war. She said:

"It is to say thank you to any lady who helped to win the Second World War. This is for the mothers at home, those in the services, nurses, doctors, civil defence workers, the women who went out at night looking for fire bombs, the WRVS, the Salvation Army, the women who worked at York station, the women who took in evacuees and the teachers who went with them—everyone."

In a few days it will be Remembrance Sunday. Hon. Members will scatter the length and breadth of the land, attending services at war memorials—some grand and magnificent; some simple, understated and dignified.

I was once organiser of a football team trip to a tournament in Holland. We got the ferry and very early one Saturday morning drove through Belgium in a minibus, bad-tempered through lack of sleep and, it must be said, through my rather haphazard arrangements. At a small town called Rijel, we got out and walked around searching for a coffee as the Saturday market stalls were erected. I wandered off on my own, and suddenly it dawned on me that the French name for this town was Ypres, and that the monument in front of me was the Menin gate, listing thousands of the dead from the first world war. I went back to get the rest of the team from the market square cafés to show them my find, all the more poignant for being so unexpected.

That simple experience helps me to understand why this group of women so desperately want a memorial. They want to take their grandchildren to—or perhaps want their grandchildren in later life to just happen upon—a memorial which acknowledges their special efforts and sacrifices in fighting against fascism and for freedom.

Mr. Barry Gardiner (Brent, North): I congratulate my hon. Friend on his excellent choice of Adjournment debate. It is right to draw the attention of the House to the magnificent contribution which the women of Britain made to our victory in the second world war. Does he agree that such a memorial might not simply commemorate the achievements of the past, but inspire young women of today to take up careers in the armed services, where more than 70 per cent. of jobs are now available to women?

Mr. Grogan: My hon. Friend is right. I think that 70 per cent. of jobs in the Army are now open to women, 75 per cent. in the Royal Navy and 96 per cent. in the Royal Air Force. If we are to inspire a new generation of young women to take up the opportunity to serve their country, we must surely recognise the contribution of their grandmothers all those years ago.

Almost £60,000 has been raised towards the cost of the memorial. The obvious site is the empty plinth in Trafalgar square, unoccupied since it was laid in the 1840s. Future generations of schoolchildren and families on a happy day out in London in the heart of our capital would pause for perhaps just a moment and ponder the meaning of the memorial. The square is synonymous with the great celebration which took place at the end of the war. It has an international profile and is a symbol of Britain. It is surely the most fitting place to honour a generation of British women who broke new ground in the defence of freedom.

In September this year, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport launched a national debate on the future of the plinth and asked Sir John Mortimer to chair an advisory group to make recommendations to that end. More than 200 MPs have signed an early-day motion backing a memorial to the

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women of the second world war. Madam Speaker, to whom I am grateful for selecting this debate this evening, is an active patron of the campaign. I should also refer to the considerable role of retired Major David Robertson, who has helped to co-ordinate the campaign from Imphal barracks in Fulford, York, and that of my hon. Friend the Member for City of York (Mr. Bayley), who has joined the debate, who first raised the issue in the House and tabled the early-day motion. I should also mention *The Northern Echo* for its three-year campaign to win recognition for the Aycliffe angels, the munitions workers from county Durham, who did their bit during the war only to feel ignored for years afterwards.

It is significant that the Government have now set aside 3 March 2000 for a ceremony to honour the men and women who risked their lives on the home front. The two campaigns, to honour those who risked their lives on the home front and to honour the role of women generally, are very much related. There is plenty of competition for the empty plinth. At an *Evening Standard* lunch to discuss the subject, suggestions ranged from Charles Dickens to Noel Gallagher to David Beckham to Red Rum. More serious candidates include Her Majesty the Queen and Sylvia Pankhurst. But I rather think that both of those would instantly recognise the importance of a memorial to the women of the second world war. As a young woman, the Queen was active in the war effort, and her mother was instrumental in ensuring that the royal family remained in London throughout the war.

Although it was often not that easy or that comfortable for them to do so, the women of Britain came forward and responded to the then Prime Minister's call. As a nation, all we need to do now is say a simple, "Thank you". If we do that soon enough, we can, in many cases, say it to them in person.

7.10 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Mr. Alan Howarth): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Selby (Mr. Grogan) on securing the debate and the quality of his speech. I recognise the wide range of support that his proposal has already gained, including, as he noted, that of an impressively large number of Members of the House who put their names to an early-day motion tabled in October 1997 by the Under–Secretary of State for Social Security, my hon. Friend the Member for City of York (Mr. Bayley), who I am pleased to see on the Front Bench.

I understand that the campaign was started by the Auxiliary Territorial Service section of the Royal Artillery Association, which is based in York and holds its annual reunions there. The section had decided, earlier in 1997, to raise funds for a memorial that would commemorate all second world war service women and acknowledge the contribution of women in civilian occupations such as the fire service and the Land Army. Madam Speaker is now the patron of the charity that was established to raise funds for the proposed memorial and the Princess Royal is a vice-patron. My hon. Friend the Under–Secretary of State for Social Security is also a vice-patron.

We all owe an enormous debt of gratitude to these women. The contribution of Britain's women to its survival and eventual victory in the second world war was immeasurable. I know that from my own mother's story. A Wren who served in the blitz in Plymouth and Liverpool, she was proud of the service that she had given to her country and I am proud that she was one of millions of women whose efforts alongside our armed forces in Europe and in the far east ensured victory in 1945.

Millions of women worked in arms and aircraft factories or laboured on farms as land girls. To use the language of those days, women manned air defence batteries, which proved so vital to London's defence in the V1 and V2 terror raids of 1944-45, and most of the harbour craft in Britain's naval ports, so releasing thousands of naval personnel for duty elsewhere. As nurses, they cared for wounded civilians and military personnel, and later the physically and psychologically traumatised survivors of Hitler's concentration camps.

Victory may not have come were it not for those women at Bletchley Park who worked to break the Enigma code and of course it was left to women to raise the children of the war—my generation—who were thankfully able to grow up into a time of peace. The women brought us here and continued to support us during the austerity of the post-war period.

Many other images of the second world war are of women. Dame Vera Lynn's efforts entertained and heartened the wartime generation and during the darkest days sustained the hope that peace would come. The Queen Mother, as Queen, famously visited bomb sites and gave her uniquely wonderful support to ordinary people in those terrible circumstances. Without the contribution of Britain's women during the second world war, Britain would have starved. Our armies would have been defeated for lack of adequate supplies of arms, munitions and fighting personnel and the country would have slipped into what Churchill termed the abyss of a new dark age.

Today's citizens of Britain owe a great debt of gratitude to the women of two generations ago for the peace and liberty that we so often take for granted. Women changed the course of the war and we should remember that the war also changed their lives, which were never the same again. Their efforts in the war strengthened and affirmed their central role in society and paved the way for greater freedoms in the years to come. Today's women owe a vast debt to that generation.

Let me now speak about the vacant plinth itself, since it is arousing so much interest and is the focus of the debate. The plinth in the north-west corner of Trafalgar square has been empty since the square was laid out by Barry between 1840 and 1845. Records indicate that the two plinths in the north-east and north-west corners were originally designed by Barry to carry bronze statues, but the estimated cost of these exceeded the budget available. The statue of George IV which occupies the other plinth was originally designed to stand at Marble Arch, and then to stand in front of Buckingham palace. It was placed in its current position when plans for Marble Arch and the palace were changed.

My Department has a dual role in regard to the vacant plinth. We are currently responsible for the physical care, control and management of Trafalgar square, which is Crown land. Under the Public Statues Act 1854, the Secretary of State must give formal approval for the erection of any statue in the Metropolitan police district of London. His approval is given on the basis of the granting of planning permission and, if necessary,

listed-building consent by the local planning authority—in this instance, Westminster city council—and consultation with English Heritage.

The promoters of any proposal for the vacant plinth—such as the memorial suggested by my hon. Friend—therefore need to establish that planning permission and listed-building consent are forthcoming, and that the scheme is supported by English Heritage. They must also be able to confirm that they could fund the erection of the statue and provide for its maintenance in perpetuity.

Mr. Bob Russell (Colchester): Is the Minister inviting the organisers to go through the procedure now? If they did so, would he regard that as almost a pre-emptive strike?

Let me also point out that it is possible for similar memorials to be placed in locations around the country. Only last month, ladies in their twilight years unveiled such a memorial in my constituency.

Mr. Howarth: I am speaking of the specific circumstances of Trafalgar square. If the hon. Gentleman will bear with me, I will unfold a little more about the procedures that we anticipate as we move towards being able to make a decision on the future of the vacant plinth.

That is the Department's formal position on the possible use of the plinth. Whether or not it would be an appropriate site for the proposed memorial to the women of the second world war I cannot say, although that does not of course detract from my personal support for the campaign to erect a memorial in an appropriate place.

As the House will know, the Royal Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce is currently showing a series of contemporary works on the vacant plinth over a period of two years. The "fourth plinth project", which I find enormously exciting, is very much the brainchild of the RSA's deputy chairman, Prue Leith. The project was originally intended to find a permanent solution for the problem of the vacant plinth that would have widespread public support, but, that having proved elusive, the purpose became to stimulate public interest in contemporary British art, and to stimulate debate about the long-term future of the plinth.

Twelve eminent British artists were asked to suggest ideas for the plinth, and the three works being displayed were chosen from those. Planning permission and listed-building consent were granted by Westminster city council in March this year, and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State gave formal consent for the temporary erection of the three sculptures in April. The first sculpture to be displayed—a life-sized white marble figure of Christ by Mark Wallinger entitled "Ecce Homo"—was unveiled on 21 July. I feel a deep admiration for what has been achieved in that work. It is extremely moving and beautifully made, and stands as a striking representation of purity and vulnerability among its brasher neighbours in and around Trafalgar square. It has already become a much-discussed and greatly admired work of art.

"Ecce Homo" will be followed, in March 2000, by a challenging piece by Bill Woodrow called "Regardless of History". There is some irony in the choice of title, in the context of this debate. The final sculpture in the trilogy will be an untitled work by Rachel Whiteread, which will be installed on the plinth in the autumn of next year. Each piece will remain on the plinth for approximately eight months; then, in mid-2001, the plinth will become vacant again, unless another proposal has been agreed in the meantime to follow the "fourth plinth project".

Considerable numbers of people—their imagination having been caught by the wonderful scheme proposed by Prue Leith and the RSA—may feel that a continuing rotation of temporary works on the plinth would be preferable to a single, permanent solution. The outcome of the RSA's project, which I shall await with interest, should show whether that approach has gained public support.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Selby has reminded the House, on 9 April 1999, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State announced that, at his request, Sir John Mortimer had agreed to chair a small advisory group to be set up to consider the long-term future of the vacant plinth. Sir John's group is seeking proposals and submissions from the public and interested organisations on a fitting permanent solution to the question of how the vacant plinth should be used.

The group is taking evidence and soliciting opinions from many people who are eminent in the fields of both traditional and contemporary public art. In early summer 2000, the group will make its recommendations to the Secretary of State. The views of the public will be widely sought and considered before any final decisions are taken.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State believes that that is the best way to try to find a long-term solution for the future of the vacant plinth. Such a solution might, of course, be to continue rotating different sculptures on the plinth, but on a more formal basis. The solution might be the proposal made today by my hon. Friend the Member for Selby, or it might be one of many other proposals that have been made in the consultation process. The House will understand that we cannot prejudge.

The inaugural meeting of Sir John's group was held on 29 June, and my right hon. Friend met the members of the group who were able to attend. The group is now meeting regularly, on a monthly basis.

The full membership of the advisory group consists of Sir John Mortimer, chairman; Professor Peter Clarke, professor of modern history at Cambridge university; Richard Cork, chief art critic at *The Times*; Bob Crowley, award-winning stage designer for the Royal Shakespeare Company and the national theatre; Councillor Bob Harris, chair of the arts and leisure committee of the Association of Local Government and deputy leader of Greenwich borough council; Neil MacGregor, director of the national gallery; Elsie Owusu, London-based architect and principal of Elsie Owusu Associates; and Baroness Rendell, the crime novelist Ruth Rendell. It is a very distinguished group, and the House can be confident that they will give fair and wise consideration to the matter that we have put before them.

I know that details of the campaign for a memorial to the women of the second world war have been sent to Sir John Mortimer, and that Madam Speaker, as patron of the campaign, has written to him commending the use of the vacant plinth in Trafalgar square for that purpose. Sir John has replied to Madam Speaker, inviting a representative on behalf of the women of the second world war to give evidence to his group. The

[Mr. Howarth]

Under-Secretary of State for Social Security, my hon. Friend the Member for City of York (Mr. Bayley) has also written to Sir John, to reinforce the case.

I assure my hon. Friend the Member for Selby that Sir John's advisory group will give the proposal the full and serious consideration that it merits, taking into account the range and weight of support that it has already achieved.

Many other suggestions have been received from the public and numerous organisations about what should go on the plinth, and Sir John's advisory group will need to take all those into account. The group is looking for the best solution for the plinth in that hugely important civic location, and may feel that it should not be a war memorial. There are other sites in central London where such a memorial might be placed: the vacant plinth in Trafalgar Square may not necessarily the best place for it. I assure my hon. Friend, however, that the proposal will be given fair consideration.

Mr. Peter Bottomley (Worthing, West): The debate has two parts: the first deals with whether there should be a memorial; and the second deals with where such a memorial should go. If by chance Trafalgar square is not the best place for the memorial, will the Government consider establishing a team led by Ministers to determine a better alternative?

Mr. Howarth: The hon. Gentleman has made a very constructive and helpful suggestion, which I shall certainly ask my hon. Friend the Secretary of State to consider.

I shall conclude by reminding the House of the commitment that was made in the White Paper on London Government, "A Mayor and Assembly for London", published in May 1998, to transfer management responsibility for Trafalgar square to the new Greater London Authority. The square will remain Crown land, but day-to-day responsibility for its care, management and use will, subject to the passage of the legislation now before Parliament, pass to the new mayor of London. Clauses to effect that transfer of responsibility have been included in the Greater London Authority Bill.

Subject to the agreement of Parliament, the mayor should take over responsibility for Trafalgar square in July 2000, or soon after. I therefore anticipate that it will ultimately be for the mayor to decide what, if anything, goes on the vacant plinth once the RSA's project has reached its conclusion and Sir John's advisory group have made their recommendations. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State will, however, have a continuing involvement in decisions on what will occupy the vacant plinth by virtue of his responsibility to give final approval under the Public Statues Act 1854, which will not be extinguished by the Greater London Authority Bill.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Selby for putting forward an important case with such dignity, humour and eloquence.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at twenty-six minutes past Seven o'clock.

House of Commons

Friday 29 October 1999

The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Broadcasting

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Pope.]*

9.33 am

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Mr. Chris Smith): Broadcasting is close to the hearts of many Members on both sides of the House because it is of enormous importance to our constituents. I am pleased to initiate this debate as broadcasting reaches yet another important milestone, perhaps the most significant for society in the longer term.

The debate is particularly timely. One year on from the start of digital satellite and digital terrestrial services, with cable operators beginning to roll out their digital services, and just two weeks since new interactive services began, the digital revolution could be said fully to have arrived. We are beginning to see the strengths of the new technology not only in providing more choice and diversity of entertainment for viewers, but in adding to traditional broadcast services new interactive services, connections to the internet and, more generally, an easy introduction to other forms of electronic communication, which Government and industry are increasingly adopting to conduct business. The latest figures show that 1.8 million people have signed up to digital television in this country and it is growing daily.

Mr. Gerald Kaufman (Manchester, Gorton): Will my right hon. Friend confirm that, when he says 1.8 million people have signed up to digital television, that means that they have signed contracts with commercial providers of digital television?

Mr. Smith: That is correct. Those people have signed contracts either with ONdigital, or with digital satellite through Sky. Over the past couple of weeks, they may have signed up for digital cable services as well.

In the excitement that has been generated by the digital visions of the broadcasting industry, we must not lose sight of the ordinary viewer's needs and of the importance of ensuring that all sections of society have access to the new services. Several issues need to be resolved, and new ways forward need to be debated to ensure that we get it right. I intend to provide as clear a policy and legislative framework as possible, which will enable broadcasters to plan with confidence and, at the same time, ensure that consumers' best interests are furthered and protected. Before we take final decisions, for example, on the Davies report on the future funding of the BBC, it is important for us all to listen to what Members on both sides of the House, the Select Committee on Culture, Media and Sport, which is so ably chaired by my right hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton (Mr. Kaufman), and the world outside have to say.

I raised several important issues when I addressed last month's Royal Television Society conference in Cambridge. I hope that hon. Members will use the opportunity to debate fully many of the key issues and their other concerns.

At the conference, my aim was to look forward and to promote the future of digital broadcasting, but, at the same time, to reassure the public about the safeguards that should be put in place. I wanted to set out the Government's thinking on the time scale of the switch-over from analogue to digital broadcasting as soon as possible because it is a key issue for broadcasters and for the Government, and of immediate concern to viewers.

Viewers need to be fully informed of the advantages and opportunities of the new technology. Those who want to continue simply to receive free-to-air channels need to be effectively protected. I have set two crucial tests that must be met before the analogue signal is fully switched to digital: a test of availability and a test of affordability.

We need to ensure that, at the very least, everyone who currently receives free-to-air analogue channels—99.4 per cent. of the United Kingdom population—is able to switch over and to continue to do so digitally. The digital signal must be receivable by as many people as currently receive the analogue signal.

Mr. Norman Baker (Lewes): I am grateful for that point, but does the Secretary of State accept that the 99.4 per cent. mark that he has set means that 150,000 households will not be able to receive digital television? Should not the opportunity of digital television be taken to ensure that households that cannot receive analogue television are able to receive digital television?

Mr. Smith: I sympathise with the hon. Gentleman's point. He will have noticed the crucial phrase "at the very least". I hope that we can aim for absolutely universal coverage, which would, of course, be better than is achieved under the analogue system. Achieving that level of coverage will not be easy. Over the next two years, one of the main tasks will be to establish the best technological means for doing so. It may not be the case that all the service is delivered to all people by digital terrestrial means. We may need to use other technical means to reach the entire population.

I welcome the work being undertaken by the Radiocommunications Agency, and the establishment by the Independent Television Commission, the BBC, NTL and Crown Castle Transmissions of an advisory board to develop further the frequency plan for digital terrestrial television and the use of cable, satellite and new transmission technologies.

Consumers must not face unacceptable costs when switching to digital services. "Affordable" must mean that prices are within the range of people on low and fixed incomes, including pensioners. It is also essential that those who want to watch only the free-to-air channels should be able to do so without heavy costs. The level of take-up of digital equipment will be a key measure of progress. I want to ensure that at least 95 per cent. of consumers have achieved access to digital before the switch-over.

[Mr. Smith]

We also need to ensure that it is easy for consumers to switch between different platforms and providers. The three regulators—the ITC, Oftel and the Office of Fair Trading—are taking forward my request that they advise the Government on options for ensuring that the digital television market does not develop in a way that inhibits competition or sets unnecessary barriers to access to new services. The aim has to be that the viewer can make a ready and easy choice between terrestrial, satellite and cable, and does not have to invest in a tower block of set-top boxes to do so. We want to encourage the development of affordable equipment that facilitates open access as far as possible.

The full switch-over to digital transmission will not happen until the two key tests of affordability and availability are met. That could start to happen as early as 2006 and could be completed by 2010. With the help of the industry, that time scale can be achieved. However, I emphasise that the tests, not the target dates, are paramount. We shall need to make regular checks to measure progress against the two key tests and to check our assumptions against what is happening in the marketplace. I intend to do that through a series of two-yearly reviews, beginning with a formal consultation of the BBC, the ITC, the industry and consumer groups before the end of 2001. The reviews will enable us to take any necessary action to accelerate take-up levels.

It is particularly important to have an independent view from consumers. I am in the process of setting up a viewers' panel, which will assess the evidence provided by industry, broadcasters and the Government at each review stage and will report on the matters that are causing most concern to the public. My intention is that representatives of consumer organisations and pensioners will feed their views directly through the panel.

For switch-over to happen, we need the confidence and support of consumers. It is clear from speaking to consumer organisations and constituents, and from letters that we have received from hon. Members and from the public, that there is considerable confusion among viewers about what digital means and about what services and equipment are available to them. No one is explaining what digital television as a whole has to offer. There is robust commercial competition between companies offering different digital packages, but no one is explaining to the public what digital means. I have invited the major broadcasters, manufacturers and retailers to meet me on 11 November to discuss ways of giving consumers clear, general messages about what digital has to offer, reassuring us about the timetable for switch-over and giving information about the tests that will have to be met.

Mr. Peter Ainsworth (East Surrey): I welcome what the right hon. Gentleman has said about getting together with the industry and other interested parties. There is a need to inform the public about what is available.

The 95 per cent. threshold is potentially a crude measurement. Many households have more than one television set. Does the threshold mean that 95 per cent. of households should have digital television? If so, what happens to all the television sets that are not accessing digital technology? Will teenagers across the country find that their bedroom television suddenly goes blank?

Mr. Smith: We do not want to deprive teenagers around the country of access to television in their bedroom. During the next seven to 10 years, the price of set-top boxes and integrated television sets will undoubtedly tumble. That always happens with the development of such technology. A second-hand market in set-top boxes will also develop as people purchase integrated sets and their old sets begin to wear out. The NERA report last year showed that the turnover time for an average television set is about seven years. As people buy integrated sets, they will hand on their set-top boxes to children's bedroom televisions.

The threshold is a relatively crude measurement. It cannot take account of every second or third set that people have. However, it is a useful broad measure of our progress on the tests of availability and affordability, and it has been broadly welcomed following the Royal Television Society speech.

Mr. Baker: I thank the Secretary of State for giving way again. I should like to push him on the 95 per cent. figure, which seems to be set a little low. It will mean that 1.2 million households will have their televisions rendered obsolete overnight. Those who have not invested in digital television may well be the poorer members of society. What does the Secretary of State have to say about those who do not have the means to invest in a new television and will have their old set rendered obsolete?

Mr. Smith: We shall have a more precise time scale well in advance of switch-over and as we approach that moment, it will be in the interests of the television broadcasting industry to ensure that the final 5 per cent. are helped directly to make the switch-over. We do not want a substantial segment of the population to be deprived of access to television.

It is important that all sections of society should have access to the current free-to-air services. In particular, people with disabilities could benefit from the new and sophisticated services that digital television offers. There is too often an assumption that digital television is of interest only to those who want a greater choice of programmes. It brings many other advantages. For example, it can ensure better signing services for deaf people. Through the links with interactivity, it can enable the development of home delivery services for housebound people. It can help to provide community information and welfare advice for people who face disadvantage and difficulty.

I want to encourage viewers to take up and enjoy new additional services, including basic internet access, which will also become possible with the combination of digital television and telephony. Beyond that, we want digital television services to achieve much more. We want to broaden access to our rich and varied cultural heritage, to the arts and to sporting events. We want everyone to enjoy opportunities to further their education. Television, with its almost universal access, is an excellent way to begin to achieve those aims, and digital technology opens up the prospect of dedicated community education and other learning channels, backed up with interactive services.

Nor should we lose sight of the role of radio services in the digital era. Radio was the first medium to enter the digital arena. The BBC has broadcast digital radio services since 1995 and now has a reach extending over 60 per cent. of the United Kingdom. The BBC offers Radio 1, Radio 2, Radio 3, Radio 4 and Radio 5 Live, and is developing a range of new services. They are soon to be joined by the first national commercial radio service, Digital 1 which is due to launch in November, followed soon by the first local and commercial digital radio services.

Mr. Desmond Swayne (New Forest, West): Although these are exciting developments, does the Minister accept that they do not add greatly to the difference in output of the existing radio network? There is an opportunity to provide greater variety, including religious output. Is it right that religious output should be excluded from this increase in choice?

Mr. Smith: The hon. Gentleman will know that the Broadcasting Act 1990 disqualifies groups whose objectives are wholly or mainly of a religious nature from holding a terrestrial national radio licence issued by the Radio Authority. That disqualification does not extend to local, satellite or cable radio licences where the authority is permitted to license religious bodies, subject of course to compliance with its guidelines. There are two such satellite licences—UCB Europe and Cross Rhythms—and Premier Radio has a terrestrial radio licence in London. There has been considerable pressure from United Christian Broadcasters and others to change the system. My hon. Friend the Minister for Tourism, Film and Broadcasting has taken a very keen interest in these matters and has had detailed meetings with UCB to see whether progress can be made. It is difficult to make progress at present because we are still at a relatively early stage in the development of digital radio, but we want to continue our close dialogue with UCB and others about the possibilities that may arise. My hon. Friend may have more to say about that later.

Digital radio can offer an increased number of programmes and, importantly, the potential to deliver a range of data services via the radio. I recognise the investment and work that the industry will have to put in to develop and promote digital radio. I suspect that it will be a much slower process than the development of digital television, but I am sure that, over time, consumers will embrace this new technology.

I am sure, however, that a major concern to consumers, in addition to the new services that will be available to them, will be whether they will continue to enjoy high-quality services. We must remember that people are not interested in watching delivery platforms; they want to watch programmes. Programmes are important and ultimately will drive any particular change.

All broadcasters will need to produce quality digital content to attract customers and there is a strong role for public service broadcasters—particularly the BBC, ITV, and Channels 4, 5 and S4C—in providing a diversity of viewpoints and acting as a quality benchmark.

The BBC has a particular duty in this respect. The primary message that the House should send the BBC is one that I am sure all right hon. and hon. Members will endorse. It is that the future role of the BBC, which will be even more important in the multi-channel age, will be to provide a quality benchmark against which all other broadcasting has to be measured. The BBC should be chasing quality rather than ratings.

In that respect, I disagree passionately with the speech that Richard Eyre from ITV made in his McTaggart lecture earlier this year. He spoke about the death of public broadcasting and tried to redefine public service broadcasting as public interest broadcasting. In particular, he said that, nowadays, the BBC should not be in the business of aiming just a little above people's heads—just beyond their immediate horizons, challenging them to reach up to something which they had not hitherto known was of interest to them. I strongly disagree. I believe—not for 100 per cent. of its programming, but for some of what it does—that the BBC should seek to stretch people and challenge them to do something that is beyond their immediate horizons; I very much hope that it will continue to do that.

Let me make one point about content, which relates to the ITV environment since the changed timing of the "News at Ten". As the House will know, when the proposal was made, I expressed a personal view—it is not a matter on which the Government could or should take a view—that I was disturbed by the potential consequences of the move. The change was approved by the Independent Television Commission, but it is worth noting that approval was given on several strong conditions. First, there should be no diminution in the funding or the range and quality of national and international news on ITV; secondly, ITV would schedule a regular headline service in the nearest break to 10 pm on weekday evenings; thirdly, the commission expected ITV's commitment to public service values to be undiminished and for the more diverse range of programmes proposed between 9 pm to 11 pm actually to be delivered; and fourthly, ITV would schedule an agreed quantity of 30-minute slots for high-quality regional programmes in or just outside peak time on weekdays throughout the year. Those were the conditions that the ITC set in agreeing to the shift of "News at Ten". It indicated that it would review the changes after 12 months.

The chairman of the commission recently expressed concern at the decline in viewing and ratings figures for ITV regional programmes and made it clear to ITV that the trend needed to be reversed before the formal review next spring. I very much hope that, when the ITC reviews the position at ITV since the shift of "News at Ten", it will look carefully at the commitments that were given and the conditions that were laid down at the time, and will be prepared to be robust about any analysis of whether those conditions and commitments are being met.

Protecting quality was one reason why I asked the independent review panel, chaired by Gavyn Davies, to focus specifically on ways in which the BBC's role could be enhanced. The panel put a great deal of time and effort into producing a measured and thoughtful basis for public consultation. I am grateful to Gavyn Davies and his committee for the work and the imagination that they put into the report, which was published at the start of August. The closing date for consultation is Monday, and we have received more than 1,000 responses, with more coming in as I speak.

[Mr. Smith]

I do not need to tell hon. Members how important the issues covered in the report are for the general public, as many of those responses came via constituency Members of Parliament. I have indicated that we aim to reach decisions on the Davies recommendations around the end of the year when we have had an opportunity to consider all the responses fully. Therefore, it is not appropriate for me to give a Government view today. Our minds are genuinely open, and I want to take account of what the industry, the Select Committee and hon. Members today—as well as the general public—have to say.

One of the issues that needs the most careful consideration is the extent to which the BBC can help itself through efficiency savings, improved licence fee collection, more effective commercial exploitation of its assets and a transfer of resources out of bureaucracy and into programme-making. This is why I have adopted one of the recommendations of the Davies committee; I will shortly announce the appointment of consultants to carry out a rigorous and wide-ranging study of the BBC's financial projections, which will enable us to reach a view on the appropriate level of funding for the BBC up to 2006.

The consultants will, therefore, review the BBC's evidence to the Davies panel, taking account of the latest information available, the panel's recommendations relating to BBC funding and those areas that the panel was unable to assess in detail. The consultants will also review the BBC's assessment of the costs of its future service plans over and above maintaining existing services. I will publish a summary of the consultants' findings when I announce the Government's decision on the Davies recommendations.

I felt that it was extremely important for us to have some objective, non-partisan analysis of the detailed figures of the BBC before reaching final conclusions on the Davies report. The work of the Davies panel, the public consultation and the follow-up consultancy exercise are vital to the UK broadcasting ecology of which we are all so proud.

Because the profusion of the multi-channel digital future will not render public service broadcasting unnecessary, there may be reasons for reaffirming—and, to some extent, reinventing—public service broadcasting, but it will remain highly relevant. As our principal public service broadcaster, the BBC should continue to set the benchmark for the industry as a whole. We do not want the main result of digital abundance to be a trimming of expenditure and quality. We do not want more to mean worse.

There must still be a place for the new, the unexpected and the original, and for the unashamedly educational. Viewers expect to be able to choose difficult, but rewarding, new and stimulating programming from time to time, as well as the tried and tested. Public service broadcasters will have an important role to play in the digital future, as trusted guides and defenders of the principle of universality. The potential for social exclusion is increased by technological advances, and we will look to our public service broadcasters to counter that effect. If public service broadcasters are to continue to thrive, they must be seen to adhere to their public service remits, and to demonstrate their accountability to the public and to democratic bodies.

In future, public service broadcasting must be something distinctive and special, with correspondingly distinct regulatory arrangements, rather than the regulated norm from which everything else deviates. That, in turn, means that public service broadcasters need to rise to the challenge of restating their purpose and demonstrating to the public that the purpose is being met.

As the number of channels increases and new technologies offer new features, such as time-shifted viewing and internet access, our system of regulation will need to evolve. Although there will always be different views about difficult cases, overall, this system has been very effective so far in maintaining standards and providing a reasonable level of consumer protection. The watershed, in particular, is widely recognised and accepted by viewers.

Changes in technology and the increase in channels will make it more difficult and, arguably, inappropriate to apply effective regulation in the same detailed way. We want to strike a balance between responding to these changes and facilitating the development of the industry on the one hand, and remaining true to the principle of providing viewers with adequate protection on the other.

We are, therefore, working with the ITC to examine how regulation in the short term can be simplified and applied more lightly. We are concerned that viewers should know clearly when they are watching broadcasts meeting familiar standards, and when they are in a new environment, as they might be when accessing the internet through interactive services.

Viewers will need new skills to navigate the new media world safely. It will be increasingly important to develop critical viewing skills for the general viewer, for parents and teachers responsible for children, and for children and young people themselves to supplement the regulatory system as it evolves. To this end, my hon. Friend the Minister for Tourism, Film and Broadcasting—together with the Under-Secretary of State for Education and Employment, my hon. Friend the Member for North Swindon (Mr. Wills)—chaired a seminar earlier this week of senior figures in broadcasting, education theory and parenting support to examine the issues and the options for action.

The research work of the Broadcasting Standards Commission will be important in providing an insight into viewers' developing attitudes. Most commentators expect that the main terrestrial channels will continue to provide the majority of television watching for some time to come. However, we need to be looking ahead to the new era and ensuring that our regulatory and legislative framework is sufficiently future-proof.

Digital broadcasting has the potential to bring great benefits to viewers of televised sport. Additional services will mean that viewers will have better coverage of more sports events on more channels. However, the Government will ensure that viewers who cannot afford—or do not want—subscription services are not excluded from access to nationally important sporting occasions.

Last year, I extended the list of events for which live and secondary coverage on free-to-air channels is protected, adding several events for the first time. I shall continue to monitor the scope of the list as digital services develop further.

The UK leads the world in digital transmission technology. The Government's aim is to have a regulatory environment that will enable and encourage the television

and radio broadcasting industry to flourish. However, content will be the king in the digital future. I want to ensure that programme makers are best placed to identify and take advantage of all the opportunities this will bring.

The export of programmes and programme formats can benefit both the industry and viewers by generating funds for investment in the domestic market. The UK is already very successful at selling programmes overseas, but our industry can do better and, to this end, I appointed an inquiry earlier this year to make recommendations on measures to support export efforts. We shall shortly publish the inquiry's sensible and realistic proposals for the industry and for Government action.

It is equally important that we develop the talent and have the trained work force to maximise the opportunities offered by digital. The success of the industry in an increasingly converged market will rely heavily on the skills and talents of the work force. That is why my Department, together with Skillset, has established a training group of key industry players under Roger Laughton's leadership. The group, which met for the first time last month, is already setting about the task of identifying current and future skills needs and considering what needs to be done to ensure that the skills are there to allow the UK to compete effectively in the world media market.

We have challenged the industry to make digital television a success, but the Government have a clear role here in driving forward the change. I have taken the view shared by the industry that an evolutionary approach to broadcasting regulation is right and broadly sustainable for the time being. However, it is clear to me that the time for a more fundamental assessment of broadcasting legislation is coming and I anticipate that we may be able to include major broadcasting legislation early in the next Parliament.

The main issues for such legislation might be the role of the regulators, the role of the public service broadcasters and media ownership. I want to proceed with that work without delay. I am setting up a dedicated unit within my Department, and we will announce its programme of work and the consultation process in relation to these issues shortly.

This is a time of great expansion in the broadcasting industry. The development of digital technology will need a clear and careful steer from both Government and Parliament to ensure the continued success of the industry and to ensure that the interests of all consumers are protected. My announcement of a switch-over date and the prospect of new legislation is only a beginning, but I believe that it is a positive one on which to build a successful UK broadcasting policy.

10.12 am

Mr. Peter Ainsworth (East Surrey): I offer the apologies of my hon. Friend the Member for West Suffolk (Mr. Spring), who has donned his tourism industry hat and is visiting a coastal resort. I welcome my hon. Friend the Member for Mid-Dorset and North Poole (Mr. Fraser) to the Front Bench; he will wind up the debate for the Opposition.

I welcome this opportunity to discuss the future of broadcasting. It is a bit of a pity that the Government have tucked this debate away on a quiet Friday at half term, in a week of thin business. Broadcasting deserves better; it is a dynamic, growing, highly skilled industry, a powerhouse of new jobs that contributes an increasing amount to our gross domestic product, and something that we do extremely well. Britain is at the forefront of exploiting many of the new technologies. Our broadcasting industry is a showcase for our creative talent: our writers, actors, producers, directors and presenters. We can be justly proud of their work.

Like so much else that is sponsored by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, broadcasting is of immense importance to our quality of life and a powerful influence on society. People feel passionately about it. A headline in today's *Financial Times*—it will probably make it into the tabloids tomorrow—informs us of BSkyB's £1 billion offer for the Premiership rights. One need look no further than that for an assessment of the centrality of broadcasting issues to many people's lives.

The Secretary of State touched on the question of sporting rights. Conservative Members recognise that the rights in any sport are the property of the sporting body. Substantial sums have flowed into sport from the sale of television rights in recent years. It is profoundly important that a significant part of that money should be used to support the grass roots of sport, as otherwise sport will suffer in the long run.

As well as reflecting our society, broadcasting helps to shape our attitude towards ourselves, our neighbours and the world. It is the most powerful and pervasive medium ever invented. It can educate and inform like no other medium. It can also misinform like no other medium. It can create celebrities. It can even, it has been alleged, create Prime Ministers. Clearly, it is an important industry. It is so important that Governments have historically taken a very close interest in its affairs.

Back in 1966, I believe, the right hon. Member for Chesterfield (Mr. Benn), no less, famously remarked that broadcasting was too important to be left to the broadcasters. For once, he was in step with mainstream opinion. Hence, in the intervening years, there have been numerous Broadcasting Bills. In the 1980s, they took on a deregulatory flavour and we witnessed the establishment of Channel 4; the advent of cable; the liberalisation of communications; the arrival of satellite television; the dawn of local and national commercial radio; and later, the creation of Channel 5.

The most recent Broadcasting Bill heralded the beginning of the digital age, opening the door to new and, for many people, baffling and slightly scary opportunities: a world of 200 television channels, interactivity, media convergence and technical jargon definitely understood by the few and not the many—and, frankly, I suspect, not understood by many of the few either. It is easy to get lost in the jargon, and many have fallen victim to the temptation to get lost in messianic predictions of precisely how technology will change our lives.

I commend the Government on taking a relatively cautious, pragmatic and evolutionary view of the impact of the multi-media age. Technology is moving so quickly that the one thing of which we can be certain is that almost every prediction that we make today will prove wrong tomorrow. Most people would have predicted a few years ago that we would all be watching more television at the end of the 20th century, but it turns out that we are watching less.

[Mr. Peter Ainsworth]

I want to focus on what is possible—in the sense of being achievable—not on what is probable, and therefore probably wrong. I am pleased that the Secretary of State has recognised the need for a radical overhaul of the way that we regulate the media. It is always a matter for great anxiety for Opposition spokesmen when they find that the Secretary of State is doing something sensible. It does not happen very often but I believe that, when it does, it should be recognised.

The Government are right to approach the future of regulation in consultative mode, but I do not understand why the Secretary of State has given the task of developing the new regulatory agenda to the Independent Television Commission. The ITC's remit runs only to the independent commercial sector and no review of broadcasting regulation can hope to be comprehensive if it fails to take the position of the BBC fully into account.

Mr. Chris Smith: I fear that the hon. Gentleman may be under a misapprehension. The immediate-term review, considering what can be done to ease the regulatory burden within the present legislative environment, is indeed being led by the ITC; but the medium-term exercise of preparing major legislation for two or three years' time will be led by the Government ourselves, taking into account the views not only of the ITC but of a wide range of other sources.

Mr. Ainsworth: I am grateful for that clarification, because there is some misunderstanding about that in the industry and some have been baffled by the ITC's role, so it is good to have the true position on the record. If the ITC is given too strong a role—let us not forget that it is part of the regime that the Secretary of State intends to overhaul—the right hon. Gentleman's approach to reforming regulation will be in danger of taking on a rather partial view, without a sufficiently dispassionate overview.

A good starting point would be to aim to make the next Broadcasting Bill the last for a considerable time. As the purpose of successive Broadcasting Acts has been to deregulate, that would mean taking deregulation as far as it will go. Subject to normal competition policy, we should let the market decide the future shape of the commercial broadcasting industry. More than 30 years after the young Technology Minister, the right hon. Member for Chesterfield, made his remark about the importance of broadcasting, the time has come to say that broadcasting is too important to be left to politicians.

There is an important caveat. If the future lies, as many believe that it should, in a single regulatory authority, that authority will need two arms—one with a light touch, encouraging competition and innovation, and the other dealing with content. The time for detailed minute-by-minute analysis of radio and television schedules is probably over, but the public rightly continue to expect protection from degrading, gratuitously obscene and violent material.

That is especially true and important with regard to children. Recent findings by the Broadcasting Standards Commission suggest that there is growing public concern about violence on television, and about the increasingly cynical approach to portrayals of explicit sexual activity, which are seen as simply a ploy to attract ratings.

Whatever new regulatory regime emerges, there will be a continuing need to ensure that the young and vulnerable are protected. The Opposition believe that breaches of acceptable broadcasting standards should be the subject of tough penalties.

Mr. Swayne: That process must be open to political lobbying; my hon. Friend will be aware that it is to their Members of Parliament that people write and complain. It would be a bit weak if we had to reply, "Actually, we have no leverage over those standards."

Mr. Ainsworth: My hon. Friend makes a good point, which will be familiar to everyone in the Chamber—and nobody is better equipped than he to conduct political lobbying.

We also believe in maintaining the present watershed, with rigorous enforcement. We must, however, also recognise that parents have a duty to regulate what their children watch, and that adults are the prime regulators of their own viewing habits; every television has an off button.

I see no reason why all broadcasters should not be subject to the same degree of authority. That is by no means to say that they should be required to produce the same type of programming, but merely to say that they should be subject to the same scrutiny, accountability and sanctions. At the earliest opportunity, the BBC's programme content should be brought under independent and impartial regulation.

The debate is about the future of broadcasting, not about the future of the BBC. However, as the BBC is so important within the United Kingdom broadcasting universe, the two are closely bound together. I doubt whether anybody in the Chamber does not admire the BBC. Since its inception, it has played a pivotal role in the life of the nation, providing a benchmark of quality to which all other broadcasters aspire. I want that to continue, and I agree with the Secretary of State that, in future, that role is likely to grow in importance.

However, I am not persuaded that the BBC's demands for extra funding are justified. The starting point of any inquiry into its funding should be the question: what is the BBC for? The remit handed to the Davies panel by the Secretary of State did not permit it to ask that question, and the result is a report that, although well considered, is fundamentally flawed. There is a need for the BBC to redefine its mission as a public service broadcaster in the light of a radically changed media environment. Only when that has been done can funding issues be properly addressed.

We set out our views on the Davies issues in some detail in our submission to the panel last summer, and I shall not rehearse them all today. However, I welcome the fact that, on several important issues, the panel reached the same conclusions as the Conservative party. For example, there is the introduction of private capital into BBC Worldwide, and the sale of the bulk of BBC resources. There is also the emphasis on greater accountability, financial transparency and the reduction of waste. There is a proposal to improve the discount for blind people, and the idea of advertising sponsorship or subscription on the BBC's public services is rejected.

We are however disappointed that the panel did little to challenge the BBC's underlying assumption that it requires extra funding. It has been interesting to hear

today that the Secretary of State appears to share some of our scepticism. I welcome the fact that he is now appointing consultants to look into the BBC's books, but I cannot help observing that it would have been helpful if he had done that before establishing the Davies committee in the first place.

Let us have a quick look at the BBC's finances. Under the arrangements established in 1996, the corporation has received the benefit of licence fee increases above the rate of inflation. The sale of the home service transmitters raised £244 million. Incidentally, that sale was supposed to fund the BBC's entry into digital broadcasting, so it is disappointing that, only three years later, it has come back to ask for more money for precisely the same purpose.

Since 1996, the commercial businesses under BBC Worldwide have brought in about £210 million in extra revenue. Efficiency savings have realised £267 million for programmes over the past three years. In total, the increase in resources between 1996 and 1999 has been about £1 billion, which is equal to half the corporation's annual income from the licence fee, and considerably more than the £750 million that it costs to run BBC1.

It should also be noted that the BBC enjoys privileged free access to the spectrum. According to figures published by the Radio Authority and the ITC, national commercial radio pays £9 million a year and terrestrial television pays £345 million a year to the Exchequer for the use of the spectrum; the BBC pays nothing. Arguably, that represents a further financial benefit.

In future, although the licence fee is set to increase by less than the rate of inflation, current projections of household growth suggest that the BBC can still budget for a rise in licence fee income in real terms over the next 10 years. In addition, the contribution from the commercial activities is forecast to quadruple over the next six years.

In other words, it is not obvious to me that the BBC is short of money. I am not at all convinced, either, that the scope for efficiency savings has been exhausted. The BBC's corporate centre still costs the licence fee payer £60 million a year. A much greater effort needs to be made to eliminate waste; the BBC should be looking for ways of reducing rather than increasing the licence fee.

The Opposition do not accept the panel's arguments in favour of a digital licence supplement, although we are not surprised—presumably, the Secretary of State is not surprised either—that a panel chaired by Gavyn Davies, who had the idea of the licence supplement in the first place, should recommend it. We note the ingenuity with which the panel has finessed this proposal, but we still believe that a digital licence tax would be wrong in principle and in practice. It would represent a tax on new technology and innovation and it would impede the take-up of digital services, even against a distant background of analogue switch-off. We also believe that the new tax would bear most heavily on families on low incomes.

We note that, for its assessment of the impact of a digital licence fee, the panel relied for its principal evidence on a report commissioned by the BBC. We regret that the panel did not seek evidence from more independent sources. The Secretary of State will no doubt be aware of a report, featured in today's newspapers, by the economic consultants, NERA. In its view, the digital tax, as proposed by Gavyn Davies, could delay the take-up of digital by between two and four years.

The panel's proposal to sell a 49 per cent. stake in BBC Worldwide represents an uneasy halfway house that is unlikely to satisfy industry concerns about fair trading or to raise a sufficiently attractive capital sum. We believe that a better long-term solution for the licence fee payer, for BBC Worldwide itself and for the industry as a whole, would be to sell the commercial operations outright. We regret that the panel did not investigate more thoroughly whether new services, such as News 24 and BBC Choice—which have cost the licence fee payer more than £100 million in the past two years—are properly justified under the public service banner, especially bearing in mind the charter commitment to universal access.

The question of licence fee concessions has attracted much interest. Everybody agrees that the present arrangements for concessions are arbitrary, complex and, in many ways, unfair. The problem is that nobody can agree on how to make them better. Disappointingly, the Davies committee was evasive on the question of concessions for pensioners. The panel was not much help to the Secretary of State, who will now have to decide between three options. He could leave the present unsatisfactory arrangements in place, and put the issue in a drawer marked "too hard"; he could irritate the BBC by requiring it to deliver a more generous arrangement; or he could try to persuade his colleagues in the Treasury that the attractions of a pre-election bribe outweigh the last election pledge to reduce the welfare budget. The Government's control of the welfare budget has already been shot to pieces, so he may well choose the latter option. It is not necessary to do so.

We believe that there is scope for a fairer and more generous concession scheme, but the question of paying for increased concessions cannot be divorced from the overall context of the need to reduce unnecessary expenditure by the BBC and to reduce waste.

Dr. George Turner (North-West Norfolk): The hon. Gentleman has made much of the issue of financing for the BBC and few people would not wish to encourage efficiency and cutting bureaucracy. The issue is what the finance is for, and I hope that he will explain the Opposition's view of the BBC's role in the future. Only if we know that can we judge its financial requirements.

Mr. Ainsworth: The role of the BBC in the immediate future is to define what it means by public service broadcasting in the light of the radically changed media environment in which it now operates. It was set up in the 1920s as a monopoly provider of radio services and it had the great Reithian vision of being all things to all people. It managed to keep that vision intact through all the changes of the latter part of the 20th century and did so very well. However, the BBC needs to come to terms with the fact that we now live in an age of explosive choice. It can no longer continue to apply the principles that were right for a monopoly provider of radio services to an age in which consumer choice has moved into a completely new orbit and competition is rife and varied. The Secretary of State and the BBC will need to work out carefully the meaning of public service broadcasting in the multi-media age.

Once the BBC has done that, I have no doubt that the principal justification of the BBC is programmes. It is programmes that will underpin the licence fee. However,

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if it continues to chase ratings and to compete overtly with the commercial sector in a way that the commercial sector finds offensive, the BBC runs the risk of forfeiting the justification for the licence fee. Instead of "Walking with Dinosaurs", it will be sleeping with the plesiosaurs.

Dr. Turner: I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman's courtesy in giving way again. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and the Government face the issue of funding next spring. What is the view of the Opposition on what should be funded? What role does the hon. Gentleman envisage for the BBC in the digital era? Should money come from somewhere else, or is the Secretary of State charged with ensuring—after accountants have reported—that what the BBC is trying to do now should be continued in the digital era? Does the hon. Gentleman accept the BBC's internet services and its provision of the new news services, for example?

Mr. Ainsworth: If the hon. Gentleman cares to see me after the debate, I will give him a copy of our extensive document, "Fair Funding for the BBC", which makes detailed recommendations. I do not wish to embark on a in depth exposition of that document, because it is available and on the public record.

I welcome the Davies committee's recommendation for a half-price licence for registered blind people. It is a good idea and I hope that the Secretary of State will accept the panel's advice. I note that the Royal National Institute for the Blind has some outstanding concerns about the way in which licence fees are collected, including the sometimes threatening tone of letters, and the need to develop audio subscription services as soon as practically possible. It also raises important issues concerning the use of text on the screen and more accessible programme information. The RNIB has offered to work with the Government and broadcasters on developing solutions to those problems, and I urge them both to take up the offer.

The Davies panel also makes some welcome recommendations about subtitling, and urges more ambitious targets for the introduction of subtitles on digital television. I hope that the Secretary of State will take those recommendations to heart and go further. It is farcical, as the Royal National Institute for Deaf People has said, that, while digital terrestrial broadcasters are required to provide subtitling, cable and satellite broadcasters have no such obligation. I take this opportunity to pay tribute to the work of my noble Friend Baroness Anelay, who has done much to draw the attention of Parliament to the issues raised by people with disabilities on their access to broadcasting.

Failure to enable adequate access to new television services for blind and deaf people will act as a serious impediment to the take-up of digital television. The Secretary of State has recognised the importance of encouraging digital take-up and announced a possible time frame for the switch-off of analogue transmission. Again, the Government have been judicious rather than courageous, but, in this case, that is the right approach.

Even so, more still needs to be done if the Secretary of State's targets for digital take-up are to be met by 2006. While the take-up of digital television has so far been very encouraging, with around 2 million households now participating, it seems clear that the process of converting to digital services is being driven by a desire for subscription channels. A large proportion—perhaps 50 per cent.—of the population are, and are likely to remain, uninterested in subscription television and only want or can afford free-to-view television.

What do the Government propose to do to encourage those who want only free-to-view television to go digital? The free set-top boxes being offered by BSkyB and Ondigital appear to some in the equipment manufacturing industry to be part of the problem. It is said that they are suppressing demand for integrated digital television sets. The Government should be concerned that the number of analogue televisions being sold in Britain this year will be higher than it was last year, and will outnumber sales of digital sets by a factor of more than 100.

I entirely agree with the Secretary of State's remarks about the seriousness of the problem to do with public confusion over what is on offer, what options are available and what the benefits of digital television may be. That is not helped by spats between BSkyB and Ondigital over the screening or otherwise of various sporting events. I am sure that the Secretary of State would wish to join me in urging those companies to sort out those problems soon.

I suspect that most people are not even aware that they have been watching analogue television signals all their lives. Why should they be? It is hardly surprising, therefore, that the news that the analogue signal will be switched off rouses alarm and indifference in almost equal measure—although I reckon that indifference just about has the edge at the moment.

I welcome the Secretary of State's statement that the Government will get together with manufacturers, retailers and broadcasters to begin a major public information exercise so that consumers can be told, reliably, clearly and in language stripped of jargon, about what is available, what the benefits are, and how to make informed decisions. Unless that happens, there is a real risk that the switch to digital will falter, and that the 95 per cent. household penetration threshold will not be met.

It would be wrong and absurd to have a debate on the future of broadcasting without mentioning radio. The radio industry has been one of the great commercial success stories of recent years. Following the successive liberalisations under the previous Government, commercial radio stations have sprung up all over the UK. They have become established and profitable, and now form a vital part of the national broadcasting scene.

There has always been a tendency among radio people to consider themselves the poor relations of television, although I exclude from that observation the presenters of the "Today" programme. Under this Government, the radio industry knows that it is the poor relation. Scarcely any consideration at all was given to the BBC's radio service by the Davies panel. Even the panel's attitude survey failed to seek views on the future of the BBC's radio services.

The Secretary of State's important speech last month, in which he set out the timetable for the digital revolution, failed to make even a passing reference to the radio industry. This week, in reply to my written question about the Government's thinking on the future of the analogue radio signal, the Minister for Tourism, Film and Broadcasting admitted that she was not even contemplating universal digital radio services.

I suspect that the Government, along with many people in the radio industry, have simply forgotten about radio altogether. I take this opportunity to remind the Secretary of State of radio's importance to millions of listeners. If it is not too much trouble, will he examine seriously the issues facing what is an important industry?

What are the Government doing to help encourage the take-up of digital radio? What are they doing to modernise the commercial radio ownership rules, and to take into account the role of the BBC in local radio when considering issues of plurality and competition?

Successful radio companies are constrained by the points system, which limits, on the basis of population areas, the number of stations that a company can own. A good case can be made for a system based on a share of voice, which would be a more realistic and relevant measurement. What do the Government think about that?

What do the Government intend to do about the scarcity of spectrum and digital radio development? I hope that the Minister, when she winds up the debate, will answer some of those questions. Scarcity of spectrum was the main reason why the previous Government excluded religious broadcasters from bidding for national radio licences. At that time, spectrum scarcity was a real problem, but technology is moving on. Will the Secretary of State take this opportunity to announce his intentions for religious broadcasting?

I thought that the right hon. Gentleman's answer earlier to my hon. Friend the Member for New Forest, West (Mr. Swayne) was somewhat evasive. Conservative Members believe that the time has come to say that it is not appropriate for Parliament to disqualify Christian groups or other religious groups from applying for national or local radio stations. They should be able to compete on the same basis as all the other bidders for the right to broadcast. We look forward, with bated breath, to the Minister's concluding remarks.

Finally, just as no consideration of the future of broadcasting would be complete without mention of radio, so it is important to recognise the significance of advertising. It is often forgotten that there would be no commercial television or radio to speak of without advertising. Advertising is the driving force behind the new technologies that are changing the landscape of broadcasting.

It follows, therefore, that any attack on advertising and the advertising industry that threatens future revenues is an attack on broadcasting. We understand that there are moves afoot among some European countries, led by Sweden, to ban or restrict advertising aimed at children. That proposal is patronising, bossy and dictated by political correctness. It would also be entirely counterproductive, resulting in less investment in children's programming and leading simply to more imports of cheap cartoons, of which there are probably too many already.

I appreciate that the advertising sector comes under the responsibility of the Department of Trade and Industry, but will the Secretary of State or the Minister take this opportunity to place on record the Government's recognition of the link between investment in advertising and investment in programming? Will the right hon. Gentleman assure the broadcasting industry that, in the event of any attempt to curtail children's advertising, the Government will put up stiff resistance?

I have tried to identify several areas in which a bit more effort by the Government would help in the development of this important industry and enable it to go from strength to strength. For the most part, however, the most constructive thing that the Government can do is to get out of the way. That is what I hope that they will do.

10.47 am

Mr. Gerald Kaufman (Manchester, Gorton): I agreed with much, if not quite all, of what the hon. Member for East Surrey (Mr. Ainsworth) said about the Gavyn Davies report. I note the Conservative party's new-found fastidiousness towards pre-election bribes: I have always been in favour of a good solid pre-election bribe, provided that it is offered by a Labour Government.

I thank my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for giving the House the opportunity to debate the future of broadcasting today. I agreed with much in his speech, and welcome his strictures on Mr. Richard Eyre's views on public service broadcasting. I do not believe that the person who was the driving force behind downgrading peak-time television news has much right to talk about the ethos of public service broadcasti-g.

I welcome the hon. Member for Mid–Dorset and North Poole (Mr. Fraser) to the Opposition Front Bench. Knowing the robustness of his views on a great many subjects—with many of which I often agree—I look forward to hearing what he has to say.

The hon. Member for East Surrey spoke about the BBC series "Walking with Dinosaurs". It is appropriate that that series is the BBC's latest success, as the BBC itself is turning into a communications dinosaur.

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: They looked frighteningly alive to me.

Mr. Kaufman: The BBC or the dinosaurs?

Many of the recommendations in the Gavyn Davies report seem foolish, but an even greater problem is that, with one or two exceptions, they are irrelevant to the future of broadcasting. The report examines the BBC alone, not setting it within the context of wider developments in audio-visual communications, which are bringing about the greatest communications revolution in the history of the human race and which might bring revolutions in society and employment that might outstrip even the changes brought by the industrial revolution in the 19th century.

We should first dismiss the Davies report's recommendations on the television licence. A digital supplement on the licence would be a fine on those who subscribe to commercial digital services. The infinitesimally few people—too few to be counted—who watch BBC digital services do so by subscribing either to Sky Digital or Ondigital. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport pointed out that 1.8 million households subscribe to those services, which may mean that around 5 million people pay to watch digital programmes.

It is unacceptable to expect that those people should, in addition to the contracts into which they enter voluntarily, be required to pay a regressive poll tax to the BBC whose digital programmes—if they watch them at all—they can watch only through paying digital subscriptions. That

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point is quite apart from the utter absurdity of the sum proposed for the additional subscription of £1.99. What on earth are these people up to? This is no Tesco bargain offer on which one can take a penny off. The Davies report is proposing a £2 fee, and if its signatories think that they can get away with making people believe that it is less by taking off a penny, that merely shows the patronising nature of their report. It would be equally wrong to increase the licence as Lord Gordon proposes in his note of disagreement.

Let me turn to arguments that torpedo the Gavyn Davies proposal for the digital licence. I have received today a report, "The Impact Of A Digital Licence Fee On The Take-up Of Digital Television", from the National Economic Research Associates. It states, at paragraph 2.5:

"The Davies Report's conclusion that a digital licence fee will not have a significant impact on take-up does not withstand detailed scrutiny."

The report subjects Davies to just such detailed scrutiny, arguing:

"We expect a digital licence fee supplement to have an adverse impact on the take-up of digital services by both pay and free-to-air homes . . . The results of our analysis suggest that the digital licence fee is incompatible with the Government's objectives for early switch over from analogue to digital television."

I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State on the announcement of his plans for analogue switch-off, which accord with the report of the Select Committee on Culture, Media and Sport. I should add that, although the Select Committee will shortly conduct an inquiry into the Gavyn Davies report, I am not speaking for the Committee today and have no right or authority to do so. I am speaking purely on my own account.

The NERA report continues:

"Assuming that analogue services are switched off when digital penetration reaches 95 per cent. of television homes, the digital licence fee scenarios all suggest a delay of approximately 3 years beyond the end of the Government's 2006-2010 target range for switch over."

The report's central estimate is that adoption of a digital licence fee of the kind proposed by the Gavyn Davies report would reduce penetration of digital television in households by 10 per cent.—2,570,000 households—by 2004, and by 20 per cent. by 2008. Apart from its misguided nature and its regressive impact—to which the hon. Member for East Surrey referred—the Davies report simply has not taken into account the effect on digital television. That results from the report's utter, tunnel-visioned obsession with the BBC and nothing but the BBC.

I am opposed to the digital supplement. I am also opposed to any increase beyond the settlement decided by the previous Government, which was over-generous, for the licence until 2006. The BBC spends money as if there were no tomorrow. It can do so because it has a guaranteed income of £2 billion because of the licence. It is the only hypothecated tax whose rules are laid down by its recipient and which is collected by the recipient. No doubt, other organisations would like to be able to do that.

The hon. Member for East Surrey referred to "BBC News 24". At the last count, 0.1 per cent. of the television audience was watching that, but it costs £30 million a year. The sums being spent on consultants—to little or no avail so far as I can see—are monumentally large. There are other matters on which the BBC fritters finance. There is a forthcoming jamboree at Hampton Court. It was recently reported in the press that £2,000 was being spent on providing ambient noise so that those who work at BBC headquarters in White City should not feel lonely.

Today, another news story tells us that the BBC will spend an unspecified amount to make people feel more lonely; a new system called sound-masking is being introduced at Broadcasting House so that some BBC employees cannot overhear what others are saying. A BBC spokesman has said that personnel and legal staff may obviously not wish others to hear what they are saying. The corporation is spending money on concealing conversations at the same time as spending money to provide bogus conversations.

Mr. Baker: Perhaps journalists at Broadcasting House have good reason to feel lonely, because most of their colleagues have been shipped out to White City and replaced by managers.

Mr. Kaufman: I shall not reveal what employees of the BBC say privately about their management because I favour good employment practices.

Mr. Tony McWalter (Hemel Hempstead): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Kaufman: I will give way again, but shall not do so often because I do not want to take up too much time and I have several more broadsides to deliver.

Mr. McWalter: I am aware that those broadsides are on their way, but does my right hon. Friend agree that the BBC retains unparalleled authority in many fields? It is held in great regard by many people who use its services. Its internet sites continue to grow at an enormous rate; they have great authority and provide a good service to schools and to adults and children who want authoritative information. Will my right hon. Friend bear those points in mind when he launches his broadsides?

Mr. Kaufman: I have an extremely high regard for my hon. Friend, but that will not allow me to endorse the panegyric that we have just heard—a panegyric that is not shared by many millions of people in this country. Although they may be accustomed to the BBC—indeed, they have to be, because they pay large sums, against their will, to keep it going—they no longer regard it as a special case. They think of the BBC as only one broadcaster among many whose wares they sample, as they feel appropriate.

I disagree with Lord Gordon's footnote to the Gavyn Davies report in which he opposes the digital licence, while advocating an increase in the general licence. However, I agree with him when he asks whether the BBC should continue to do things just because commercial companies do them. When the BBC was the only broadcaster, it was appropriate for it to provide a reasonably full spectrum of entertainment, education and information.

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: Is it not the point of the BBC that it does what commercial broadcasters cannot do?

Mr. Kaufman: Sometimes the BBC does what commercial broadcasters should not do.

The day has passed when the BBC could do everything—even if we believed that it should do everything. The hon. Member for East Surrey mentioned that BSkyB was willing to spend £1 billion on a deal with the Premier League. In a commercial market, BskyB has a perfect right to do that, but it is not what the BBC should be getting up to. The BBC should provide a wide range of high quality programmes in education and entertainment, without feeling that, whenever anyone else in the commercial market does anything, it should have to do the same.

On page 42 of the Gavyn Davies report, we read of the kind of money that the BBC is asking for in order to fulfil its vision. We are told that it wants a further £700 million, and although the purpose of £300 million of that money was specified to the panel in detail, the purpose of the remaining £400 million was not. The BBC is extremely free with taxpayers' money. I have a high regard for much that the BBC does; it has contributed what is possibly the most precious single aspect of broadcasting in the world today—the ethos of public service broadcasting. Nevertheless, that does not mean that it should receive a blank cheque for whatever pops into its head—a great deal pops into heads at the BBC.

Commercial companies risk shareholders' money in the market. If they fail, they fail; indeed, satellite companies nearly did fail at the beginning. However, failure is a risk for commercial companies. The BBC risks taxpayers' money, and then demands more. There is not merely a case against increasing the licence fee, but one in favour of freezing it in cash terms during the whole of this charter period. There is also a strong case for providing substantial concessions to those who cannot afford what, to many people, is an amount that they can take in their stride, but to many others is money that is difficult to find.

When I was shadow Home Secretary—in days beyond most people's memory—I advocated, as official Labour party policy, free television licences for pensioners. That is an idea whose time has returned. I strongly commend to my right hon. Friend the idea that all pensioners be provided with a voucher equivalent to the television licence. I realise that there are problems in removing from pensioners the obligation to pay the licence fee, because some of them share their homes with their children. There might thus be a justified apprehension that we might be subsidising people who were below pensionable age. However, if we provided every pensioner with such a voucher, they could either obtain a free licence, or pay a subscription to one of the services that are not free to air under the licence arrangements. That is my small recommendation for a pre-election bribe.

The BBC is doing far too little to obtain commercial income. The hon. Member for East Surrey referred to its commercial ventures. We have gone far beyond the question of whether the BBC is a hybrid organisation—part public sector and part commercial. The BBC has commercial partnerships with many organisations here and abroad, such as Flextech and UK Gold. It takes advertising on some of its overseas ventures. The BBC is no longer pristine and pure when it comes to commercial activity. In view of that fact, the BBC needs to earn far more income from its commercial activities, using that money to fund whatever additional activities it deems appropriate.

The Gavyn Davies report records a pathetic target for BBC Resources Ltd. of £82 million revenue over the next five years. The report makes it clear that—petty though it is—that sum is over-ambitious because BBC Resources Ltd. is losing money. On the other hand, although I have said on many occasions that I am in favour of the privatisation of the BBC as such—I remain unrepentant in saying it—I certainly do not commend the report's proposal for the privatisation of BBC Resources Ltd. On page 101, the report rightly states:

"As with any privatisation, these sales would replace a flow of revenue by a single capital payment."

If BBC Resources Ltd. were run so that it made the money that it should make, there would be a most valuable addition to BBC revenues. It is absurd to sell it off for one capital payment when, properly run, it could add a great deal to the BBC's revenues.

There are many ways in which the BBC—if properly, efficiently, effectively and imaginatively run—could make large amounts of money. Reference has been made to BBC Online, which is probably the most enterprising and forward looking of all the corporation's activities. It costs £23 million a year. The Davies report said that, in June this year, the site was receiving 100 million hits—it probably receives even more now—50 per cent. of which originated abroad. It is absolutely typical of the lack of imagination displayed in the report that it says that BBC Online should not be commercialised. Here we have a service, funded by the licence, half of whose usage originates with people overseas, who gain access for the cost of a local telephone call. If the BBC took advertising on it, it could fund the entire enterprise—

Mr. McWalter *rose—*

Mr. Kaufman: If my hon. Friend is about to tell me that the BBC has beeb.com as well, I have to say that beeb.com is a mere fledgling, whereas BBC Online is up and working and could bring in a great deal of money for the corporation.

Mr. McWalter: I am grateful, because I know that my right hon. Friend does not really want to give way. Beeb.com, which is the commercial arm, exists, but there are no trails from BBC.co.uk to beeb.com. If those links from the free BBC Online service to commercial products were established, it would be a way of making beeb.com work much harder.

Mr. Kaufman: My hon. Friend's suggestion demonstrates the dilemma now facing us: he is saying that a wholly licence-funded service should be used to advertise a commercial service, which brings us to the issue of transparency of financing within the BBC—a matter with which many of us are dissatisfied. The BBC is a hybrid organisation, so BBC Online being used to gain audiences and money for beeb.com would mean that licence payers' money was being used to finance a commercial service, whereas we have been told—somewhat unconvincingly—by the BBC that it ring-fences the licence funded services. My hon. Friend's suggestion is worth considering, but he has illustrated the increasing commercialism of the BBC.

Although it makes some rather strange recommendations, the report says something quite wise on page 65:

"We also expect that closer convergence will take place between websites and broadcast services, so that the BBC's domestic audience will increasingly access BBC output via the website."

[Mr. Kaufman]

That is absolutely true and that is the way of the future. We are approaching the era of convergence and it is that which makes the Gavyn Davies report not only foolish, but irrelevant. The report describes not only the BBC but the entire audiovisual communications environment that is now coming into being, and the panel's comments apply to that revolutionary environment as well as to the BBC.

While the BBC whinges about a supplementary digital licence for services that no one watches, its rivals march into the future and cost the taxpayer not a penny in doing so. While the BBC stagnates in a poll-tax financed backwater, the real cutting edge of enterprise and innovation is found in the private sector. Every day, one finds more information about new developments. *The Times* today tells of W H Smith being

"in talks with a number of 'big names' to help it to bolster its new Internet service and construct a second side to the business to rival its traditional bookselling."

Analysts are talking about the development of holiday services, supermarket services and special deals on home delivery. That is the future.

Photo-Me International, best known for its passport photograph booths, has already announced that it is to transform 1,000 of those booths to enable people to access the internet and use e-mail. The company announced only a few days ago that some of its booths are to be used to pioneer the downloading of music on to CDs with which people can then walk away. Carlton Communications is moving away from the transmission of films via celluloid distributed in cans to cinemas; it plans to replace analogue spools with film that can be stored on disk and beamed down from satellites or sent down fibre-optic cables. The era of e-cinema may bring films e-mailed to people's homes so that they can watch them on their own television. Telewest Communications has announced that it is to recruit 840 staff to expand the scope its digital services.

A great convergence revolution is taking place—people talk about the prospect of convergence, but it is already here. Today, we can get television sets on which we can not only watch television programmes, but log on to the internet and use e-mail. Although the BBC has set up its BBC Online service, it appears to be utterly impervious to the idea that such services are the future. Soon—possibly within months—we shall be able to buy an entirely converged box that combines the capacities of the computer and those of the television set. That will result, not in the realisation of the "family around the fireside" vision described by Sir John Birt in his recent lecture, but in limitless opportunities for everyone in society, regardless of income, to participate in entertainment.

The hon. Member for East Surrey spoke of the fall in television audience: the reason that that is occurring is that people are turning to the internet. There are now 10 million people in Britain who have access to the internet, ranging from schoolchildren in their bedrooms to pensioners, who increasingly use the internet to access the world. One can get all sorts of things via the internet. When I was in Palestine taking part in a recent conference, I was able, via a computer, to read *The Daily Telegraph* and *The Times* and to refrain from reading *The Guardian* every day. When the picture quality has been sorted out, which will happen soon, we shall be able to watch entertainment of all kinds on television-quality or even cinema-quality screens. That is the future for our country.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State said, rightly, that we in this country have a primacy in the basic lingua franca of broadcasting that no one else in the world possesses: the English language is the key to communications. We see abroad the creation of vast media conglomerates: last month, Viacom, which already owns Hollywood's Paramount studios, the MTV channel and the Blockbuster video rental chain, bought the CBS Corporation for $34 billion; and News Corporation is already an immense transcontinental organisation. Meanwhile, the BBC whinges about a supplementary digital television licence, when it could be a major player in world communications.

The BBC has the most famous and respected logo in the communications world. We need the BBC to compete, expand and safeguard the public service ethos that is its priceless legacy and gift to world communications. Instead of paddling about in backwaters, it is time to swim purposefully into the tide. I hope that my right hon. Friend will consider the future of broadcasting in its real context. He must set aside the irrelevancies in these finicking reports and ensure that our country, which pioneered broadcasting, can continue to lead the world.

11.20 am

Mr. Peter Atkinson (Hexham): After that broadside, I feel rather nervous about risking my rigging by sailing close to the right hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Mr. Kaufman) to defend the BBC from his attack. It is a pity when debates about the future of broadcasting and the BBC boil down to an argument about what kind of potted plants should be put in the office of the director general. We should talk today about quality. The Secretary of State was absolutely right when he said that the BBC still provides quality broadcasting, although perhaps not in sufficient quantity. Despite his great vision for the future, I, as a fully paid-up member of the forces of conservatism, like to switch on the television and sit down to watch a programme that I find interesting. I do not particularly want to sit alone in an attic playing with the internet: I am happy to be an old-fashioned, conventional television viewer.

The poor old BBC has marched up and down the same hill in successive generations: it does not know whether it should compete for ratings or produce quality programmes. It has always faced that dilemma. The licence fee is a regressive tax and the BBC argues, quite properly, that, because many people pay for it, it should provide programmes for the many and not simply for middle-class, educated Members of Parliament who go on about quality programmes. That is a difficult decision for the BBC; ultimately, I believe that Parliament will have to take it. We will have to decide, following proper consultation, in which direction we want to send the BBC. I agree with the Secretary of State that it should concentrate on quality: it should establish a benchmark in the broadcasting spectrum.

People often criticise the BBC for being wasteful—and I have no doubt that, like many large, sleepy corporations, it often is wasteful. BBC producers and production staff at lower levels worry that their budgets are cut endlessly

while management remains top heavy. A report was published recently by an organisation called the Campaign for Quality Television. It is a pressure group, so one must be cautious about its findings, but it conducted some alarming interviews with BBC staff and other television companies. It found that, as a result of budget cuts in the BBC, there is

"a growing culture of self-censorship: 'Every year, they keep cutting. We feel we've become so budget orientated that we've clipped our own wings, we don't even suggest ideas because we think it will be too expensive.'"

That alarming attitude must be addressed. However, it does not change my basic view that the BBC forms a valuable part of our broadcasting spectrum and should be defended, not ceaselessly attacked and demoralised.

I welcome also the Secretary of State's remarks about the roll-out of digital terrestrial television. He said that the test of availability will be a crucial benchmark in deciding when the analogue switch-off will occur. I was particularly pleased to hear him say that at least 99.4 per cent. coverage will have to be achieved and that he would like to aim for universal coverage.

As I have said before, I represent a constituency in which live some of the 0.6 per cent. of people who cannot receive television. I am afraid that it is a little like a soap opera: every time that I talk about broadcasting, I like to speak up for the few remaining people in the United Kingdom who cannot get television. Their lives are quite different, and, I believe, not as rich, because they do not see the soap operas and the news programmes. They will miss out on the new interactive and digital services that are coming on line. Therefore, it is extremely important that we make studious efforts to achieve 100 per cent. coverage.

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: Does my hon. Friend agree that some people choose not to have television and argue that their lives are much richer as a result?

Mr. Atkinson: My right hon. Friend the Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe), who has just bought a television, survived for a long time without one. I never mention the exact location of that part of my constituency where television is not available because I fear that if I did, many people would flock there so that their children could not watch television. It is good news that such people will have access to television in the future.

I must pay tribute to the BBC because it is not generally realised that its digital satellite services are available to such people free of charge. There is potential for great improvement in that area because, if people are prepared to purchase a set-top box and a decoder card from the BBC, they will be able to receive all BBC digital services, including BBC Choice and BBC News 24, and Channels 4 and 5. However, people will not receive ITV 1 and ITV 2—and I shall turn to that issue in a moment.

My hon. Friend the Member for East Surrey (Mr. Ainsworth) and I have a long-standing disagreement about this subject. I do not think that a disagreement between two commercial companies can be dismissed lightly as a spat. It may seem like a spat to him, but it is a fundamental point of principle arising from the question of platform universality. Those people who want free-to-air services cannot receive ITV because the two companies refuse, for commercial reasons, to make it available to a satellite platform. In all fairness, BSkyB is compelled to make its programmes available on all platforms. I believe that we should hold absolutely to the principle of platform universality.

That problem will affect not only those who cannot access television but those who cannot get digital terrestrial television signals for ONdigital or one or two multiplexes lower down the spectrum—I hope that that is the correct technical term. Although digital services are aimed at more than 95 per cent. of people, the programmes will be available only on multiplex one—the BBC's multiplex. Only 90 per cent. of people will ultimately be able to receive ONdigital services.

The effect would be that next Wednesday, for example, many of those people who wanted to watch the match between Bayern Munich—I am not a great football supporter—and Rangers would be unable to do so. Although such a match would be of enormous interest to people in Scotland, at least 10 per cent. of Scots would not be able to watch it—even when the full digital roll-out is completed and even if they wished to pay to watch it on digital. That service will not be available.

Mrs. Jacqui Lait (Beckenham): Is my hon. Friend aware that, even in the sophisticated south, I, as a Scot, was unable to watch Scotland play Spain at rugby because Meridian has not signed a BSkyB contract?

Mr. Atkinson: That is an important issue, and I am sorry that I cannot convince my hon. Friend the Member for East Surrey in that regard. People must have choice, whether one pays for a service or receives it free, and such services should be available on a universal platform. The Government must intervene when they review the regulations to ensure that it is part of the package deal.

Mr. Desmond Browne (Kilmarnock and Loudoun): To complete the hon. Gentleman's education about both Scotland and football, I must point out, in all fairness, that about 10 per cent. of Scottish television viewers would choose not to watch Rangers play any team.

Mr. Atkinson: That may be so, but people should be able to exercise self-censorship. It is rather frustrating if some of the 90 per cent. of people who want to watch the match cannot do so, even if they pay for the privilege.

I understand the reason for that situation. The previous Government wanted to allow ONdigital to get off the ground, and they thought that it would do so if it was sheltered from too much competition. ONdigital has signed up 400,000 subscribers, and the time is rapidly coming when it should be able to face the full blast of competition and make its programmes available to all.

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: I know that my hon. Friend has for a long time strongly believed that the matter is one of important principle. I did not wish to belittle its importance. Indeed, I drew attention to the difficulty because of its impact on the take-up of digital television. The question is how to resolve the problem. He and I may disagree about that, but I have no doubt that it needs early resolution. The Government should work with those in the industry who are responsible to achieve an early solution

[Mr. Peter Ainsworth]

because the public are confused and, as my hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham (Mrs. Lait) suggests, getting angry.

Mr. Atkinson: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his intervention. We have made progress on that matter, which needs to be resolved urgently. It causes great confusion and we cannot wait two years for the proposed broadcasting Bill. Having scored a minor victory, I shall sit down.

11.31 am

Dr. George Turner (North-West Norfolk): It is interesting that, in a debate on new technology, it is almost as if pride is taken in ignorance of that technology. If we are to make the right political and commercial decisions, we have to take care to understand what the technology makes possible. I have an engineering background, and I find that the pace of change in jargon is off-putting.

The convergence to which my right hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton (Mr. Kaufman) referred is indeed with us. It is not for the Government to decide who will win the battle of convergence and whether the recent Henley Centre report was correct in predicting that the television set will become the means by which shoppers interact with the marketplace, or whether that will come about through a major expansion in the use of the more traditional internet. Those issues will be decided by entrepreneurs who imagine how they can apply the new technology and successfully do so.

The Government have two responsibilities. The first is to provide a level playing field so that the best of the technology can be used by the best of the entrepreneurs. The second—I was pleased that the Secretary of State referred to this in his speech in Cambridge—is to protect the interests of consumers while the entrepreneurs make or lose their fortunes.

I want to concentrate on a particular group of consumers. It is important that we should look to the interests of the few as well as those of the many. We have heard that 95 per cent. of Britain has good television coverage, but my constituency is one of the few that has not. In Adjournment debates and on other occasions, I have brought the attention of the House to the fact that, although my constituency is in Norfolk, many of my constituents have to watch regional broadcasts from Yorkshire. Frankly, people in King's Lynn and nearby villages are not very interested in special offers that are available in Yorkshire.

More importantly, there have been occasions when Anglia's regional television has transmitted reconstructed crime scenes, yet the people in the place where the crime has happened cannot watch those broadcasts. They can watch crime reconstructions taking place in Burnley, although there is almost no likelihood that they would have witnessed those crimes.

I remind the House that 95 per cent. of the population put watching regional news programmes at the top of their television agenda. More people are keen to see their regional news than they are to watch soaps, yet those programmes are denied to many people in my constituency. Adjournment debates and other discussions in the House have revealed that there are many other hon. Members whose constituents suffer from that very problem. When I was preparing for an Adjournment debate on the subject, I found that between 30 and 40 hon. Members have constituents who have to put up with an entirely irritating and unsatisfactory delivery of the existing television channels. They have to put up with television that is meant to be watched by people in other areas.

My hon. Friend the Member for Wirral, South (Mr. Chapman), who greatly regrets that he cannot be here, pointed out to the House in April that his constituents see themselves as traditionally Cheshire or even Merseyside-oriented, and they do not see themselves as Welsh. People in Wirral, South do not want to watch television from Wales. I understand that my hon. Friend invited the Minister for Tourism, Film and Broadcasting to his constituency recently, and she probably got an earful. I am delighted that she has been invited to my constituency in the near future, where she will hear just a little of what I am told week in and week out about the frustration that people have had to put up with for a decade.

It is a disgrace that the BBC, the public service broadcaster, and previous Governments have ignored their responsibility to attempt to fulfil their universal service obligation. That is why I have introduced a private Member's Bill to deal with the matter.

I respectfully suggest that other minority groups need to benefit from the introduction of digital television. Some of them have already been mentioned. The possibilities of interactive television could be particularly important to people who are isolated, without means of transport, in rural parts of the country such as mine. It could help many poor people and people whom we do not want to encourage to travel or who cannot travel.

There are many deaf people for whom the present regulations on the availability of subtitles are wholly inadequate. They are the very people who could benefit most from the introduction of the new technology, but they seem to be almost an afterthought. The targets set for all platforms are abysmally low, particularly for the take-up of the new technology by those who stand to gain most.

I suspect that, in addressing the few hon. Members present, I am preaching to the converted, but there are many people who still think that the digital revolution involves simply a few extra channels and being able to watch extra films. It should, and does, involve more than that, and we should deal with it accordingly. We should not regard it as if, like colour television, it were a fancy innovation for the rich.

Digital television and the services that it provides should be available to minority groups, because the technology makes it possible to help people with disabilities and others to have a better life. It should be helping people who are housebound. We should be enabling people to receive their own regional television broadcasts. All those minority groups should be high on the Government's agenda, although it is clear that they are routinely low on the agenda of those who are seeking large numbers of viewers so that they can maximise the income and profit from their commercial ventures. It is important that the Government ensure that the ground rules are such that those issues are dealt with, not as an afterthought, but as part of how we set about delivering the benefits of the new technology.

I broadly welcome what the Secretary of State said about the analogue turn-off. However, I believe that one difficulty remains in the path of delivering an early turn-off of analogue. We must first ensure that it is not the same 95 per cent. who receive digital television and that, in a few years time, my constituents do not have to watch digital Yorkshire Television.

One of the great difficulties in rolling out digital services is that they must co-exist with analogue services. Anyone who has ever looked at an engineering map showing the overlap of the different transmitters in my part of the world will understand the genuine problems that the engineers had in trying to erect extra relay masts to deal with the technical problems of providing a full range of programmes in west Norfolk. Those problems arose from the fact that analogue television interferes with other analogue transmitters, and engineers must be careful to separate frequencies of adjacent transmitters.

As digital television is rolled out, west Norfolk is low down the priority list for the same reason. Until analogue stations are turned off, the options for turning on digital transmitters are substantially reduced. We must be wary of the fact that, unless we encourage early turn-off of analogue television, perhaps on a regional, step-by-step basis, we will restrict the possibility of covering the whole nation with the new digital services. It is a chicken-and-egg situation.

There will be financial opportunities for the commercial and public service exploitation of the frequency space that will be released as analogue television is turned off, which could also provide the Government with income. The roll-out of digital television will provide greater commercial opportunities for companies to sell their subscription channels. We should ensure that some of that money is used to assist those who are in danger of becoming minorities in the new age as they have been for the past decade.

I am concerned about some of the proposals that have been made. Every argument that we have heard this morning was used in support of the roll-out of the digital broadcasting revolution. Our constituents may not understand it, but analogue transmission is a huge waste of resources because it is inefficient. While we are stuck with analogue television, we are stuck in this century and are not moving into the next.

The Government must do what they can to encourage the entrepreneurial private sector to deliver digital transmission, and in doing so to address minority interests. Why on earth is Davies suggesting that a special tax should be imposed? I have yet to understand the logic of encouraging a good idea by increasing its cost through the Government's approach to the funding of a public service need. When we wanted people to use unleaded petrol, we made it cheaper for them to do so. The price of petrol may be increasing, but we made sure that the differential favoured unleaded.

We have yet to find out how the financing of the BBC through the licence fee will work in practice. The idea of making the priciest that which we want to encourage is turning logic upside down. There is much to be said for offering free digital licences to pensioners from the outset and having a lower licence fee. That makes more sense. I hope that the Government will have no truck with taxing a new development that we are trying to encourage and speed up.

I want to say something about the BBC, as it is an important issue at the moment. My right hon. Friend the Member for Gorton takes a jaundiced view of the BBC and emphasises some aspects that have merited attention in the past but which, in the past decade, have been addressed in substantial measure. I do not think that it is fair to expect the BBC to behave in the same way as a capitalist entrepreneur on the convergence issue.

The BBC should be more accountable for the areas into which it moves public resources. I am pleased that the Secretary of State intends to ensure that the financing of the BBC will be examined dispassionately. For pensioners in particular, the licence fee is a large portion of their meagre income. It is much less affordable for them than it is for those of us who are in employment or in younger age groups, who value the services that they receive and will pay the larger subscriptions required to enjoy the greater choice available.

It is important that we understand the financing of the BBC, and that we look for efficiency and cut out waste and bureaucracy. I want to encourage the digital revolution, but it would be dreadful to lose the BBC: that would be too high a price to pay. It has as substantial a future as it has had a past. What it does in the future may, in some respects, be different from what it has done in the past. There are new ways of delivering services through the internet, or through digital or interactive television. The BBC may not perhaps be at the forefront of that new technology, but we must not prevent it from moving into those areas with the same ethos as it has had in the past for quality provision and for addressing the needs of minority interests that may be neglected in the commercial domain.

I hope that the Secretary of State will carefully consider the suggestion that I made in my private Member's Bill of imposing on the industry a universal service obligation. If he were to spell out now his intentions for 2002, it could alter the lay-out, the placing of masts and the use of frequencies. If we knew where we were going, we might take a different path from that which we would have taken had we not known where the end point was. If the end point is to be a universal service obligation—which I believe it should be—the quicker the industry knows that, the more effective it will be in delivering it.

If we give the industry the target of 95 per cent., the danger is that it will become expensive to cover the other 5 per cent., and we will have to do things differently from the way we would have done them had we known what the position was from the outset. That is what happened with analogue. Early decision and guidance from the Government are important, although I accept that the Secretary of State has been wise in taking a cautious, step-by-step approach.

11.48 am

Mr. Norman Baker (Lewes): I welcome the Secretary of State's sensible and thoughtful speech—it seems a long time ago now—and I am glad to see that he is still in the Chamber to hear contributions from hon. Members. I am struck by the degree of common purpose across the Chamber. In particular, the hon. Member for East Surrey (Mr. Ainsworth) and the right hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Mr. Kaufman) made useful contributions.

New vistas are opening up, and the potential that digital television and radio offers is substantial: whether it is high-definition television, wide-screen pictures,

[Mr. Norman Baker]

CD-quality sound, video on demand or the era of convergence, to use the phrase of the right hon. Member for Gorton. Although I welcome the conditions that the Secretary of State has set—94.4 per cent. of households being able to receive a digital signal, the necessary equipment being affordable to all and 95 per cent. of households having access to digital television—I query that last criterion, as I did when I intervened in his speech. I am not convinced that rendering the televisions of 1.25 million households obsolete at a stroke will be acceptable.

The Secretary of State said that he expected the last 5 per cent. to receive direct help from the broadcasters to change over. Frankly, I am not convinced that that will happen, unless the Government require it. The last 5 per cent. are likely to be the poorest in society. They are the least attractive to advertisers, so there will be no incentive for anyone to help those 5 per cent. unless the Government require it.

Mr. Peter Atkinson: The point that the hon. Gentleman is missing is that the value of the analogue channels will be limitless. They will be worth billions of pounds. I suspect that, if the industry realises that it is being blocked from being able to use those because of 5 per cent. of people, it will find an easy way to get them new television sets.

Mr. Baker: I accept that there is commercial pressure in the opposite direction. Nevertheless, I think that the Government will have to intervene to ensure that all persons in this country have access to digital television. It will not happen by market forces.

I make it plain on behalf of the Liberal Democrats that we are not in favour of the digital poll tax—the £24 supplement that has been suggested in the recent Gavyn Davies report. The BBC has enough money to pay for its digital services itself. We have heard how it is awash with money in certain respects. In 1996, it told a Committee of Members of Parliament that it would fund the lion's share of its digital investment from increased efficiency and the contribution from its commercial arm. Since then, it has received above-inflation increases in the licence fee. The 1998-99 report and accounts show that it has £235 million in the bank.

There is no question but that the £24 supplement is not required. Furthermore, as other Members have made clear, it would act as a disincentive to take up the technology. In 1996, John Birt told the Select Committee on National Heritage that it would be "a tax on innovation". It is the only time this morning when I shall agree with him. I hope that the Government will not go towards the digital poll tax. It would be entirely wrong for all sorts of reasons, and quite unnecessary.

I pick up a point that the hon. Member for Hexham (Mr. Atkinson) made—I think it was him; I hope it was—about subtitles. *[Interruption.]* He is shaking his head. Perhaps it was the hon. Member for East Surrey. According to the Broadcasters Audience Research Board, 5 million people rely on subtitles for television programmes, but digital satellite and cable channels are not required to subtitle at all, and digital terrestrial is required to introduce subtitles only at a very slow rate over a number of years.

If we are to see benefits from digital television, that issue will need to be addressed by the Secretary of State. I do not think that commercial pressures will achieve that. The Government will have to intervene.

The Secretary of State referred to the BBC's duty to provide a quality benchmark. It is a sensible comment and I concur with it, but there is a potential problem. As the range of services from digital television and range of providers increases, that necessarily lessens the BBC's market share; it would be extraordinary if it did not. John Birt himself suggested that the market share of BBC1 and BBC2 would drift down over the years.

If that happens, it will put pressure on the licence fee and more and more of our constituents will say, "Why should we pay our licence fee for a market supplier that is now capturing less of the market?" That, in turn, will put pressure on quality programming because the BBC will be tempted to respond by going down market and getting more and more game shows: more and more Jeremy Beadle-type programmes. That would be an entirely wrong response. The position would be very difficult. Politicians will be required to defend the BBC if it sees a decline in market share but sticks to quality programming. There will be pressures to resist.

The BBC is like the European Union. It is necessary, we are all much enriched by it, but that does not stop me feeling exasperated by some of its idiocies and extravagances on occasions. For example, Sir Christopher Bland has admitted that the BBC spends £22 million year on consultants. He said:

"I don't think that we have any need to be ashamed of that number."

I wonder whether it is a case of what the consultants are looking into, because I am not aware of their producing any recommendations that have improved the BBC greatly.

Then we have the common excesses, which are indefensible. John Birt's farewell party was referred to in passing by the right hon. Member for Gorton. On 1 November, 150 BBC worthies will be given a jamboree, to cost £50,000—that is equivalent to 495 licence fees—to be held at Hampton Court palace. He is, I understand, to receive a pay-off of £150,000, which is equivalent to 1,485 licence fees, as a golden goodbye.

The evening will start with a reception in the Great Watching chamber, which was used by King Henry VIII, perhaps not inappropriately, to entertain his barons. The charge for renting the room is substantial: £7,050 per evening, with an additional fee of £45 for each guest after the first 100. Catering is extra, needless to say.

The main event will take place in the Great hall, costing £10,575 per evening. It is a lovely hall, decorated with Flemish tapestries. Of course, the BBC Symphony orchestra and the BBC Singers will be on hand to entertain the guests.

That is all very nice, but it is all licence fee payers' money. I get letters from constituents saying that £101 is a lot for a licence fee and that we should look at how the money is spent. A huge amount is being spent on a farewell bash for John Birt.

Governors' pay in 1999 is £264,000; that is equivalent to 2,614 licence fees. Pay checks for executive committee people total £3,051,000 for 1999; that is equivalent to 30,200 licence fees. Sir John Birt's pay topped £400,000 this year after a generous increase in his salary of 7.2 per cent., well above the rate of inflation.

I am staggered by some of salaries at the BBC. John Birt's is £415,000. Colin Browne, the head of public relations, receives £210,000; he seems to have failed miserably in his job, at least as far as convincing me is concerned. Patricia Hodgson, head of strategy, receives £207,000. Margaret Salmon, head of personnel, receives £216,000. None of them is a broadcaster or journalist producing programmes. They are management. They are the ones who occupy Broadcasting house and have pushed out all the journalists, who are somewhere in White City now.

Broadcasting house is singularly inappropriately named, in that there are no virtually no broadcasters in it any more; they rattle around if one goes there. The right hon. Member for Gorton mentioned the chit-chat machine.

Of course, we can be reassured because the BBC says in its statement of promises to viewers and listeners, 1999-2000:

"We promise to offer the best value for money. The BBC will be run efficiently in your interests."

So that is all right then. We need not worry about all the excesses, because the BBC is being run in our interest with no waste of money.

I am pleased that Greg Dyke, who will shortly be taking over, seems to be sceptical about some of the expenditure. He is reported to be selling the country mansion used by staff for weekend breaks and cheap wedding receptions, and targeting limousines for BBC executives that cost up to £1 million a year—that is, 9,900 licence fees. He might also ask himself why John Birt's wife has a 4.6 litre Range Rover at the expense of the BBC. I hope that such grotesque expenditure will be cut.

Many of us want to defend the BBC. We strain to do so because we believe in it, but it would be a lot easier without such indefensible expenditure. The BBC needs to provide good value for money. If it is going to produce quality programming with a declining market share, it needs to avoid being open to attack on the issues that I have just attacked it on.

We might also look at BBC News 24—so called because that is the number of viewers that it normally has at any given time. It is a grotesque waste of money. I am profoundly irritated—as many hon. Members may be—when I find that BBC local radio stations are run on a shoestring. There is no money for anything in BBC local radio these days, yet money is being poured down the drain on BBC News 24.

I am also worried about the BBC World Service, which does not come under the Department for Culture, Media and Sport because it is funded by the Foreign Office. Despite reasonably helpful funding from the Government, the World Service has suffered unacceptable cuts that do nothing to improve the image of Britain abroad.

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: The hon. Gentleman and I share a BBC local radio service. Will he confirm that, despite the straitened times in which the station lives, it found time to give him a starring role as a teddy bear in a Christmas pantomime special?

Mr. Baker: I can confirm that. It shows how far down market the BBC has gone.

Accountability of BBC finances is crucial. There is a case for giving the National Audit Office a formal role in ensuring that the BBC gives value for money. When I had a rather nice dinner with BBC bosses some time ago at our party conference, they did not welcome the idea, saying that it would infringe their independence. It should be possible for the National Audit Office to be seen to be independent of the Government, yet still ensure that the BBC gives good value for money. *[Interruption.]* You will be pleased to know, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that that mobile phone was upstairs, not in the Chamber. The Secretary of State may want to wait until later in the year, but I should like him to respond to the argument for auditing the BBC through the National Audit Office, because £2 billion a year is a lot of public money to go unaccounted for.

The Secretary of State also mentioned "News at Ten". There was a deal—almost a Faustian pact—on how it might be replaced. It was a very good way of getting news across to people who might not want to see it. It became an institution. ITV has thrown that away and put nothing satisfactory in its place. In mid-February, "News at Ten" had 8 million viewers. The "Evening News", at the unfriendly time of 6.30, is down to 5.25 million—almost 3 million viewers down. The "Nightly News" is a joke—not in its journalistic standards, but in the commitment that ITV gives to it. It is broadcast at a variable time around 11 pm and has only once made it into the nation's top 70 programmes. I hope that the review to which the Secretary of State referred will conclude that ITV has not met its side of the bargain and that "News at Ten" must be reinstated. That is the only logical conclusion.

The Secretary of State also briefly mentioned the important issue of media ownership. If we are to have a free, fair and responsible press, it is important that we do not have one person or group controlling too much of the media. Hon. Members on both sides have argued that supermarkets should not have too great a market share, because that distorts the retail market. The same happens in the media. People rely on the printed media in particular for news and views and to help them assess their voting intentions. It is unhealthy that News International controls 35 per cent. of this country's circulation.

I also find the apparent close relations between Rupert Murdoch and the Government—particularly the Prime Minister—unhealthy. I wonder why Mr. Murdoch, who is on record as criticising and insulting the Dalai Lama, was present at the luncheon for President Jiang Zemin. While demonstrators outside were being hustled off the street for having free Tibet flags, the Prime Minister was with Mr. Murdoch and President Jiang in No. 10 Downing street. That is not healthy for the country or for media control. I did not mind the Prime Minister going to meet Mr. Murdoch on the other side of the world down in Australia before he was elected, but he should have offered lots of promises and then stripped him of his press control a week after coming to power, or at least reduced his market penetration.

In any case, the Prime Minister did not do that. *[Interruption.]* It is perfectly proper to suggest that a maximum level of media ownership should apply to one individual or group and that if that level is exceeded we will run into danger as private interests take over from public interests. Capping Mr. Murdoch would have been a sensible and democratic policy and I am sorry that it did not happen. We have to make sure that News International does not wield too much power in this country. I feel that perhaps it does, and I would be interested to hear the Secretary of State's comments.

[Mr. Baker]

Finally, let me say a word about violence on television and censorship, a subject referred to briefly by the hon. Member for East Surrey. People are rightly worried about that, particularly because of the potential for children to be adversely affected by violence and sex on television.

I am astonished that violence in context in a programme often arouses antagonism and opposition from individuals and groups while very little is said about the constant violence in mainstream programmes, usually emanating from America. Personally, I find nothing more offensive than gun culture and a stream of programmes showing people shooting each other, which seems to be the main fare on American television, along with car chases. I find that much more offensive than a single act of violence used in the context of a programme to make a particular point artistically. I should like to hear the Secretary of State's response on that.

It has been useful to hear what hon. Members have had to say. There is a degree of unanimity across the Chamber and I very much hope that we will continue in that spirit, making sure that we embrace the new and get the most from it without throwing out what is best about what we already have.

12.7 pm

Barbara Follett (Stevenage): It is fitting that we should be debating the future of broadcasting at the end of the century which saw its introduction and at the end of the consultation period on the future funding of the service which still leads and defines broadcasting in this country—the BBC. Whether the BBC will continue to lead and define broadcasting in the next century and the next millennium depends to some extent on the decisions that will be taken over the next two months.

Those decisions have to be informed by the three criteria set out by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State at the beginning of the debate: affordability, accessibility and quality. I should like to deal with them in reverse order because I believe that the quality of the BBC's programmes sets it apart from other national and international providers. My constituents and I wish to see that quality protected and enhanced in the coming years.

Quality used to be synonymous with the BBC. In most cases, it still is. The service is impartial, intelligent and informed and has reported and relayed the defining moments of the past seven decades to the people of this country and many others across the world.

My mother remembers her parents tuning in on crystal and cat's whisker sets in Newcastle-under-Lyme at the beginning of the century and the wonder of the instant news that it brought them. Almost everyone over 65 in Britain today remembers hearing Chamberlain announce on the BBC:

"this country is, therefore, at war with Germany".

I remember my father standing in front of a radio one cold February morning in 1952 to hear that the King was dead, and a year later and 6,000 miles away I remember kneeling and pressing my ear up against the bakelite and cloth of a very old radio in Addis Ababa in Ethiopia to hear the crackling commentary on the coronation of his daughter.

It was the BBC that I turned to while living in South Africa during the dark days of the apartheid regime. It gave, as no other service did, an impartial and informed view of the situation in that troubled area. No wonder the then regime did its best to jam it for years.

The BBC brought me other things: the Beatles and the Rolling Stones, both banned in South Africa in the 1960s, and faithful adaptations of the books and plays that I studied at school and university, such as "The Forsyte Saga" and "I, Claudius". All were brought to life on the screen, and all were funded by the taxpayer. The BBC was the NHS for the mind.

When I returned to Britain in 1978, the BBC was a wonderful way back into a world in which genuine debate was encouraged, rather than squashed. In the past few years, the service has carried the culture of excellence into the development of BBC News 24, BBC Knowledge and BBC Online.

Unfortunately, the same cannot be said of some of the BBC's other services. The original three "I"s—impartial, informed and intelligent—are in danger of being replaced with a new trio; impatient, interruptive and imitative. This is particularly true in the provision of news, and particularly at a regional level. I agree with the hon. Member for Lewes (Mr. Baker) that one often gets a threadbare service there.

The imitative, impatient and interruptive quality is not absent from national programmes. Regional radio—with its gaggle of only-just-restrained shock jocks, misinforming and insulting listeners on endless call-ins—is the worst offender. Here the impatient and interruptive tendencies are at their most obvious and irritating.

Anyone who has tuned into "Today" recently will have heard numerous examples of the impatient and interruptive tendency, and of impatience and interruption getting in the way of information. I do not understand why the BBC wastes money on getting two scientists to debate the pros and cons of GM foods, and then insists that Professor X answers a complex question in 15 seconds and keeps interrupting Professor Y while he or she tries to put forward their case. It is simply a waste of time, and means that the public are more baffled than informed by the exchange.

Imitation rather than intelligence seems to govern electronic news-gathering, and those involved seem to be in awe of the print media. That is the only reason I can think of why they follow an agenda set by the print media. Why, when they have sound and pictures, are they so happy to stick slavishly to what has been in the print media, and simply amplify it?

As a publicly funded service, the BBC has the leeway and the duty to investigate in depth matters of public concern, but it is not always doing this at present during peak viewing and listening hours. When I raised this matter with the BBC at a dinner during my party conference, I was told that there were programmes at 11 pm and 6 am. However, we want such programmes at 8 o'clock or 8.30 before we go out.

I welcome my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State's commitment to quality, and I urge him to commend the three "I"s to the viewers panel that he is setting up, in the hope that it will monitor their delivery closely. If it wants to retain its unique reputation and authority, the BBC must remain impartial, informative and, above all, intelligent.

I welcome all that my right hon. Friend had to say on accessibility and I wish him well in his attempts to get all platforms to carry the free-to-air channels, digital or not. At present, my constituency—like those of other hon. Members—does not receive some of the free-to-air channels equally. Some 9,000 of my constituents cannot get BBC News 24 or the Parliamentary Channel. I am the only one who regrets the lack of the Parliamentary Channel, but many regret the lack of BBC News 24.

Mr. Swayne: Given the number of viewers of BBC News 24, an increase in viewing numbers in the hon. Lady's constituency might have a significant impact on the number of people who watch it.

Barbara Follett: It might indeed.

Accessibility, whether regional, geographic or platform-based, must be taken into account by both the Government and the television companies. I wish my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State well in that endeavour. Price is the other factor in accessibility. My right hon. Friend's commitment to affordability is commendable but I, like my right hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton (Mr. Kaufman), feel that pensioners deserve special treatment.

The case is made stronger by the fact that pensioners in sheltered housing and nursing homes already receive concessions. The unequal treatment is felt sharply by pensioners in my constituency who are also extremely concerned by the tendency of some commercial channels to screen major sporting fixtures only on digital. Given the limited reach of digital television, that is truly bad for some people.

An elderly gentleman recently came up to me on a visit to sheltered housing and told me that, for the past 10 years, he had forgone cigarettes in order to subscribe to both of Sky's sports channels, and was outraged that some of the most important football matches were being shown only on digital, which no amount of abstinence would allow him to afford. The divide between information rich and information poor could widen if the licence fee is raised without concessionary fees being introduced for those on low incomes, especially pensioners.

We are on the brink of another communications revolution. If it is to benefit the consumer as well as the provider of broadcast services it must be carefully monitored and managed; if it is, the future of broadcasting in Britain is bright; if not, it is bleak. No one wants a two-tier broadcasting service. We must take care to prevent that.

12.16 pm

Mr. Desmond Swayne (New Forest, West): It is a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Stevenage (Barbara Follett), whose speech was lucid and faultlessly delivered. I confess to one disappointment, however. In the Register of Members' Interests, she lists her position as a "communications consultant", and I was rather hoping, given the references that many hon. Members have made to the amount that the BBC spends on consultancy fees, that she would enlighten us as to what that money might be spent on; but I am afraid that I am none the wiser as to what a communications consultant might do than I was when she began.

The hon. Member for North–West Norfolk (Dr. Turner) gave us the benefit of his technical expertise in engineering in describing the technology platforms available. He raised the question whether the television or the personal computer would win the battle for the hearts, minds and, indeed, activities of the future. I offer him a third possibility: that it will be neither, that people will go on living their lives much as they do now and that the whole digital revolution has been as over-hyped as the other revolutions of the past 10 to 15 years.

I remember being told how cable television would change my life. It did, but only in the sense of being a minor inconvenience while the road was dug up.

Mr. Browne: Would the hon. Gentleman include in his over-hyped revolutions the commonsense revolution?

Mr. Swayne: No. I am talking about common sense rather than over-hyping.

I had much sympathy with what the right hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Mr. Kaufman) said, but I found his vision of the future profoundly shocking. The thought of having a film e-mailed to me so that I can watch it at home instead of being able to avail myself of the services of a babysitter and go with my wife to the bright lights of Bournemouth to watch it at the cinema strikes me as an unacceptable reduction in the quality of life. I could not possibly countenance that.

Mr. Chris Smith: The hon. Gentleman has a good point about the changes over the past 10 to 15 years. When video first appeared, everyone predicted that it would mean the death of the cinema, but precisely the opposite has been the case. Cinema attendance—at the bright lights in Bournemouth—has risen by 150 per cent. over 10 years, which proves that there can be a synergy between new technology available in the home and traditional forms of entertainment outside it.

Mr. Swayne: I thank the Secretary of State for that lucid exposition, with which I wholeheartedly agree.

I agree with almost everything that my hon. Friend the Member for East Surrey (Mr. Ainsworth) said, and the way in which he said it, but I differ with him on one or two minor points. He began by telling us that television represented one of the greatest educational opportunities, so I ask him to repeat an experiment that I conduct from time to time with my children. I ask them to read a story book for half an hour—to master a chapter, say—and then to tell me, coherently and in chronological order, about what they have read. I then ask them to watch a television programme for half an hour and do the same with that. The difference in the results is instructive, and serves as a powerful corrective for those who over-hype the educational possibilities of television.

Some examination has taken place, especially by the right hon. Member for Gorton, of the BBC charter. Undoubtedly when it was granted, it required the BBC to provide a broadcasting service, and that was appropriate, because there was no service then. That is no longer so. Therefore, it is proper to ask whether we still require the BBC to provide a full broadcasting service.

Should we not be more concerned that the BBC provides what other broadcasters cannot, in terms of the quality of programming? In that respect, I was encouraged by what

[Mr. Swayne]

the Secretary of State said about stretching audiences and raising their horizons. The right hon. Gentleman said that the BBC should do that "a little", but I think that it should do it a lot. It is nonsense for the BBC to pursue ratings. Its financial structure emancipates it from having to do so. That is precisely why it can afford to be innovative, to experiment and to concentrate on raising the sights and stretching the imagination of its audiences.

The way in which the BBC competes with commercial broadcasters is undesirable. I draw particular attention to local radio in that respect. Why, in the south-east of England—or, indeed, elsewhere—does the BBC provide a service that competes with other local radio stations? When I tune in to the local stations as I motor along, it is extraordinary how often I hear repeated the jingles telling me which station I am listening to. They are necessary; without the jingles one would have no idea which station one was listening to, because they are all the same.

Why is the BBC spending money, which should be used elsewhere, to provide a service identical to those provided by the market?

Mr. Peter Atkinson: I must dispute that, because, in the north-east of England, the local BBC station has a substantial audience, is well appreciated and deals with local matters. If one travels across to Cumbria or to Scotland one finds entirely different BBC local radio stations, with an entirely different agenda. Our local BBC station competes extremely well with Metro FM, which is one of the most successful commercial local radio stations in the country.

Mr. Swayne: I thank my hon. Friend for pointing that out, but I suggest that other commercial stations would probably provide a similar service. I remind him that my constituency stretches from Lymington, on the coast, to eight miles south of Salisbury, and, within an area of that size, there are different local radio services competing with one another and covering different local issues. None the less, between each zone, the output of the competitors is remarkable similar—so much so that they have to rely on jingles to remind the listener that there are several different stations.

The hon. Member for Lewes (Mr. Baker) raised an effective point about the declining standards of decency and morality on the broadcast media. We all receive letters complaining about the decline in standards, and surveys have shown that, over the past two years, public disquiet about standards on television has increased considerably. In particular, I have received a number of letters consequent upon some salacious, late-night programmes that have been more concerned with chasing ratings than anything else.

The Almighty, in his wisdom, did create man with a recreational interest in sex. An inevitable consequence is that that appetite will be addressed, and it will tend to be addressed on television late at night. My hon. Friend the Member for East Surrey pointed out that there is an off switch, and many people would do well to use it more often. He also, in an intervention in the speech made by the Secretary of State, referred to the possibility of teenagers' television screens going blank as a consequence of the change from analogue to digital. It might be appropriate if teenagers' television screens—and, indeed, those of younger children—went blank a little more often.

It is entirely appropriate that we should discuss the problems caused when adults do not take an effective interest and make informed decisions about what vulnerable young people and children watch. We must consider whether it is appropriate for the state to take on a greater role in protecting them. It is no good shying away from the word censorship, because that is what I mean. Censorship exists, and the only question is whether we have got right the balance of what we censor. I suggest, in the case of some late-night television programmes, that we have got the balance wrong and should re-examine it. We cannot rely on the off switch alone.

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: My hon. Friend is making a compelling point well. However, does he agree that public attitudes to the issue can be more complicated than they at first appear? Somebody came up to me not long ago and said, "I want to know what you are going to do about all this filth on television." I asked him what he meant, and he said, "All the disgusting filth and sex, and all those films they have on night after night." I told him that he did not have to watch it, and he thought for a minute and said, "Yeah, that's what my wife says."

Mr. Swayne: His wife is right, and I am certain that I would get fewer letters complaining about the subject if my constituents used their off switches a little more. However, it is right for us to take account of the fact that many children have televisions in their rooms and are not protected properly by parental influence. Many parents are feckless, but to what extent should the state step into that gap? I shrink from interference, because I believe in freedom of speech and I do not like regulations that tell people what they should or should not do. However, we should exercise more care, because the current balance is wrong.

The hon. Member for Lewes drew the House's attention to programmes that rely almost exclusively on violence and the exposition of violence for their dramatic effect. I agree with that, but a more insidious and troubling problem is caused less by drama and more by soap opera. The problem arises when scenes of physical violence—and of violence of language and of sexual behaviour—are insinuated into ordinary scenes of daily life. That practice gives the impression that such violence is normal and acceptable. The programmes involved are not protected by the watershed. They go out early in the day, and can be seen by children when they come home from school—indeed, in many respects, they are designed for that audience.

It is in such soap operas that the pervasive corrosion and corruption is evident. They often appear innocuous, but that only makes it more difficult to exercise the discipline and authority of using the off switch.

When our constituents write to us with their concerns, it is not acceptable to tell them that Ministers cannot take decisions on those matters because that power has been handed over to the independent organisations whose duty is to maintain standards, and that complaints and representations should be made to those bodies. Our constituents' letters tell us that people consider that those

watchdogs have failed, and that they want politicians to do something about the problem. They tell us that the system is not working, and that they require their representatives to act on their behalf.

Members of Parliament have a proper concern about low turnouts at elections, and all sorts of extraordinary procedures are being put in place to reverse that trend. We like to exercise our minds on the enormously important political questions of the day, such as whether Britain is to be ruled by Parliament or by a bureaucracy in Brussels, but our constituents are more worried about what is on the television. If they get no response when they write to us with their complaints, they will get the impression that there is no point in voting, as nothing will change no matter how they vote. We must address the legitimate concerns of the growing number of people worried about standards of morality and decency on television—otherwise, we can expect only their contempt and derision.

About two and a quarter hours of religious programmes are put out every week by ITV stations, but they have been shifted to later slots, away from peak time. In addition, the output of religious programmes on BBC1 and BBC2 has decreased by one third over the past 10 years—a period in which the BBC's total programme output has increased by more than 50 per cent. There has therefore been a huge reduction in the total output of religious programmes output and in the amount of prime time devoted to such programmes. That trend is accelerating, as religious output has fallen by 15 per cent. in the last year alone.

The BBC strategy document entitled "2000 and Beyond" makes virtually no mention of religious broadcasting at all, and neither does the corporation's most recent annual report. It is therefore entirely inappropriate for the BBC to have any role in the regulation of religious broadcasting. We should remove BBC control over appointments to the secretariat of the Central Religious Advisory Committee, which should be entirely independent. Will the Minister address that point?

Religious broadcasters do not need the BBC and commercial radio stations to do their job. They should be able to get on with it themselves, but the law prevents that. As the Secretary of State said, the Broadcasting Act 1990 prevents religious broadcasters from having anything but a local radio analogue licence. It is difficult for anyone to get hold of one of those, and it is therefore unsurprising that there is only one religious broadcaster using analogue radio—Premiere, in London. There are also the two national and excellent United Christian Broadcasters' channels on satellite. However, outside London, one cannot hear Christian radio unless one possesses satellite equipment or a cable licence. That is the practical consequence of the law.

The Secretary of State said that the digital revolution would bring a huge opportunity for increased choice, and I welcome that. Religious broadcasters should be emancipated from the law and allowed to take advantage of that. However, the Broadcasting Act 1996 makes the situation even worse. Religious broadcasters are excluded from holding any territorial digital licence. Religious broadcasting is flourishing in Europe, but the practical effect of our policy is to ban all religious output, Christian and other. That is a clear breach of the liberty of freedom of speech. David Pannick QC has given the opinion that our law breaches the European convention on human rights. The Minister should address that point.

Religious broadcasting is being increasingly excluded from mainstream television channels, and the Education Act 1944 is being ignored. I recently received a circular from my local authority which, though full of low-grade sociological gobbledegook, effectively said that it could no longer enforce the 1944 Act's provisions. I strongly suspect that my generation was the last to be taught the faith at school. There is therefore all the more reason to fill the vacuum with religious broadcasting, but we have banned it.

There is increasing disquiet about moral standards on television, and that could clearly be addressed by religious broadcasting, but the practical implication of our policy is that it has been banned. Elderly people find it increasingly difficult to go to church, and they could be satisfied by religious broadcasting. It need not be denominational or sectarian. Take the example of the United Christian Broadcasters; the output is not inflammatory, and it provides healing and reconciliation. A survey of listeners in the island of Ireland, which crosses the sectarian divide, has made that clear. There are no grounds for disquiet on denominational grounds.

Mr. Baker: How would the hon. Gentleman give extra access to religions of all denominations while not allowing airspace to pseudo-religious organisations that might be unwelcome? Is it his view on freedom of speech that everyone should have access to the airwaves?

Mr. Swayne: My view is most definitely in favour of freedom of speech. As I am a member of a mainstream Christian denomination, I should prefer a particular type of output, but that would be improper. We must accept that it is incorrect simply to make it illegal for any licence—national or digital—to be held. The secondary issues arise as a result of that legal ban. We may impose certain licensing conditions on breadth of output or whatever, but we must first consider the law that prohibits religious broadcasters from holding a licence at all.

The Minister for Tourism, Film and Broadcasting will be assisted in this matter by the views of the House. Earlier in this Session, when my hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Mr. Leigh) introduced a ten-minute Bill, my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Mr. Loughton) and I ensured that the House had an opportunity to divide on the matter. The vote was 138 to 9 in favour of allowing our hon. Friend to introduce his Bill. That is a powerful demonstration of the views of the House.

The Minister is not responsible for the current state of the law, but she does have the power to alter it. I hope that she has the will to do so, because there is a strong and vocal constituency which deserves to be heard. That group realises that it is appropriate to deal with that matter at a time when we have a Prime Minister who openly professes his religious faith, a Home Secretary who professes his religious faith and a Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport who also professes a religious faith. It would be difficult to say that the matter will not be addressed; if it cannot be dealt with now, when can we deal with it?

I am grateful to have this opportunity to speak in a wide-ranging debate, but the House will be aware that Second Reading debates can also be wide ranging. I suggest to the Minister that we should hold more such debates, so that we can remedy the problems that we are discussing.

12.42 pm

Mr. John Grogan (Selby): The Americans take about two months to do it; the papacy takes about one month to do it; the British Government do it brutally during an evening; but the BBC proposes to do it over the course of a year. The exercise to which I refer is the changing of the chief executive of the organisation. That length of time is likely to prove irritating and too long for those of us who are great friends of the BBC—I chair the all-party group on the BBC—and who agree with the polls undertaken for the Davies panel. Those polls reveal that 50 per cent. of people think that the BBC represents good value and more than 50 per cent. think that it is good for Britain's image abroad.

Taking such a long time will not help managerial efficiency and coherence during the vital few months that lie ahead for the BBC. If Greg Dyke wants to introduce changes, the sooner he gains total control, the better. I point out to the hon. Member for Lewes (Mr. Baker) that John Birt does a good job in many ways. Without producer choice, the BBC would probably not have survived; £600 million has been saved while John Birt was in charge. However, it must be a case of, "The king is dead; long live the king." The millennium would be a good time to go, because the BBC and its programmes will, once again, be at the centre of the nation's attention—perhaps even the centre of international attention.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton (Mr. Kaufman) accused the Davies panel of being obsessed with the BBC. That is not an accusation that anyone would make against him. He talked about ideas popping into the heads of BBC executives. He reaffirmed his view that the BBC should be privatised, and said that it was appropriate that "Walking with Dinosaurs" was being shown at present. Let us consider a typical Monday night on the BBC of a few weeks ago. Would anything on BBC television or radio have tempted him away from the internet?

As well as "Walking with Dinosaurs", there was Jeremy Isaacs's "Millennium" and "EastEnders", which is a good example of what my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State refers to as "making the popular good". "The Major Years" might have tempted my right hon. Friend the Member for Gorton later that night—if any programme is a good candidate for continual repeats on all BBC channels, that is it. He could have tuned into BBC Radio 5 and heard classic commentary on Premier League football, or into Radio 4 and heard a classic play, the like of which is not broadcast on any other public sector radio channel in Europe. He could even have tuned into BBC local radio, which indeed has a distinctive voice. In some parts of the country, it is the only speech-based radio broadcasting available locally.

I found annexe 8 of the Davies report fascinating: it sets out in economic terms the case for public sector broadcasting and for the BBC. Its four points are based on the concepts of public good and market failure. The report states that public broadcasting services should:

"act as a counterweight to the private concentration of ownership . . . provide a centre of excellence which both makes and broadcasts programmes . . . be large enough to influence the market and so act as the guarantor of policy",

and

"widen choice both now and in the future by complementing the market through the pursuit of public service purposes."

It seems to me that that role will be as relevant in the digital world as it was in the analogue world.

I welcome the fact that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has called in consultants to examine carefully the BBC's figures. When that exercise is complete, the case for an increase in BBC resources will remain. Whereas the commercial sector increased its resources by 10 per cent. a year during the 1990s, largely though subscription television, the BBC managed only a 1 per cent. increase. In the early 1990s, the BBC had 40 per cent. of broadcasting revenue, whereas it will have only 20 per cent. in 2008, according to the Davies panel.

There is a case for the BBC to invest in new digital services and to be given the money and the freedom to experiment. BBC Online is an extremely successful experiment, which receives more hits than any other website in Europe. BBC Knowledge has tremendous potential and there is a clear case for a BBC children's channel to counter the cartoons shown continuously on many of the satellite children's channels.

On BBC News 24, there is a case for the BBC to use its news-gathering resources to produce a news channel, not least because Back Benchers such as myself are more likely to get on that than on mainstream channels. Where BBC News 24 competes with Sky News, with viewers having access to both, the viewing ratio is about 50:50. In addition, it is extremely important that BBC World News continues as a counterweight to CNN in world broadcasting markets.

I do not go along with the Davies report recommendation on the digital licence fee. There is little in the report about likely evasion rates or the additional costs of collecting such a fee. It hardly seems worth levying the new licence for only a limited number of years, as the report suggests. It would have a marginal deterrent effect on viewers taking up digital television by giving them an incentive to wait until the digital fee was merged back into the main licence fee. However, unless the BBC develops digital services of quality, the take-up of digital will never reach the 95 per cent. target, because only a limited number of people will get digital for sports, movies and other specialist services.

There is a strong case for additional resources and, if that case is proved by the Secretary of State's consultants, the licence fee should be raised. The licence fee is not regarded in the same way as the poll tax was: rates of evasion of the television licence fee are decreasing, suggesting that it is generally accepted, albeit grudgingly. An opportunity to increase the fee may shortly become available: the previous Government's licence fee settlement ensured that the fee would decrease by 3.5 per cent. in real terms over the next two years, but the new Labour Government need not remain committed to that settlement. The Davies report spoke of a £5 increase in the licence fee for two years as an alternative to the digital fee, and that proposal should be considered.

I want pensioners to be exempted from any licence fee increase. That would cost about £25 million to £30 million, which I would call a judicious use of public expenditure, rather than a pre-election bribe, as a similar proposal was described earlier. If the Government are to make good Labour's commitment to enabling pensioners to enjoy a share in the nation's rising earnings, we have to look for ways to do that. It would be very much in the

spirit of the winter bonus if pensioners were to receive a £10 or £15 voucher to compensate for any increase in the licence fee.

I disagree fundamentally with the privatisation of BBC Resources and BBC Worldwide. BBC Resources is the craft base of the entire television industry. Many technicians who are trained through BBC Resources go on to do good work in the independent sector. BBC Resources does not make a profit at present—although it is moving more into profit—so it could be privatised effectively only if business from the BBC were guaranteed for many years to come. The costs to the BBC are likely to rise in a seller's market.

BBC Worldwide is a good example of public enterprise efficiency within the BBC. Some £80 million now comes from BBC Worldwide, which is an increase from £50 million a few years ago. My right hon. Friend the Member for Gorton must spell it out: is he in favour of the BBC undertaking commercial activities? It is a question of selling off the family silver.

Many hon. Members mentioned sport during the debate. I was surprised that my right hon. Friend the Member for Gorton seemed to show no interest in a decision that will affect the football teams in his city, which must be the greatest footballing city in the country at the moment. According to today's *Financial Times*, Premier League rights—both live and recorded—may be sold exclusively to BSkyB for the first time. Several BSkyB executives are apparently having a cosy chat with two of the rich clubs in an attempt to stitch up the deal.

Such an arrangement would be absolutely catastrophic for many football supporters up and down the country who would be denied any access to Premier League matches. The Secretary of State said that he will review the A and B lists of protected events. Programmes on the A list must be shown live on terrestrial television and there must be access to recorded highlights of programmes on the B list. If the Premier League decides to go down the route of selling all its football rights to the highest bidder, there is a case for putting Premier League football on the B list. That would separate live and recorded rights, and "Match of the Day" or its equivalent programmes would continue to be broadcast.

I congratulate the Secretary of State on extending protection for sporting events—the so-called "crown jewels"—to a majority of the population. The next football World cup will be shown in its entirety on terrestrial television. That protection came in the nick of time because World cup rights were sold for the first time not to the European Broadcasting Union but to a German media entrepreneur, Mr. Kirch. He will have to sell those rights to terrestrial television, which is a good thing. I urge the Secretary of State to consider the case of Premier League football.

I think that some sports rights holders are realising for the first time that they will get a better deal overall if they allow at least some terrestrial coverage. For example, the Walker cup—which is an amateur event—was watched on BBC "Grandstand" by more people than the Ryder cup, which gained only 600,000 viewers live on Sky Sports. That has given the golfing authorities something to reflect upon.

Sky Sports has extended the range of choice for the sports fan, and done a wonderful job with its technical presentation. ITV Sport has done well to bounce back in recent years to broadcast popular sports such as football, rugby, boxing and motor racing, which command high advertising rates. The BBC should continue to put both minority and crown jewel sports together in magazine programmes such as "Grandstand". The BBC has done a good job this year promoting athletics, and I am glad that Greg Dyke has listed sport as one of his priorities.

I agree with the hon. Member for Hexham (Mr. Atkinson) about the importance of universal access to channels across platforms. As a Yorkshireman, I was sorry to hear my hon. Friend the Member for North–West Norfolk (Dr. Turner) say that north-west Norfolk is receiving Yorkshire regional news. My hon. Friend claimed that his constituents receive crime reports from Burnley. If that is true, the problem is very bad because Burnley is in Lancashire. The signal must be getting mixed up somewhere.

I shall conclude by quoting Michael Grade on the subject of the BBC. A few weeks ago, he said:

"The BBC is not so much an institution as an idea."

That idea is public service broadcasting and we would do very well to preserve that in the digital world that lies ahead.

12.55 pm

Mr. Desmond Browne (Kilmarnock and Loudoun): I, too, thank my right hon. Friend the Secretary for State for the opportunity to debate this important issue. In common with other hon. Members, I welcome his remarks about many aspects of the matter, particularly the switch-over, as we are being encouraged to call it, from analogue to digital.

I agree with much of what my hon. Friend the Member for Selby (Mr. Grogan) said. I enjoyed, as I usually do, the contribution of the hon. Member for New Forest, West (Mr. Swayne). In his own inimitable style, he put his finger on many issues that are important to our constituents. The common touch is much hyped, but he undoubtedly has it. However, in what by his normal standards could be described as a measured speech, he was long on problems but short on solutions.

The challenge of how the state should intervene between inactive parents lounging in front of the television in their living room and their unsupervised teenage children channel-hopping in their bedroom has defeated me thus far in the debate, but perhaps the Minister will rise to it more effectively in summing up the debate.

It is a particular honour to speak in the same debate as my right hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton (Mr. Kaufman), the Chairman of the Culture, Media and Sport Committee. Many of us are somewhat in awe of his comprehensive knowledge of these matters, which, when coupled with his eloquence, makes him a formidable advocate. Accordingly, it was with some trepidation that I anticipated speaking in his presence on this subject for the first time in the House. I fear that my less well-honed opinions may rattle his cage, and I suspect that I may shortly be the victim of one of his broadsides.

[Mr. Desmond Browne]

Before I move on to a matter on which I may disagree with my right hon. Friend, I point out that I agree with him that the time for free television licences for pensioner households has arrived. We could debate whether that should be achieved by vouchers or by simply giving all pensioner households greater financial wherewithal—I should prefer the latter option, to preserve the BBC's independence—but in principle I support him.

I also agree with my right hon. Friend and other hon. Friends that we should reject the digital licence fee, for the simple reason that it would not be accepted by the public. The move towards digital television cannot be compared with the transfer from monochrome to colour television. The public do not have sufficient knowledge to understand what they would get from digital television, and we may not achieve that level of knowledge in the foreseeable future. I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Selby that, if the case for more money for the BBC stands up to independent scrutiny, we should just increase the licence fee.

The debate about the future of broadcasting is timely. To reinforce the point that has already been made by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State, my right hon. Friend the Member for Gorton and my hon. Friend the Member for North–West Norfolk (Dr. Turner), I shall quote from the foreword to the independent review panel's report. It says that

"we doubt whether many people have yet had their horizons lifted to the full potential of digital technology—limitless numbers of channels, full access to massive archives of programmes, the creation of 'virtual channels' to suit individual tastes, total portability of equipment, convergence between the web and broadcasting, convergence between both of these and personal communications, interactivity between households, programme makers and the commercial suppliers of all manner of consumer products, and no doubt a myriad of new applications which are as yet barely a glint in their inventor's eye.

This qualifies without any doubt as the Fourth Broadcasting Revolution".

At such a time of revolution in broadcasting it is appropriate that we debate, among other issues, the future of public service broadcasting. In this country, of course, that means the future of the BBC. I shall take up an opportunity presented by my right hon. Friend the Member for Gorton, who referred to "Walking with Dinosaurs". It is fortunate, not unfortunate, for public service broadcasting, that that hugely successful BBC1 series should arrive on the scene now—for two reasons. First, it achieved the remarkable phenomenon of attracting an audience of almost 19 million people for a series of educational television programmes. In a persuasive opinion piece in the *Evening Standard* on Friday, David Aaronovitch concluded:

"This one series is, in itself, an overwhelming argument for the retention of the BBC and the licence fee."

That opinion piece was prompted by a shared experience of intellectual stimulation that the author had had with his child when watching the series with her. Perhaps I think that his piece was persuasive because I, too, underwent a similar experience with my children. I am sure that it was shared by countless millions of families throughout the UK as children and the BBC opened the eyes of parents and people of my generation to the magnificence of these giant creatures, which dominated the earth during the Triassic, Jurassic and cretaceous periods. Before I saw the programme, I did not even know about those periods.

The second timely reason is the health warning that is implicit in the subject matter of the programmes. However prolific and influential in its heyday, no organism can be absolutely immune from the threat of extinction. Once vanished, it may be impossible to retain what has been lost.

The evolution and survival of any organism is dependent on its natural environment and the predators it faces. "Walking with Dinosaurs" reminds us that, in the BBC, there is something worth preserving, and that, if we do not actively manage its environment, its survival could be at risk.

The series further reminds us that there is very little new under the sun. Certain predators have always been around. The Jurassic period provides many prototypes for the great creatures that inhabit the broadcasting environment of today. The coelurus is 2 m long with, as the BBC on-line fact file says,

"grasping hands and a long snout."

The ankylosaurus has a skull that is broad and thick, leaving little room for a brain. The fact file says that it was not built to reach upwards. I could give further examples of the coincidence between creatures of that period of prehistory and present-day inhabitants of the broadcasting environment but, as I shall return to the analogy with "Walking with Dinosaurs" later, I do not want to overstretch it now. I shall leave hon. Members to their own devices in deciding to whom those descriptions apply.

Why should we worry about the BBC's survival? After all, it has survived major environmental changes before now, especially at its birth and at the start of commercial television. I remind the House that, at the BBC's birth, the Government created a monopoly for it to live in to protect broadcasting from the predators that still dominate the field in the United States, and in that environment, it flourished.

Later, when commercial television provided competition, the Government acted again to create a highly regulated environment to ensure that broadcasting developed in a way that was as beneficial as possible to the public. In the past 10 years, major social, political, market and technological developments have prompted fundamental changes in the broadcasting environment. Will the BBC, which can pull off miracles such as "Walking with Dinosaurs", survive in anything like its current form? Not unless public policy decides that it should, and works to create an environment that, while allowing the benefits of digital to flourish, does not damage the element of public service broadcasting that we want to preserve.

In my view, the answer to the question put by the hon. Member for East Surrey (Mr. Ainsworth) requires two other questions. We must ask ourselves what bits of the BBC we want to keep, and what bits we would want to recreate if we lost them. There are two answers: the services that people get from the BBC that they cannot get from anywhere else; and services for which there are alternatives but which the BBC does best, and so gives the others a lead, raising standards for all. It is with alarm that I find myself in almost total agreement with the hon. Member for New Forest, West on those two issues.

A prime example of such services is BBC journalism. The BBC, although not infallible, is generally a source of impartial and accurate information, which is a vital constituent of a healthy democracy. It does not always meet its target, but it aims at the highest standards of broadcast journalism. I suspect that politicians' repeated complaints of bias by the BBC are in inverse proportion to the public's perception of such bias.

As a public service with no competing commercial considerations, the BBC has uniquely nothing else to aim for but the highest standards of broadcast journalism. That means that a quality kite-marked British journalism is available for listeners and viewers on as wide a range of outlets as technology permits, on their own terms, on whatever medium, whenever and, increasingly, with BBC World and BBC World Service, wherever they are. A further example of what we should keep is the BBC's educational role, the range and quality of which are not offered by any other broadcaster.

As the Secretary of State said, using the media to promote social cohesion is likely to be much less effective in the digital universe than in the analogue. The digital universe will be much larger and highly fragmented. In that environment, the BBC's role will become more important, not less. The BBC needs to be embedded in that new environment and to fill it with content that is drawn from the rich diversity of cultures in the United Kingdom—programming about our communities, made by members of our communities, using the full range of languages and accents to be found in the isles, reflecting the breadth in contemporary British culture.

If that is the sort of broadcasting that we want to preserve, we will need to ensure that, in benefiting from market forces, we also regulate to allow public service broadcasting to survive. If it were to become extinct, we would not be able to clone it back into existence. Future generations will not find an example frozen in the tundra from which to extract the DNA of public service broadcasting. It will be lost for ever.

The ability to produce series such as "Walking with Dinosaurs" is the result of decades of evolution, production talent, credibility with the academic community, building audience expectations of what channels will offer, and the technology to provide supporting activities such as the website. It is what one would expect a highly evolved organism such as the BBC to be able to do. Do we want that to disappear?

1.6 pm

Mr. Gareth Thomas (Clwyd, West): I share the view of many hon. Members that the debate is timely. I am grateful that the Government have found time to raise the issue on the Floor of the House in an Adjournment debate. It is a pity that it is during what might be described as an off-peak period. I hope that we can have a repeat in the near future.

I enjoyed greatly the gusto with which my right hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton (Mr. Kaufman) launched his broadside against the BBC, but he was more than a little unfair on the Gavyn Davies review, bearing in mind that its terms of reference—to examine future BBC funding—were limited by the Government. In that context, the allegation that the review panel was obsessed with the BBC seems to be entirely unfounded and unfair on the BBC itself.

We should not be over-sentimental about the BBC's role, or dwell too much on the past. The BBC should not rest on its not inconsiderable laurels. Surely the basic principle that is at stake and that underlies much of the debate is: can an entirely free and unregulated market enable public service broadcasting to flourish, not as a marginal activity, such as we find in the United States and other parts of the world, but as a mainstream broadcaster with big audiences and—this is the crucial point—a major influence on the whole of the broadcasting market; what is referred to in media jargon as the broadcasting ecology? There can be no doubt that the BBC's public service broadcasting ethos has influenced the whole of the broadcasting market in the UK.

The BBC faces a major challenge. I quote what the BBC itself has underlined as the challenge in its recent publication "2000 and Beyond." I endorse these words:

"The most important challenge for the BBC is to continue to fulfil its long-standing purposes: setting a benchmark for quality; guaranteeing a range and type of programmes other broadcasts will not, and guaranteeing universally available, high quality television, radio and new media services, such as online, and other digital services in an increasingly fierce commercial environment."

Experience tells us that the public service broadcasting ethos will not survive unless there is a secure base of funding for the BBC. The conclusions of the Davies report are balanced and cannot be dismissed lightly. The members of the committee obviously took great care and time to balance the arguments. I am surprised that some hon. Members have attacked the report in intemperate terms.

There is such a thing as market failure, as my hon. Friend the Member for Selby (Mr. Grogan) said. An unregulated multi-channel market with predatory multi-media conglomerates appealing to the lowest common denominator through an endless diet of game shows and quizzes creates problems. Can it deliver the public service broadcasting that we apparently all want to preserve? There is at least a risk that it cannot. In those circumstances, the Government must be prepared to accept that the BBC has a case for extra funding to help it during this formative stage, while the multi-channel market is developing and we enter the fourth broadcasting revolution.

The important point about the BBC, which has not come out during the debate, is that it is a free-to-air service which provides universal access. There will always be a need for a service that informs and educates impartially, takes risks and stretches horizons.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Mr. Browne) on using the ingenious analogy of the dinosaurs and their need to adapt to change to survive. That is an apposite analogy for the media.

The committee's conclusion was that the BBC would be frozen out of the digital market unless it got extra funding. I share the scepticism of other hon. Members about the appropriateness of the digital fee supplement, which has been described as a poll tax or a fine on households that take out a subscription with a digital provider. Even if one does not accept this particular recommendation, there is a case for extra funding. I welcome the fact that the Government are minded to test rigorously the BBC's figures, which appear to have a broad-brush approach. That evidence does suggest that there is a real demand for extra funding. It would be better

[Mr. Gareth Thomas]

to adopt the alternative course mapped out by the report by providing a £5 increase for each of the next two years—a substantial increase above the rate of inflation.

The vexed issue of concessionary licences has exercised many on both sides of the House for many years. The present system is complex, arbitrary and unfair. I would like to see it changed. I am sure that right hon. and hon. Members will agree that pensioners should get a better deal. Having read the report, however, I am persuaded that it would be wrong to extend the scheme. My right hon. Friend the Member for Gorton made what I presume were light-hearted remarks about electoral bribes, but putting a charge on the BBC's finances by making it pay for free licences for pensioner households would amount to just that. However, something needs to be done to address the problem as many pensioners are dependent on television. I would like a voucher system similar to the winter payments system to be introduced to help pensioners with the cost of their television licences.

In the post-devolutionary era, the BBC has an important role in cementing the countries of the United Kingdom. It is a very British organisation and it has a strong influence in Wales and Scotland. I pay tribute to the work of the BBC in Wales, which attracts 48 per cent. of the viewing and listening public. Its share of the audience is far higher than in England and Scotland. The BBC provides services in Welsh and English in what many people regard as a very professional and efficient way.

It is superficially attractive to engage in the sport of BBC baiting and there is a great deal of that in the printed media, but one has to ask why. Many of the media conglomerates that have been referred to already have vested interests in attacking the BBC and tarnishing its image. Perhaps some hon. Members have fallen into that trap too.

We must ensure a secure future for the BBC and I hope that the Government will accept the main recommendations of the report even if they do not accept the proposed digital licence supplement. I share the grave reservations that have been expressed about the recommendation to sell off BBC Resources and I endorse what several hon. Members have said about that. However, I see no reason why the BBC should not be subject to more rigorous accounting control. The BBC is jealous of its independence and rather nervous about too much Government control or regulation, but I see no objection in principle to the National Audit Office having a role in ensuring that BBC resources are accounted for properly. It is essential that the organisation is seen to be fair and transparent.

We are at a crossroads. The public service ethos that the BBC symbolises is essential. We have to preserve it, but that can only be done at a price. I earnestly ask the Government to take on board the major recommendations in the Davies report.

1.19 pm

Mr. Christopher Fraser (Mid-Dorset and North Poole): I am honoured to have the opportunity to speak in what has been an interesting and wide-ranging debate that has addressed a number of the important issues affecting the future of broadcasting. I am encouraged that the Secretary of State acknowledged the impact of digital broadcasting and that he is setting two tests for availability and affordability.

The shadow Secretary of State, my hon. Friend the Member for East Surrey (Mr. Ainsworth), rightly pointed out how important broadcasting is to the whole country. He also rightly highlighted the position of radio—an issue not addressed properly by the Davies panel in its report.

I am grateful for the kind words of the right hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Mr. Kaufman), who is not in his place. He made a comprehensive speech. Like him, I am a member of the Select Committee on Culture, Media and Sport, but I do not speak on behalf of the Committee in this debate. The right hon. Gentleman made many observations. He is always robust, and is often judged outside this place by the column inches that he gets. I can only assume that he is arranging that at the moment.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hexham (Mr. Atkinson), as ever, made a sensible and astute speech, and rightly spoke up for his constituents. Issues of choice and availability are extremely important.

The hon. Member for North-West Norfolk (Dr. Turner)—who is not in his place—has often told this House of his regional difficulties. I shall not refer to the fact that most of Norfolk is Conservative. I assume that he has returned to his constituency to sort out some of those difficulties.

The hon. Member for Lewes (Mr. Baker), the Liberal Democrat spokesman, highlighted some of the problems of minority groups, and the points that he made have echoed around the Chamber. The hon. Member for Stevenage (Barbara Follett) gave an account of the BBC and of access to BBC News 24 in her constituency, and referred to the reach of digital television.

My hon. Friend the Member for New Forest, West (Mr. Swayne), as ever, articulated common sense about the broadcasting revolution. I am pleased that the entertainments of Bournemouth featured well in his speech, and I, for one, would encourage that. He rightly points to standards in broadcasting, which are relevant to today's debate.

The hon. Member for Selby (Mr. Grogan) spoke about the position and role of the chief executive of the BBC, and referred to choice. I thought at one point that his speech was a script suited best for the *Radio Times*. I am pleased to say that the hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Mr. Browne) supported much of what my hon. Friend the Member for New Forest, West said, and that is encouraging. Like the hon. Gentleman, I enormously enjoyed the series "Walking with Dinosaurs" with my children and family. Finally, the hon. Member for Clwyd, West (Mr. Thomas) spoke about the BBC's position in the broadcasting revolution.

There is no argument among us that the advent of digitisation has changed the nature of broadcasting. The digital age will end broadcasting as we have known it. Comparatively new services such as satellite and cable will no longer necessarily be free to air. Terrestrial television will not necessarily always be free of charge. If it were not difficult enough to decide between four or five channels, in future we could be faced with more than 200.

Hon. Members face a daunting challenge if we are to keep pace with the speed of change, both technical and commercial—not only within broadcasting, but across the communications sector which, as has been pointed out, includes the internet. That change has turned broadcasting into one of the biggest growth sectors of the late 1990s, with perhaps even greater potential extending into the new

millennium. A great many jobs and commercial opportunities have been created, not least as a result of the Broadcasting Act 1996, brought in by the previous Government.

That legislation established the right environment in the UK for the digital revolution to take place. We are at the forefront of development of digital terrestrial television. There is no argument about the fact that the principle broadcast medium is television, and that it has an enormous and potentially beneficial influence on our lives. It is not only an entertainment medium, but a source of information, knowledge, news and current affairs, both international, and national and local. It offers visual access to sport, arts and even, I am pleased to say, politics. It is especially important to the elderly and the housebound.

The digital revolution will have a profound effect on society in many ways. In these early days of the new technological era, we must reflect on the fact that, as diversity grows, it will bring not only a wider choice for viewers but greater competition among broadcasters. We must ask whether we can be confident that we will not lose the best of what we have now in the pursuit of innovation, sacrificing quality for quantity.

The Minister for Tourism, Film and Broadcasting will recall that, in the debate on broadcasting of 28 April, I raised concerns about social exclusion. She agreed that television can contribute to an information-rich and socially inclusive society. I hope that she will develop her argument and tell us what progress the Government have made in their consideration of the way forward.

Perhaps the most obvious anomaly affecting broadcasting is that of regional reception. I welcome the Secretary of State's comments on coverage. I, too, am concerned that we take on board the point—made by our constituents and by other hon. Members—that the digital television era should offer at least the level of coverage that analogue systems have attained: estimated, as we have already heard, at 99.4 per cent. of UK households.

I remain equally concerned that social anomalies still exist. Is it not right that the new technology—digitally broadcast television and radio—should be equally available to all members of society? The Secretary of State referred to his statement in September to the Royal Television Society, in which he announced his proposals for analogue switch-off. We welcome the opportunity to hear his comments at first hand in the House and we broadly support his approach, but I urge him to consider carefully the problems and unintended consequences associated with switch-off. What will the consequences be if take-off is slow? We must ensure that no one is left out in the cold. What will happen if switch-off occurs before digital television is both universally available and readily affordable?

I share the Secretary of State's vision of basic internet access for everyone with a television and a telephone. Certainly, the housebound and those who rely on television for information and communication could greatly benefit from such a core package of services, but how will it benefit those who already struggle to pay their telephone bill and for whom the additional cost of internet use would be prohibitive? Will the Minister clarify how the Government envisage the internet benefiting the poorest and most vulnerable in society?

In an increasingly competitive environment, how will the Government encourage broadcasters to provide what the Secretary of State called new and sophisticated services for the disabled? The Royal National Institute for the Deaf is conducting a continuing campaign on behalf of those with sensory disabilities. In the debate on 28 April, the Minister told the House that she had written to the broadcasters to ask what they are doing to encourage the development of digital services for the hard of hearing. Perhaps she can take this opportunity to tell us what responses she has received and how she will answer the RNID's call for Parliament to champion its members' desire for equal access to digital television through subtitling?

That is surely not a matter for regulation, although many other areas may well be. Standards of broadcasting by commercial channels are regulated by the Independent Television Commission and the BBC regulates itself. Both are subject to judgments, without the power of sanction, by the Broadcasting Standards Council. I believe that we in the House are agreed that the new technology and diversity in broadcasting, including not only digital television but the internet, means that there must be a fundamental review of the regulatory environment. I look forward to hearing the Government's proposals—in the House first.

It is essential to have a regulatory environment that provides safeguards to protect the innocent and the vulnerable. As the number of channels increases, we must accept that it would be impossible to regulate globally, or to have the invasive regulation that the present system allows. However, that need not mean that we cannot aspire to high standards, or that broadcasters should not strive voluntarily to set codes of acceptable practice. As many of my hon. Friends, including my hon. Friend the Member for New Forest, West, have said, we must not give our constituents the impression that such matters are of no importance to Members of Parliament.

That takes us back to what has been said about Christian broadcasting. It is a pity that the current law restricts the opportunities available to such religious groups. Will the Minister expand on that subject?

Inevitably, our debate has been drawn to the subject of how that world-renowned public institution, the BBC, can survive the upheaval taking place around it. There is no doubt that the BBC must be part of the digital revolution, but no one wants to see a decline in the quality that it provides, for which it is respected throughout the world.

On the other hand, as has been said by at least two contributors to the debate, the BBC must not become a dinosaur. As I wrote in my notes for the debate, I can tell the House that it was an enormous relief to find that the programme "Walking with Dinosaurs" was not about the launch of the BBC's annual report.

As hon. Members are aware, the task of recommending how the BBC should be funded was given to a review panel under the chairmanship of Gavyn Davies. Among the panel's proposals were the introduction of a digital licence fee, the injection of private capital into the BBC, and a review of aspects of the concessionary licence scheme.

The Opposition believe that, in recommending a digital licence fee, the panel has recommended a tax on innovation. What is to be gained by discouraging digital take-up in that way? I would value the Minister's comments on that subject, because the inevitable result will be further delay in the date of switch-off, if the decision is based on the parameters set out today by the Secretary of State.

[Mr. Christopher Fraser]

As the shadow Secretary of State, my hon. Friend the Member for East Surrey said, another issue raised by the Davies panel is the idea that the BBC should seek to sell some of BBC Worldwide via an injection of private capital, and also to sell the bulk of its resources. Does the Minister agree with those recommendations? Does she think that they would allow the BBC to be more competitive? If they would allow it to concentrate its efforts on producing the high quality programmes that people expect of a public service broadcaster, would that not be broadly welcomed?

The Conservatives share the view that the present concessions on television licences for pensioners and the disabled are unfair, unduly complex, and arbitrary. The cost of a licence increased on 1 April, and a colour licence now costs more than one and a half times the single person's weekly state pension; a 73p increase in the pension will do little to make good the deficit.

Any promises of concessions for the disadvantaged or elderly, some of whom rely on television as their only medium of contact with the outside world, should not be used as party political gimmicks. They are certainly not the preserve of one political party.

We welcome the recommendation by the right hon. Member for Gorton about BBC-funded concessions for the elderly. Does the Minister support the view that the existing derisory concession for the blind should be increased to reflect more accurately the sort of access that visually impaired people have to television programmes, as has already been requested for the deaf? Should the BBC not look closely into such matters and offer some solutions?

With the digital revolution, there is the future ever directly in front of us. I have spoken at some length, as have other contributors, about the BBC. Any debate over the funding of broadcasting will inevitably focus on the corporation's future as a public sector broadcaster. It is clear that the BBC provides an invaluable service to people in this country and those who listen to, and watch it, throughout the world. Its contribution to broadcasting history is undoubted, but now it must define its role in the new era without jeopardising that reputation.

Let us not forget the continued good work of the commercial sector in providing excellent and popular programmes. The advent of digital television has provided a wealth of new opportunities that have been taken up with enthusiasm by established and new programme makers alike.

Broadcasting faces an exciting and diverse future. It is right to do what we can to encourage the most competitive marketplace to drive standards up and prices down. Today's debate has been a constructive step in that direction and I am sure that, given some of the contributions from right hon. and hon. Members, the broadcasters cannot avoid listening to us.

1.36 pm

The Minister for Tourism, Film and Broadcasting (Janet Anderson): As many right hon. and hon. Members have said, this is an important issue. I remember when, in the early days after I was lucky enough to be asked to do my present job by the Prime Minister, I went on a visit to Border Television where I was asked to open its new digital studio. A member of the staff took my private secretary aside and said, "I hope that the Minister will not mind if we ask her some rather technical questions." As I was very new in the job, the private secretary went pale and wondered what I would say. The first question was, "Well, Minister, there is a whole technological digital revolution going on. How do you explain that to members of the public?" I said that the most important thing to understand was that it would mean more choice and a better deal for the consumer. I put that on the record today as the priority for the Government.

Many issues have been raised in the debate and I will try to deal with as many as I can. Many hon. Members, especially the hon. Member for New Forest, West (Mr. Swayne), have mentioned the current campaign by United Christian Broadcasters. It has been raised with me before by almost every Member of the House, but in particular by my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing, North (Mr. Pound), and my hon. Friends the Members for Stoke-on-Trent, Central (Mr. Fisher) and for Stoke-on-Trent, North (Ms Walley), in whose constituencies UCB is based. The Department has received thousands of letters on the issue.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and I have had a meeting with Gareth Littler and his colleagues, and I visited UCB on Monday with my officials. We spent a pleasant morning there and we were grateful for the prayers that they had offered for us in advance of our arrival. The problem is that UCB are prevented by the legislation from applying for a national licence. We are advised that it would require primary legislation to enable them to do so, and we have said that we will consider the issue when the time comes. I hope that that answers the points raised by many hon. Members.

The Davies report has also been mentioned by many hon. Members, and I pay tribute to Gavyn Davies and his team for their excellent work and the time that they put into it. The consultation does not close until Monday and the Opposition would not expect my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State or me to pre-empt the outcome of that consultation. We shall of course await with interest the deliberations of the Culture, Media and Sport Committee and all the other representations we receive.

The hon. Member for East Surrey (Mr. Ainsworth) raised several points. He said that I had replied to a question he had tabled by saying that I did not envisage a switch-over for analogue radio. What I actually said was that digital broadcasting was at an early stage of development and that it was premature to set a timetable for the switch of analogue services to digital.

Other points were raised about children's advertising. I confirm that the Government believe that a place remains for such advertising within the properly regulated framework overseen by the ITC.

Mr. Swayne: Although I agree entirely with the sentiments expressed by my hon. Friend the Member for East Surrey (Mr. Ainsworth), as a parent I thought that we were looking a gift horse in the mouth in respect of children's advertising. As we build up to the terrible Christmas marathon, a ban on such advertising would make life much less expensive and rather more agreeable.

Janet Anderson: The hon. Gentleman is right and, as a parent too, I have some sympathy with what he says. However, the Government have no intention of imposing such a ban.

The hon. Member for Hexham (Mr. Atkinson) raised the problem faced by those of his constituents who do not have access to television. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State made it plain in his speech that the two priorities in the switch-over from analogue to digital are availability and affordability. He made it clear that the 95 per cent. availability figure is a minimum, and that the Government would like to ensure 100 per cent. coverage. That would resolve a problem that many hon. Members have told the House affects their constituencies.

The hon. Member for Hexham also raised the question of ITV1 and ITV2 and their availability via satellite. The Office of Fair Trading is considering that matter, and we hope that it will report soon.

My hon. Friend the Member for North-West Norfolk (Dr. Turner) never misses an opportunity of raising the problem of those of his constituents who have access only to Yorkshire Television. I pay tribute to his perseverance: he has raised this issue through a private Member's Bill as well as in an Adjournment debate. I shall visit his constituency shortly to study the problem, as I recently visited the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Wirral, South (Mr. Chapman), where there is a similar difficulty. Both I and my right hon. Friend hope that the development of digital will help to resolve some of those problems.

Mr. Baker: Will the Minister also look at the problem experienced by people on the south coast of England, where my constituents, and many others, are unable to receive Channel 5?

Janet Anderson: That is a problem in my constituency too, although I dare say that some people would claim that to be a positive advantage. I am not one of them, but it was always made plain from the start that Channel 5 would not achieve 100 per cent. coverage. However, the priorities of affordability and availability are very important to the Government, as my right hon. Friend made clear in his Cambridge speech.

Mr. Fraser: I do not want to miss out on this opportunity to tell the Minister that my constituency cannot receive Channel 5, and parts of it get Welsh television. Clearly, the problem affects places all over the country. I do not want to represent Wales, and do not speak Welsh, although I appreciate the programmes.

Janet Anderson: The hon. Gentleman is right: although the number of areas disadvantaged in the way that has been described is not huge, some places are so affected. My right hon. Friend has written to the broadcasters to see whether anything can be done. If not, we hope that the development of digital will iron out some of the anomalies.

The hon. Member for Lewes (Mr. Baker) asked about subtitling. My Department has had several meetings on that subject with concerned hon. Members and with the Royal National Institute for Deaf People. Again, my right hon. Friend has written to the broadcasters to say that the Government hope that the development of digital will allow them to continue to improve on the amount of subtitling available. We have been encouraged by their response thus far, but I can assure the hon. Gentleman that we will continue to monitor progress.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stevenage (Barbara Follett) referred to BBC quality and the question of concessions. I shall touch on those points shortly.

The hon. Member for New Forest, West contributed a great deal to the debate, expressing concern about content. He said that people expected the Government to do something about it, but responsibility rests with the regulators, which is one reason why my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has asked the Independent Television Commission to examine the regulatory framework.

We are debating the future of broadcasting, a subject that the Government take seriously. Things are happening so fast that we believe that an evolutionary approach is the wisest one for the Government to take ahead of probable major legislation early in the next Parliament. That is not to say that we are not examining various issues that that legislation would have to cover. Regulation is one such issue.

As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State said, I, together with a ministerial colleague from the Department for Education and Employment, held a seminar this week with broadcasters on media education. I am the mother of three children who have spent their entire lives glued to one square screen or another. Through the school curriculum, children are given guidance that enables them to be critical of literature. When they read Shakespeare or Dickens, they learn how to appreciate it, and how to be critical. There is no such help or guidance with the moving image, however, and we and the Department for Education and Employment are discussing that point with broadcasters.

My hon. Friend the Member for Selby (Mr. Grogan) told us of his support for the BBC; it is well known, and we share it. I pay tribute to his work on the all-party BBC group. Some of his demands are not in the gift of the Government, but we have listened carefully to what he said.

I also listened carefully to the speech by my right hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton (Mr. Kaufman), who is Chairman of the Select Committee on Culture, Media and Sport. He said that the views he expressed today were personal, and we shall consider them carefully. The Secretary of State and I cannot speculate on decisions that we may take after public consultation on the Davies report. The report is a serious one and members of the panel which drafted it took the issue seriously. We shall do likewise. We await the outcome of consultation, as well as the forthcoming report of the Culture, Media and Sport Committee.

My hon. Friend the Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Mr. Browne) talked about "Walking with Dinosaurs". I knew that he would, because he and I had a conversation about that programme in the lounge at Heathrow last week as we waited for our delayed flights. I know the enjoyment that he and his son have derived from that programme, as have other hon. Members. The programme took six years to develop and has had huge and proper acclaim. It is the sort of thing that the BBC does very well, and long may it continue to do so.

[Janet Anderson]

The hon. Member for Mid–Dorset and North Poole (Mr. Fraser) talked about access to the internet. I can reassure him that the Government are anxious to ensure that people are not excluded from the benefits of new technology. We are in discussion with the Office of Telecommunications and others to see what can be done. I emphasise that that is precisely the type of reason why the Government have set up a social exclusion unit, for which a Minister in every Department has responsibility. We want to ensure that as many people as possible have access to the internet. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State emphasised that one of our priorities is availability.

My hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd, West (Mr. Thomas) asked several questions, many of which illustrated how quickly events occur. Someone has described this as the fourth broadcasting revolution, which it is. There are no easy answers to many of the questions that he posed. That is why we are adopting an evolutionary approach; we are consulting widely and taking advice on those matters that we shall need to consider when introducing legislation.

In returning to the point made by the hon. Member for Mid-Dorset and North Poole on social exclusion, I must emphasise that we are setting up a viewers panel, so that we can obtain and monitor, at every stage, the views of the consumer on access and take-up of digital.

Many hon. Members referred to concessionary television licences. My right hon. Friend and I have frequently pointed out that the Government appreciate the importance of television to many people—especially those who are socially isolated because of old age, illness or disability, or who are unable to afford other types of leisure activity. We also accept that the existing concessionary licence scheme—under which entitlement depends on the accommodation occupied and the way in which it is provided or managed—is poorly targeted and unsatisfactory. We also accept that the £1.25 reduction for registered blind people is of little help. However, I repeat that no conclusions on the panel's recommendation have been reached; the public consultation exercise, which will end on Monday, will help to inform our decisions—as will the report of the Select Committee and the views of many Members of the House.

The debate has been interesting and rewarding. We have covered a wide range of broadcasting issues. Broadcasting is complex; it is important that we get it right. Our aim is to balance the needs and interests of viewers and the need to build on the continued success of the UK broadcasting industry. There may be a perception that what the broadcasters and the Government want prevails over the concerns and needs of consumers. Nothing could be further from the truth. We do not want to see the digital programme being driven by broadcasters in the pay-TV market. The Government do not want to move to an early switch-over to digital transmissions merely so that we can sell off the analogue broadcasting spectrum for other use. That is not true.

As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State said, our main aim is to protect the interests of consumers. Our desire to encourage the early take-up of digital services and the announcement of a date for digital switch-over are to enable consumers to enjoy early access to the benefits of the new technology. We want them to be informed enough to be confident about buying into the new services if they want to do so, and to have a clear idea about the Government's agenda for broadcasting. We have challenged broadcasters to make digital happen, but we shall be keeping progress under review. There will be plenty of opportunities for Parliament and the consumer to feed concerns and views into that process.

However, as many hon. Members have mentioned, a wider revolution is taking place. The convergence of broadcasting with telecommunications and computing has been discussed for some time; now, it is finally happening—and it is happening fast—with new interactive services and the internet through our televisions. We are taking steps to ensure that the right legislative framework is in place to deal with that revolution, and that as many people as possible have access to it and are not excluded from it.

We have emphasised the important role of public service broadcasting; we shall give careful thought as to how the BBC might fit into the new framework. The Davies review is a first stage; we are now conducting—with the ITC—an audit of the regulatory requirements. We intend that the new legislation will cover all main broadcasting issues, and that wide consultation will continue.

Mr. Baker: Does the Minister agree that we need an independent audit of the BBC's finances?

Janet Anderson: The hon. Gentleman knows that we are in the middle of a consultation process and that one of the recommendations of the Davies report is that the BBC should become subject to the scrutiny of the National Audit Office. I am sure that he would not encourage me to pre-empt any of the decisions that the Government might take when that consultation is complete and we have been able to take into account the views of hon. Members and the Select Committee. However, I thank him for his intervention.

When the time comes for legislation, all the major broadcasting issues will be covered. Now is an exciting time: the future of broadcasting is important and we envisage the BBC playing a leading role in the future. We should be proud of some of this country's cultural entrepreneurs in broadcasting—they are the envy of the world. I thank all hon. Members who have contributed to today's debate and assure them that we shall take their views into account.

Mr. Jim Dowd (Lord Commissioner to the Treasury): I beg to ask leave to withdraw the motion.

Motion, by leave, withdrawn.

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

Ordered,

That, at the sitting on Monday 1st November, the Speaker shall not adjourn the House until any Message from the Lords, relating to the Greater London Authority Bill, has been received.—*[Mr. Dowd.]*

Private Recruitment Agencies

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Dowd.]*

1.56 pm

Mr. Paul Burstow (Sutton and Cheam): In May, the Department of Trade and Industry published its proposals on the regulation of the private recruitment industry. The deadline for responses was 30 September. To the layman, the draft regulations appear to offer better protection for people seeking work and those hiring staff. No one could oppose proposals that eliminate abuse or bad practice—we all want to raise standards; but what appears at first glance to be a thorough piece of work on the part of the employment standards agency is in fact nothing of the sort. If implemented, the draft regulations would have a perverse effect by driving up the cost of live-in care for the elderly and disabled people, undermining Government policy to promote independent living and greater choice through direct payments, and reducing flexibility in the labour market by increasing bureaucracy.

I was first alerted to the flaws in the draft regulations by a steady trickle of letters from providers of home care and live-in care staff. I make no apology for relying heavily on evidence provided by the United Kingdom Homecare Association, which represents about 700 care agencies throughout the voluntary, not-for-profit and private sectors. It is wrong to characterise the concerns expressed by the care agencies as a minority opinion, not least because those concerns are echoed by organisations representing care users, such as Age Concern, Help the Aged, the Carers National Association, the Royal Association for Disability and Rehabilitation and Mencap. Hon. Members on both sides of the House have written to the Minister to express similar concerns and to ask questions.

The best way to explain the draft regulations and the fact that they are misconceived is to present a case study. I shall tell the House about a lady called Elizabeth, who is 80 years old and who suffers from multiple sclerosis; she is frail and vulnerable. In 1996, she started to use her savings and attendance allowance benefits to pay for a two-weekly rotational live-in care package arranged by a care agency. The package enables her to continue to live at home with a degree of independence and dignity, instead of moving into residential care and becoming institutionalised.

The current cost of Elizabeth's care package is about £316 a week. If the draft regulations are implemented as they stand, the cost to Elizabeth of her care will rise under the new rules by 91 per cent. to £602.78 a week—an extra £286 a week, or £14,872 extra a year. The VAT element alone in that calculation is almost double the attendance allowance that she receives. Elizabeth's case is only one of thousands of examples of how well-intentioned regulations may have unintended and undesirable results.

The objectives of the new regulations are entirely laudable. They are designed to increase clarity for clients, agencies and work seekers; promote labour market flexibility; protect clients and the general public by codifying good practice; curb payment abuses so that workers are paid and safeguard clients' money to prevent loss or misappropriation. No one could argue with those aims and goals, but they will not be achieved if the compliance cost consequences of the regulations are not addressed.

I asked the Minister what assessments and estimates he had made of the impact of the proposals on those who buy care privately. In a written answer, I was directed to annexe 3 of the regulatory impact assessment. However, I was disappointed that the impact assessment was unable to quantify the cost of most of the measures,

"because the regulations are likely to lead to changes in behaviour of hirers, agencies and workers."

To be fair to the Minister and the Department, paragraph 33 of the impact assessment accepts that there are compliance costs in the form of additional VAT. However, the Department admits that it has no way of knowing how many hirers will be unable to offset VAT payments. I can tell the Minister that more than 40,000 care users in this country will be unable to offset the new VAT liabilities that arise from the regulations.

From talking to people in care agencies and reading the impact assessment, I suspect that officials do not fully understand the market in which care agencies operate. Regulations that are drafted for a wider industry are not necessarily appropriate for particular segments of it.

The employment status of carers or personal assistants, and especially the impact of regulation 7(1), are at the heart of the matter. The United Kingdom Homecare Association, and others who have made representations to me and other hon. Members, strongly contend that people who work in the care sector are genuinely self-employed. They maintain that for four reasons. First, care workers are under no obligation to accept any assignment that is offered to them. Secondly, the care worker is paid directly by the hirer. Thirdly, the care worker can register with more than one agency. Fourthly, the care worker can refuse to accept the placement for the rate that the hirer offers.

While it is right to try to clarify the contractual position—as the regulations attempt to do—to avoid opportunities for abuse and poor practice, it is misguided to believe that any real benefit will arise from prohibiting care agencies from acting as agents for self-employed, autonomous care workers.

The practices have developed and stood the test of time for 30 years or more. They enable care workers and care agencies to operate in the flexible way that the Minister and his colleagues extol to the private sector. Therefore, it is strange that the Department is willing to regulate that practice out of existence in the care sector while it allows other sectors in the recruitment industry to continue to use it.

Regulation 7(1) would insist that care agencies became direct employers. That would give rise to substantial extra costs that would put home care and live-in care out of the reach of many and confine it to the few. The extra costs of payroll, national insurance contributions, employer's liability and sick pay insurance mount to push up costs to the end user. To add insult to injury, VAT will be chargeable on the whole amount of the increased sum, not just the agency's fee for initially arranging the placement.

There are numerous examples to show that, under the Government's proposals, the VAT element of the cost of home or live-in care will exceed the amount that the Benefits Agency pays in attendance allowance, or the care component of the disability living allowance. Those benefits are designed to help people to meet their care costs and the extra costs of disability, not to pay their tax bill.

[Mr. Paul Burstow]

In the past few months, the Minister has made statements criticising care agencies and others for

"wildly exaggerating the extra costs and causing a great deal of unnecessary alarm amongst the people who receive care."

Despite repeated requests for the Government to publish their figures, they have not been forthcoming.

The Department has disputed figures such as those in the case of Elizabeth, which I quoted earlier. The Minister knows that in August, his officials met Mrs. Gifford of Able Community Care to go through her calculations. The Minister told me yesterday in a written answer that he does

"not accept that the costs which she calculates would in fact result from the proposed amendments to private recruitment industry regulation."—[*Official Report*, 28 October 1999; Vol. 336, c. 936.]

I hope that the Minister can tell the House today in detail why he does not accept the calculations. I understand that, even using a formula provided by DTI officials themselves, cost increases of about 40 per cent. still result.

The lower figures that I have been informed could be achieved are arrived at by amazing contortions which appear to defeat the stated purpose of the regulations. First, I am told, the DTI's formula results in a cut in care workers' take-home pay because officials say that the employee should absorb the extra national insurance costs. Secondly, the DTI formula makes no allowance for the cost of travel, which can be an obstacle to a flexible labour market. Again, that cost has to be picked up by the care worker. That may not be a DTI formula, but I have been led to believe that it is. Will the Minister tell me, therefore, why he does not accept Mrs. Gifford's figures? What alternative figures does he have? Why does it appear that the Department is willing to allow care workers' terms and conditions to worsen?

I know that the Minister accepts that the VAT liability will rise, although he may dispute by how much, because in a letter, the Minister said that

"ministerial colleagues at the Treasury and Department of Health have asked officials to examine and report on the impact of the changes on those buying care privately."

It is a pity that, when I tabled a written question to the Chancellor of the Exchequer, he transferred it to the DTI. However, I am glad to have been told that the Department of Health is due to reply to my question. I hope that the Minister will be able to tell the House today what Treasury and Department of Health officials have found so far, because I know that the reference to his ministerial colleagues was made back in August at the latest.

The Paymaster General confirmed in a letter in August that the DTI's proposals will attract a VAT liability. She said:

"The current application of VAT to home care gives the widest possible relief under the terms of the European Directive on which UK law is based. There is no possibility of extending the scope of VAT exemption to cover services provided commercially by unqualified, unsupervised carers."

The Government are unwilling to come forward with their own estimates, but figures from industry analysts suggest that the extra cost will be about £40 million per annum. That will be an extra £40 million in tax revenue for the Chancellor met from the savings and benefits of elderly and disabled people. The Paymaster General suggested, however, that the impact might be reduced if those agencies managed by nurses are able to argue that the services that they provide are VAT-exempt health care. That could reduce the cost to some £20 million.

That extra VAT burden will have knock-on effects. It will drive up demand for social services funding, place pressure on the independent living fund and frustrate the Government's stated policy of extending direct payments to older people and encouraging their greater take-up by disabled people. It begs the question: where was the joined-up government thinking on that set of proposals?

Although I appreciate that the Minister may not be in a position to answer for his Treasury colleagues, I hope that he will be able to pass on my representations and ask the Paymaster General to re-examine the scope for zero rating on personal home care for individual users. The Government's hands are not tied on VAT exemptions in that area. All home care services provided to meet an assessed need should be VAT exempted. Paragraph 1(g) of article 13 of the sixth VAT directive permits exemptions for

"services . . . closely linked to welfare or social security work."

The Government therefore have the scope to grant an exemption to commercial, as well as charitable, organisations.

Even if the interpretation by Customs and Excise is right, and there are clearly grounds for dispute on the point about the VAT directive, there is another way in which the Government could lift the additional VAT burden imposed by the regulations. An EU initiative would allow the Government to seek a reduced VAT rate for labour-intensive services that are sold directly to final consumers. Surely home care and living care come under that heading?

Will the Minister consider, with his Treasury and Department of Health colleagues, the possibility of making such a bid for a reduction in VAT on those services? That offers a solution to the problems that the regulations will cause for this part of the recruitment industry. I understand that time for such applications is limited because the regulations are due to come into effect at the beginning of the next calendar year.

In this short debate, I want to make it clear that I fully accept the need to strike a balance between the interests of workers, hirers and agencies so as to afford greater protection to all parties in future. Regulations have a positive role to play in eliminating abuses or bad practices and in driving up standards—or at least they could have.

That leads me to my final point. Regulations are only as good as the enforcement regime that underpins them. The current regime is complaints driven, but it gives little insight into how the sector is performing or who is operating in the sector. That is reflected in page after page of the regulations, and in the compliance cost assessment. There is almost no reference in the documentation about the regulation of this industry to the impact that it will have on the care industry. That is undoubtedly because of the paucity of information available to the Department at the moment.

Creating new rules and clarifying old ones will not necessarily raise standards. It leaves it open for low-profile cowboy operators to drive a coach and horses through the regulations while the reputable operators pick up and pass on the compliance costs to those in need of care. At worst, reputable operators will be unable to

compete in a market in which others are undercutting them by dodging the regulations, and they go out of business as a consequence.

Enforcement and regulation require a joined-up approach. I hope that the Minister will talk to his colleagues in the Department of Health about their plans for the establishment of regionally based commissions for care standards, and the possibility of them taking on some, if not all, of the role of enforcing standards in the important field of domiciliary and live-in care.

I hope that the Minister will be able to answer three questions, of which I gave his private office notice on Wednesday. I do not think that they are too taxing, but I shall wait and see. First, what is his Department's estimate of the increased care costs that will arise from the regulations? That information could put to rest the concerns being raised by hon. Members and outside organisations. Secondly, what other Departments have been involved in assessing the impact of the draft regulations, and when did they become involved? Thirdly, what is the timetable? When will the regulations emerge in their final guise, and when will the House have the chance to consider them in that context?

Above all, I hope that the Minister will tell the House that he accepts that the fears I have expressed are real, and that the Government's commitment to protecting the rights of the many will ultimately shine through in the revised regulations that emerge from the consultation process.

2.12 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (Mr. Alan Johnson): I commend the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Mr. Burstow) on securing this Adjournment debate. He has taken a keen interest in this subject, as have other hon. Members. It is an important subject, and I welcome the debate, not least because it gives the Government an opportunity to state clearly what the review is about. We have had genuine consultation, and have welcomed the positive dialogue that we have had with the recruitment industry and others. We are carefully considering the responses that we have received, and we have made it clear that nothing has been set in stone, concrete, aspic or any other substance. The debate therefore comes at an opportune time.

The private recruitment industry plays a key role in today's flexible labour market. It is a major industry, and covers permanent placements and temporary staff hire in diverse sectors, from office work to factories, from entertainment to the care of the elderly, which was the issue on which the hon. Gentleman concentrated.

The industry has tripled since 1992, and its turnover is now estimated at more than £16 billion. The regulations governing agency conduct are 23-years-old. It is widely accepted that the private recruitment industry has expanded and developed so much since then that we need to update the regulations.

We have received widespread support from employment bureaux, trade organisations, hirers and workers for the aims of our new regulations. The problem with the contribution of the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam is that it tended to give an unbalanced view of what the review is all about. He mentioned a perverse effect, but talked about one particular aspect.

It is important to put on record the fact that most of the organisations in the sector have welcomed not just the review, but the broad thrust of the Government's proposals. I amplify that by quoting, for example, Age Concern, which says in its submission to the review:

"We welcome many of the changes that would be introduced and support the rationale behind them."

It goes on to say:

"Many of the proposed changes are entirely consistent with the broader thrust of Government policy: enhancing the protection of vulnerable people; improving the quality of services; and ensuring minimum standards in employment practice. Age Concern England wholeheartedly supports these changes."

May I take the liberty of mentioning another quotation, which is also important? The hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam mentioned the UKHCA, a major player in the sector. It made it clear that

"the reforms will radically alter traditional working practices, most particularly in the care sector and, despite concerns over elements of the proposed regulations, agencies do support the basic principles of transparency and improved conditions for care workers."

Mr. Burstow: The Minister has moved on to the point that I wish to draw to his attention. The care sector of that big industry has generally welcomed the regulations, but it has particular concerns, on which I have sought to concentrate my remarks. I look forward to him dealing with the VAT issue, which is at the crux of the sector's concerns.

Mr. Johnson: Be patient. I will come to that, although the hon. Gentleman will recognise that the debate is about our review of the agency sector. For reasons that he mentioned, it is important to put it on record that the broad thrust of the proposals are welcomed. Indeed, if we did nothing and retained the status quo, Elizabeth, the constituent whom he mentioned, would stand to lose a lot and would be in great jeopardy.

It is important to set out, as the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam did to a point, the review's aims. I do not think that he or his party would disagree with them. I would be surprised if any hon. Members would.

We aim to simplify and to reduce the number of regulations. Far from increasing bureaucracy, we intend to reduce it. There are three sets of different regulations. We are looking to have one set to benefit all agencies. We have not seen any criticism of that objective.

We aim to increase the clarity of contractual relationships in the sector, so that workers and hirers know who is contracting with whom. Again, Age Concern makes an eloquent submission to support that. It is equally concerned about the position of care workers and hirers.

Another principle is to promote labour market flexibility. We are looking also to introduce stringent requirements to check temporary staff who work with children, or the elderly—again, a fundamental update that is overdue. We are looking to protect clients and the general public, to curb payment abuses, which occur, as the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam will accept, in all strands of the industry, and to safeguard entertainment workers' money. We have those seven fundamental aims.

[Mr. Johnson]

Contrary to some of the comments by the hon. Gentleman, I can assure him that, for the past two years—I respond to one of his fundamental questions—there has been close collaboration between the Department of Trade and Industry, Department of Health, Customs and Excise and Her Majesty's Treasury. He asked when that began. It would be stretching it to say 2 May 1997, but we began the process shortly after the general election. The concepts of joined-up government and cross-cutting are important, and nowhere more so than on this issue. In the care sector in particular, there are other Departments and Government objectives involved.

We recognise that many people are concerned about how their long-term care needs or those of their friends or relatives will be met. The Government are looking at the system of funding long-term care to ensure that it is fair and sustainable. We set up a royal commission in 1997 to help with that. My colleagues received the commission's report in March this year. We have already acted on some of the recommendations. For example, we have improved services for carers by allocating £140 million over three years to help to fund more respite care. We are extending direct payments to people aged 65 and over. That has been widely welcomed in the industry. We have also announced our intention to establish a proper commission for care standards as soon as parliamentary time allows so that residential and nursing homes can be inspected by an independent agency.

Mr. Burstow: The Minister referred to worthy Government initiatives, including direct payments, which were started by the previous Administration through a private Member's Bill. However, direct payments will butt against the regulations because of the increased liabilities that will result from the change of employment status of care workers, as I said earlier. The Minister has been talking about clarity—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael J. Martin): Order. The hon. Gentleman cannot go on too long.

Mr. Johnson: Everyone wants to safeguard direct payments. Age Concern and others have made that clear. The crucial aspect of the debate is the relationship between the hirer and the carer.

My colleagues are giving the commission's proposals on the funding of long-term care the careful consideration that they merit. We want to find a solution that is fair to the individual and to the taxpayer and will stand the test of time.

The Government are fully aware of the need for care services to be affordable and of good quality. We are also aware that a small number of agencies in the care sector offer among the most unsatisfactory and ambiguous business terms in the private recruitment industry. If we are conducting a proper review of the entire agency sector, it would be perverse to leave out a sector that has a large number of abuses. Good quality care will not be encouraged or promoted by such poor business practices.

As I have already said, one of our main aims is to clarify the contractual relationships between employment bureaux, hirers and temporary workers. We shall require employment bureaux to operate as employment businesses when introducing or supplying temporary workers. The temporary worker's contractual relationship will be with the bureau rather than the hirer.

People who take on the difficult job of providing care are entitled to proper contracts and proper employment rights. A bureau that supplies the carer should be responsible for those elements. Otherwise, the people receiving care could find themselves liable under employment or tax law, even if their carer is labelled self-employed by their bureau.

At the moment, some employment bureaux supply workers on vague contracts that result in no one knowing who is responsible. That is the case for Elizabeth, the hon. Gentleman's constituent. Care recipients may find that, without their knowledge, they are responsible for ensuring that their carer receives the national minimum wage and other employment rights, for their health and safety and for their tax arrangements. Unfortunately, a minority of the care sector has conducted a scare campaign. The danger is that it has unnecessarily alarmed some of the most vulnerable people in our communities—those in need of care—and their families and, of course, the care workers themselves. Lurid stories about huge cost increases do not help anyone.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned Able Community Care, a company that participated in our consultation. I note that *The Economist* this morning contains an article that probably represents all the worst aspects of the lurid reporting that I mentioned. I am not saying that Able Community Care is responsible for the article. It states that people in need of care will have to leave their homes and be housed in already overstretched hospitals and nursing homes and that the Government will prohibit self-employment in the sector. That is certainly not our aim or objective.

Mr. Burstow: In a written answer on 19 October, the Minister stated that care workers who are self-employed could remain so. Can he confirm that now?

Mr. Johnson: I shall return to that in a moment. I have one final point to make first. The article quotes someone from an employment agency as saying:

"The agency think that this bureaucratic burden"—

that is, paying the minimum wage, complying with employment law and providing proper paid leave—

"is all the more unnecessary because many carers come from abroad—mainly from the Commonwealth".

We submit that all workers in this country are entitled to basic minimum standards.

On another piece of misinformation, let me say that labelling workers self-employed—we have no desire to remove the ability to hire self-employed carers—does not necessarily mean that they are. Claiming that those placed in bogus self-employment are not entitled to the minimum wage or to working-time rights will cut no ice in the review that we are conducting.

Whether individual carers are self-employed for employment law or tax purposes depends on the nature of their contracts. Any disputes will continue to be assessed by the courts using established pointers to employment or self-employment.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned bureaucracy. We are well aware of the need to keep red tape to a minimum. As I have said, we propose to repeal a number of statutory requirements which are no longer necessary, such as those which prevent temporary workers from getting information about better jobs elsewhere. We are looking at ways to streamline the proposals to the maximum extent.

Bureaux have raised with us the need to respond quickly to customer demand. Workers are finding that they are taken advantage of as a result of that process, because the rate that they are offered on the telephone when they apply for the job is completely different from the rate that they are actually paid. We may be seeking to introduce "bureaucracy—a term that may sound pejorative—but it is to the benefit of the hirer and carer.

I have two final points. The hon. Gentleman raised the crucial issues of costs and VAT. On costs, I cannot add anything to the regulatory impact assessment in the consultation document that was published at the end of May. We do not have available the information for which the hon. Gentleman asked. I am afraid that the Treasury is responsible for VAT. We are in the middle of the consultation period so I am not in a position to tell the hon. Gentleman the results of consultation that is continuing or to say anything other than we are working closely with the Treasury on the problems that he has identified. We ourselves highlighted these problems in the consultation document. Having done so, we are certainly minded to ensure that we find a solution—

It being half-past Two o'clock, the motion for the Adjournment of the House lapsed, without Question put.

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Dowd.]*

Mr. Johnson: I fear that my inexperience is showing, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

We want to make sure that the problems are tackled. I would submit to the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam that this is the only area where there is a legitimate area for concern about the proposals. Lurid stories about raising £60 million suggest that some bureaux are not paying the minimum wage or paid holidays, are not looking after carers properly, and are leaving the hirer in a state of ambiguity, with infirm and elderly people suffering accordingly.

I thank the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam for raising the debate, and I assure him that his comments will be looked at as part of the consultation process. I am sure that, when he sees the final proposals—which we hope will be ready late in the winter, to come out next spring—he will feel that we have done a proper job on behalf of all people in need of care in this country, including Elizabeth.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at twenty-nine minutes to Three o'clock.

Written Answers to Questions

Monday 26 July 1999

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

Starch-based Products

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what measures the Government have taken to encourage the use of *(a)* biodegradable starch-base plastics and *(b)* other starch-based products in place of petrochemicals [91654]

Mr. Meale *[holding answer 19 July 1999]:* A fully biodegradable product can offer significant environmental benefits, for example where it can be composted or reused in another form. A particular type of degradable product, "inherently degradable resins" (starch mixed with polyethylene), was developed in the latter part of the 1980s. Although marketed as biodegradable, research has suggested otherwise. The micro-organisms consumed the starch, leaving the polyethylene intact.

Our recent consultation paper, "Less Waste: More Value", emphasised the need to gain more value from waste through re-use, recycling, composting and recovery of energy. Products which are specifically designed for disposal with no beneficial recovery potential run counter to this approach.

Right-to-buy Scheme

Mr. Amess: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many local authority dwellings were sold under the right to buy scheme in 1998–99. [92476]

Mr. Raynsford: The information requested is not yet available.

Rented Housing (London)

Joan Ruddock: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many affordable houses to rent were developed in each London borough in 1998; and if he will make a statement. [92428]

Mr. Raynsford: The additional rented social lettings provided in each London borough in 1998–99 by registered social landlords, with support from the Housing Corporation's Approved Development Programme (ADP) and Local Authority Social Housing Grant (LASHG), were as follows:

Borough	*1998–99*
Barking and Dagenham	193
Barnet	352
Bexley	158
Brent	220
Bromley	167
Camden	174
City of London	0
Croydon	369
Ealing	222
Enfield	204
Greenwich	269
Hackney	582
Hammersmith and Fulham	266
Haringey	264
Harrow	85
Havering	59
Hillingdon	397
Hounslow	208
Islington	211
Kensington and Chelsea	110
Kingston upon Thames	84
Lambeth	199
Lewisham	367
Merton	119
Newham	354
Redbridge	85
Richmond upon Thames	44
Southwark	171
Sutton	39
Tower Hamlets	340
Waltham Forest	342
Wandsworth	83
Westminster	196

These additional social lettings come from new build, the purchase and rehabilitation of existing property and from empty properties brought into use for temporary social housing. The ADP and LASHG also supports the provision of homes for shared ownership and incentive schemes which assist social tenants to move into home ownership and vacate their lettings for others in housing need.

On the basis of information provided to the Department by local authorities, there were at least 35 council houses built in London boroughs in 1998–99.

Transport (Disabled) Access

Joan Ruddock: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on progress in improving accessibility to public transport for people with disabilities in London. [92404]

Ms Glenda Jackson: Progress at the national level will impact on London. We are already bringing forward regulations under the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 to require new trains, buses and newly licensed taxis to be accessible to disabled people, including those in wheelchairs.

The Rail Vehicle Accessibility Regulations came into effect on 1 January 1999 requiring all new trains, including Underground trains, to meet requirements for wheelchair access and a range of other features to help people with disabilities. We are proposing that all new single deck buses will have to comply with similar regulations from next year and double deckers from the year after. There are now nearly 1,000 low floor buses in use throughout London, and most areas will have routes on which this type of vehicle are in operation.

All taxis in London will be accessible by 1 January 2000 and there are already more than 16,000 accessible taxis in the fleet. National requirements on accessibility

are proposed to come into effect from 2002 and will lead to further improvements in access standards for taxis. Other provisions of the Act which come into effect in 2004 will also require reasonable steps to be taken to remove or alter barriers to access Underground stations. Investment in the Underground, which the Public Private Partnership will bring, will, amongst other things, enable work to be carried out to establish a network of key stations which would be fully accessible to those with mobility problems.

Dedicated door-to-door services in London are currently provided primarily by the Dial-a-Ride and Taxicard schemes. Working with the Commission for Accessible Transport we will be taking forward their proposals on pilot schemes on better co-ordination of services.

The Greater London Authority Bill places a duty on the mayor to address transport issues affecting disabled people and others who may face difficulties in using all forms of public transport. The mayor's transport strategy must (under clause 124(2)(a) of the Bill) contain proposals for transport which is accessible. London Boroughs Local Implementation Plans will have to deliver the mayoral strategy.

Schedule 8(3) of the Bill places the mayor under a duty to have regard to the desirability of ensuring that the membership of Transport for London represents the interests of those who require accessible transport.

Council House Sales (Bolton)

Mr. Crausby: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many council house sales were completed by Bolton Local Authority in each year from 1980 to 1998; what revenue accrued to the local authority; and if he will make a statement. [92696]

Mr. Raynsford: The available information reported by Bolton Metropolitan Borough Council is in the table. Actual cash receipts will depend on the extent to which sales had been financed by loans from the authority.

Number and capital value of sales in Bolton

Year	*Total sales*	*Value of sales (£000)*
1980–81	681	4,131
1981–82	399	2,728
1982–83	305	n/a
1983–84	231	1,961
1984–85	271	2,374
1985–86	272	n/a
1986–87	307	2,244
1987–88	289	2,596
1988–89	396	3,457
1989–90	698	6,074
1990–91	683	n/a
1991–92	282	4,352
1992–93	198	2,658
1993–94	150	2,615
1994–95	156	2,233
1995–96	129	1,775
1996–97	90	1,466
1997–98	134	2,110
1998–99	154	2,693

Housing Green Paper

Mr. Dobbin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he intends to publish the Green Paper on Housing. [92538]

Mr. Raynsford: We intend to publish a Housing Policy Green Paper later this year.

Mr. Dobbin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will include proposals for a single tenancy for social housing for England and Wales in his Green Paper on Housing. [92539]

Mr. Raynsford: There are a wide range of housing policies in need of modernisation, building on the reforms the Government have put in place during our first two years. The Government are considering currently the issues which should be included for consultation in a Housing Policy Green Paper later this year. No decisions have been reached yet.

Rail Crossing, Rovie

Mr. Maclennan: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will exercise his powers under the Level Crossing Act 1983, as amended by the Level Crossing Regulations 1997, to instruct ScotRail to install an automatic open crossing which is locally monitored on the rail crossing at Rovie, Rogart in Sutherland. [92531]

Mrs. Liddell: The Secretary of State has received an application from Railtrack for an Order under the Level Crossing Act 1983 to authorise the most appropriate safety measures for the level crossing at Rovie.

The Department is now seeking the advice of the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) on the safety issues at Rovie Crossing. We expect to receive HSE's advice around the middle of August. The Secretary of State will then take a decision on Railtrack's application. Any new safety measures will be for Railtrack Scotland (not ScotRail) to install.

Planning Inspectors

Mr. John M. Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, pursuant to his answer of 12 July 1999, *Official Report*, columns *14–15*, on planning inspectors, what is his Department's definition of a secret society. [92532]

Mr. Raynsford: Planning inspectors have a quasi-judicial role and must not only conduct themselves in an open and impartial manner, but been seen to do so. Membership of a society that is perceived by many people to operate with a degree of secrecy is therefore inconsistent with the work of an Inspector.

Departmental Expenditure (Leeds)

Mr. Hilary Benn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the programmes funded directly by his Department, relating to social exclusion, regeneration, community development, employment or education, currently operating in *(a)* the City of Leeds and *(b)* the Leeds Central parliamentary constituency, listing for each

programme the amount of such funding for each of the last three years and the amount planned to be spent in each of the next three financial years. [92912]

Mr. Meale: The information requested is not held by my Department centrally. The Government Office for Yorkshire and the Humber (GOYH) has provided the following details:

Leeds has received £17,528,250 Single Regeneration Budget Challenge Funding (SRB) in the last three years. The projected SRB spend for the next three years is £36,271,583. It is not possible to break down the figures at constituency level but three of the most significant SRB schemes cover part of the Leeds Central constituency:

Rebuilding Our Communities: £12.5 million 7 year programme from Round 2 (1996) focusing on Chapeltown/Harehills, Hyde Park/Burley and Beeston. The scheme links housing based regeneration with programmes to improve training and employment opportunities, raise attainment and encourage new business start-ups.

Partnership with Young People: £24 million 7 year programme from Round 3 (1997) Leeds Initiative led programme to address the needs and aspirations of young people aged 9–25 in the deprived wards of Burmantofts, Chapel Allerton, Harehills and University.

Investing in the Community: £7.4 million 7 year programme targeted at the Beeston Hill and Holbeck communities to tackle multi-deprivation and social exclusion.

The Urban Community Initiative Programme which tackles social deprivation in the inner city has received £3.5 million European funding, 1997–99 and new programmes for the next six years are being negotiated at the moment.

The Capital Challenge Scheme project had £4.9 million approved in 1996, expected to be completed by March 2000 to establish a series of Customer Service centres in and around Leeds for the community to access a range of public services under one roof.

Round 5 of the SRB includes a £25 million, 7 year bid submitted by Leeds Initiative, Better Neighbourhoods and Confident Communities. This will target the most socially excluded neighbourhoods in Leeds to address the issues of neighbourhood decline.

Contaminated Land (Gloucestershire)

Mr. Nigel Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what discussions his Department has had with Gloucestershire local authorities regarding funding bids via the contaminated land supplementary credit approval programme; and if he will make a statement. [93137]

Mr. Meale: My Department wrote to all relevant English local authorities on 21 January 1999 inviting applications for funding under the 1999–2000 contaminated land supplementary credit approval programme. The Department has not received any applications from Gloucestershire local authorities.

Government Patents

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the Government patents held by his Department. [93079]

Mr. Meale: I will write to the hon. Member and place a copy of my letter in the Library.

Local Authority Housing

Mr. Blunt: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what was the average annual cost of maintaining a local authority owned housing unit in the latest year for which figures are available. [92190]

Mr. Raynsford: The average annual expenditure per dwelling on repairs and maintenance by local authorities in England in 1997–98 was £663.00. This is derived from the revenue expenditures recorded by local authorities that continue to operate a Housing Revenue Account and excludes expenditure of a capital nature.

Compliance Costs

Mr. Chidgey: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what reductions were achieved in the compliance costs of regulation administered by his Department and its public bodies for the last year for which data are available; what mechanisms exist for monitoring the post-implementation costs of such regulation; and if he has established targets for reduction in the compliance costs of regulation administered by his Department and its public bodies. [92313]

Mr. Meale: Details of regulations that imposed compliance costs on business are published in the Department's regulatory impact assessments and laid in both Houses. A summary of all the regulatory assessments published by the Department and other regulatory Departments in Whitehall are published every six months in a White Paper, and are available on a monthly basis on the Cabinet Office Regulatory Impact Unit's website.

The Department includes a section on its regulatory activity in its Annual Report.

There is no arbitrary target for reducing the compliance costs of regulation. However, all departments are required to make an assessment of the risks, costs and benefits of any regulatory proposal that has an impact on business, charities and voluntary bodies before they decide to act. Without an assessment of this kind there can be no collective agreement of a regulatory proposal.

Basking Shark

Mrs. Gordon: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) what progress is being made with the United Kingdom listing proposal for the basking shark under Appendix II of CITES; and which countries have indicated that they plan to support the initiative; [93194]

(2) what representations the United Kingdom will make to range states to seek their support for the United Kingdom listing proposal for the basking shark under Appendix II of CITES; and if he will make a statement. [93193]

Mr. Meale: A UK proposal to add the basking shark (Cetorhinus maximus) to Appendix II of the CITES Convention was submitted to the CITES Secretariat on 14 May. It was circulated for comment to all 145 CITES parties, including range states, on 31 May. We will consider responses before making a final decision on whether to submit the proposal to next year's 11th CITES Conference, by the Secretariat's deadline of 12 November 1999. We have already received indications of support from several countries.

Channel Tunnel Rail Link (Complaints)

Mr. Green: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many complaints had been received by the Channel Tunnel Rail Link Complaints Commissioner by 30 June. [92947]

Ms Glenda Jackson: I understand that he received 53 complaints within his remit by 30 June.

Mr. Green: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what is the budget for the Channel Tunnel Rail Link Complaints Commissioner for *(a)* 1999–2000 and *(b)* 2000–01. [92946]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The Complaints Commissioner's office is financed by members of the CTRL High Level Forum (HLF), which comprises the developers undertaking the CTRL and associated works, and the local authorities along the length of the Rail Link. The HLF set a budget for 1999–2000 of £262,868. The budget for 2000–01 will not be set until early next year.

Refrigeration and Air Conditioning Industry

Mr. Green: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, pursuant to his answer of 8 July 1999, *Official Report*, column *589*, on refrigerants, if he will estimate the potential number of signatories to the Declaration of Intent in relation to reducing emissions of HFCs; and how many signatories there were at the latest available date. [93051]

Mr. Meale: The current number of signatories to the Declaration of Intent with the air conditioning and refrigeration industry is 205. It is difficult to estimate the potential number of signatories to the Declaration of Intent because there are a large number of smaller air conditioning and refrigeration companies in operation, many of which do not belong to a trade association. It is important to note that those who have already signed up are mostly members of the Air Conditioning and Refrigeration Industry Board (ACRIB) and much larger companies in general.

Mr. Green: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, pursuant to his answer of 12 July 1999, *Official Report*, column *12*, on refrigerants, how many individual refrigerators are operating in his Department's buildings. [93052]

Mr. Meale: Information about the number of refrigerators in my Department's buildings is not recorded centrally. The number of refrigerators in our new London headquarters buildings is as follows:

Local refrigerators: 112

Refrigerated cabinet: 3

Refrigerated cold counter: 4

Freezer: 4.

Mr. Green: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make it his policy to make the training and certification of refrigeration and air-conditioning contractors a legal requirement; and if he will make a statement. [92948]

Mr. Meale: The proposed new Council Regulation (EC) on substances that deplete the ozone layer, which is expected to enter into force next year, will require the Government to define the minimum qualification requirements of servicing personnel who handle ozone-depleting refrigerants.

We will be consulting industry about the appropriate level of qualification needed. We are also considering whether these requirements should be extended to cover servicing personnel handling non-ozone-depleting refrigerants.

Air Quality (London)

Joan Ruddock: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on air quality in London from January 1998 to the latest available date, listing all major pollutants, times when maximum recommended levels were breached; and by what extent. [93191]

Mr. Meale: The information requested has been placed in the Library of the House. Raw data on air pollution from the national monitoring networks and summary statistics, including exceedences of national and international standards and guidelines, are also available on the Department's website at:

http:///www.environment.detr.gov.uk/airq/aqinfo.htm.

Public Appointments

Joan Ruddock: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many appointments to public bodies were made by his Department in *(a)* 1997–98 and *(b)* 1998–99, broken down by (i) gender and (ii) ethnicity; and if he will list the chairmen appointed to those bodies in those years, similarly broken down. [92522]

Mr. Meale: The Secretary of State made the following appointments to NDPBs, nationalised industries and public corporations sponsored by the Department:

1 April 1997 to 31 March 1998	*Chairman*	*Members*	*Total*
Male	12	179	191
Female	1	54	55
Total	13	233	246
Ethnic Minority	1	15	16

1 April 1998 to 31 March 1999	Chairman	Members	Total
Male	21	335	356
Female	5	159	164
Total	26	494	520
Ethnic Minority	0	23	23

Full details of the Department's plan on equal opportunities are contained in "Quangos, Opening Up Public Appointments 1999–2002", published by the Government on 25 May 1999, a copy of which is deposited in the Libraries of both Houses. This sets out our goals and objectives for improving representation of women, people from ethnic minority groups and people with disabilities.

Driving Tests (Leicestershire)

Mr. David Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many practical driving tests took place at test centres in Leicestershire in each of the last five years; if the location of these centres is under review; and if he will make a statement. [92509]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The number of practical driving tests taken at the six driving test centres in Leicestershire are as follows:

Test centre	1994–95	1995–96	1996–97	1997–98	1998–99
Leicester (Gypsy Lane)	7,527	8,031	8,797	5,084	5,590
Leicester (Welford Road)	3,039	3,352	3,331	2,323	2,690
Leicester (Wigston)	5,328	5,646	6,443	5,491	5,196
Loughborough	4,132	4,196	4,309	3,586	3,600
Melton Mowbray	2,052	2,196	2,198	1,910	1,907
Hinckley	2,415	2,224	2,405	1,940	2,228

The Driving Standards Agency keeps its test centre estate under constant review to ensure that centres can provide tests of a satisfactory standard while maintaining acceptable local levels of service in a cost effective manner. There are no plans at present to close any of the centres in Leicestershire.

Local Education Authority Funding

Mr. David Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) if he will list for *(a)* 1997–98, *(b)* 1998–99 and *(c)* 1999–2000 in respect of standard spending assessments for primary education, the 10 highest and 10 lowest local education authorities in terms of SSA per pupil aged five to 10 years in maintained schools and the percentage difference, for the mean for all maintained schools, of each of the 20 authorities; [92800]

(2) if he will list for *(a)* 1997–98, *(b)* 1998–99 and *(c)* 1999–2000 in respect of standard spending assessments for secondary education, the 10 highest and 10 lowest local education authorities in terms of SSA per pupil aged 11 to 15 years in maintained schools and the percentage difference, for the mean for all maintained schools, of each of the 20 authorities. [92799]

Ms Armstrong: The information has been placed in the Library.

Polegate Bypass

Mr. Waterson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what recent representations he has received about the Polegate Bypass Project. [92569]

Ms Glenda Jackson: We have received representations on the need for early completion of the Polegate bypass, from East Sussex County Council; on the need for the design of the Cophall Junction to be changed from a delegation led by the hon. Member for Lewes (Mr. Baker); and on the need for the scheme to be extended westwards to the A27 from a member of the public.

Mr. Waterson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list *(a)* the groups which (i) he and (ii) his Ministers received in the last six months to discuss the Polegate Bypass Project and *(b)* the names of the persons who made up the groups. [92570]

Ms Glenda Jackson: In March, my noble Friend Lord Whitty received a delegation representing the Council for the Protection of Rural England, Transport 2000, Friends of the Earth and the A27 Action Group. The delegation was led by the noble Lord, Lord Rea, and the hon. Member for Lewes (Mr. Baker).

Darwin Advisory Committee

Mr. White: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what were the findings of the Financial Management and Policy Review on the Darwin Advisory Committee; and what is the Government's response. [93284]

Mr. Meale: The Darwin Advisory Committee advises Ministers on the overall direction, and selection of projects, for the Darwin Initiative grant scheme, which helps developing countries conserve their biodiversity through partnership with British experts. As a non-departmental public body, the Committee is subject to a financial management and policy review every five years and my Department appointed in-house consultants in February this year to carry this out. The Review has been completed, and found in the first stage of its work that there was a continuing need for the functions

provided by the Darwin Advisory Committee and that the Committee was the most efficient and cost-effective means of fulfilling those functions.

The second stage of the Review considered the performance of the Committee against its terms of reference, the continued relevance of the terms of reference, the effectiveness of the Committee's working methods and whether the administrative support meets desired standards. The overall impression of this stage of the Review was favourable, although some recommendations were made to enhance the running of the programme. In particular, the Review recommended that now the Initiative has been running for six years, it is timely to take stock of the direction of the Initiative and its principles.

We accept almost all the findings of the Review and have drawn up a plan for future action taking up its recommendations. The Review and the Government response are both available on my Department's website www.detr.gov.uk and copies are being placed in the Library of the House.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Kosovo

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what discussions she has had, and with whom, about improving the environmental situation in Kosovo following the conflict there; and if she will make a statement. [92199]

Clare Short: I met the Director of the United Nations Environment Programme, Klaus Topefer, on June 15, when we discussed the UNEP mission to the Balkans. The aim of the mission, which began earlier this month, is to establish what impact the conflict has had on the environment in Kosovo and elsewhere in the Balkans. Initial assessments indicate that the main environmental threats to health are contaminated water sources and landmines. My Department has made action in both sectors a priority. We have sent twelve rapid response teams to carry out emergency surveying and demining. And we are establishing an Infrastructure Engineering Unit within our Pristina office which will focus on water and electricity rehabilitation.

Ethiopia and Eritrea

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement about the current humanitarian situation in Ethiopia and Eritrea. [92819]

Clare Short: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave the hon. Member for Rochford and Southend, East (Sir T. Taylor) on 14 July 1999, *Official Report*, column *388*.

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what representations she has received concerning a humanitarian response to the drought in Ethiopia. [92818]

Clare Short: Representations have been received from a number of the major multilateral aid agencies and international non-governmental organisations about the worsening humanitarian situation in Ethiopia. Since January 1998 we have provided over £6 million for humanitarian actions. My officials are in Ethiopia this week making a further assessment.

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what discussions she has had with the Government of Eritrea regarding the reduction in the aid budget for that country. [92808]

Clare Short: The Government of Eritre pursue a policy of self-reliance. A reduction in bilateral development activities has taken place by agreement with the Government over the last 18 months. We continue to contribute to development and humanitarian needs in Eritrea through the EC.

European Commission (Fraud)

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what assessment she has made of reports of alleged Commission fraud made by Dr. Nikolas Alexandrakis; if her Department has investigated these allegations; and if she will make a statement. [92870]

Clare Short: We take fraud against the EC budget very seriously. Specific decisions on fighting EU fraud are a matter for the Chancellor of the Exchequer and are discussed at ECOFIN Council.

I am not aware of the reports by Dr. Alexandrakis. However, the report of the Committee of Independent Experts, which led to the resignation of the Commission in March, revealed a lack of responsibility and accountability in the Commission's handling of external aid spending in the Mediterranean, in emergency aid and in nuclear safety in Eastern Europe. I welcome the report and the shake up which it has triggered. The new Commission and member states must now ensure that fraud and weak controls are rooted out and that EC funds are spent properly and effectively on development and other programmes.

Botswana (HIV)

Mr. Nigel Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development when she last met representatives from Botswana to discuss the problems of HIV/AIDS. [92709]

Clare Short: The Director of UNAIDS, Dr. Peter Piot and I discussed ways to intensify the international response to HIV/AIDS in Africa with representatives of the Government of Botswana and several other African countries during a private meeting in New York on 30 June in the margins of a United Nations conference.

Non-governmental Organisations

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what changes are proposed to her Department's funding arrangements for non-governmental organisations; and if she will make a statement. [92378]

Clare Short: We are proposing to make changes to the arrangements for funding Non Governmental Organisations (NGOs) from the Civil Society Unit. 1999–2000 was the last year in which UK NGOs could apply for funding under the Joint Funding Scheme (JFS)

which was originally set up to support the initiatives of the voluntary sector in the UK. Over the next five years, expenditure under this scheme will be phased out and replaced by two new arrangements; the Civil Society Challenge Fund and Partnership Programme Agreements for individual organisations.

The Civil Society Challenge Fund is expected to contribute to the achievement of the International Development Targets, in particular the reduction of poverty. It will be open to a wider range of UK civil society than was the case with the JFS and will fund projects which have a focused approach to strengthening civil society in developing countries. Applications may be submitted from October of this year. Approved projects will be funded from April 2000.

Partnership Programme Agreements will be open to organisations who share DFID's goal of the eradication of poverty and are actively engaged in a range of DFID's strategic concerns. The Agreements will be linked to mutually agreed strategic outcomes, allow for selectivity and flexibility in the application of DFID funding and provide the opportunity for DFID and the partner organisation to maximum the effectiveness of their collaboration. The negotiation of Agreements with individual agencies will begin in Autumn 1999.

In addition to these special schemes DFID will continue to support the work of NGOs across the range of its programmes.

Further information on the new arrangements is available from DFID's Civil Society Unit based in East Kilbride.

Widows (Third World)

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what resources her Department has given in the past three years to projects specifically targeting widows in Third World and conflict zones. [92820]

Clare Short: Information in this form is not held centrally and could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

Yugoslavia

Mrs. Mahon: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what sums have been provided *(a)* as grants and *(b)* as loans or credits to *(a)* Montenegro, *(b)* Macedonia, *(c)* Bulgaria, *(d)* Albania, *(e)* Romania and *(f)* Hungary since the beginning of NATO's military operation against Yugoslavia. [92720]

Clare Short: From the beginning of the NATO military operation, on 24 March 1999, up to 22 July, the following sums (in £ sterling) have been spent under our bilateral programme. All figures are grants. We do not provide loans to these countries from our bilateral programmes.

	Projects	*Humanitarian Aid*
Federal Republic of Yugoslavia	104,765	4,776,775
Macedonia	164,000	6,935,220
Bulgaria	670,364	—
Albania	163,000	12,034,980
Romania	1,217,368	—
Hungary	591,758	—

Expenditure for Montenegro is included in that for the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia.

Democracy Building

Mr. Menzies Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development how much overseas aid is being spent on democracy building in the current year; and what percentage this constitutes of total overseas aid. [91338]

Clare Short: We do not record expenditure on democracy building on our Policy Information Marker System (PIMS) which covers all bilateral projects with a commitment over £100,000. However, we do record expenditure to promote good government which includes activities to support democracy.

Records of expenditure in the current financial year are not yet available. We are therefore providing figures for 1998–99 where we spent just over £300 million on projects which recorded good government as an objective. This represents almost 40 per cent. of total PIMS marked expenditure. Nearly £70 million or 8 per cent. of PIMS marked expenditure was spent on projects for which good government was the principal objective of the project. Projects may have more than one objective.

Mr. Menzies Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development how much funding *(a)* has been provided for and *(b)* is earmarked for future democracy-building in the Eastern Adriatic. [91337]

Clare Short: In Albania we have provided about £20,000 over the last year to establish citizen's advice information services.

In Bosnia, we have provided some £8 million on democracy building projects since 1996. This has been provided through the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe and for reform of the police, the media and government systems.

In Croatia we have provided £690,000 since 1996 on support to reform of local and national government, the police and judiciary, and the media.

In Macedonia, we have spent £25,000 in the last year to assist with the regulation of the media.

New strategies are currently being developed for Bosnia, Albania and Macedonia to support economic and social reforms and promote democracy.

In Kosovo, we are providing financial and in-kind support to the UN Civil Administration, some of which is used for democracy building. We are supporting independent media organisations and have contributed $1 million to the UN Trust Fund. We are now carrying out assessments of the region's needs for future reconstruction and longer-term development.

Genetically Modified Organisms

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what progress has been made in the scientific audit of DFID-funded projects during the past 10 years which have supported the development, testing or use of GMOs; and if she will make a statement. [93149]

Clare Short: From the many hundreds of natural resources research projects supported over the last decade we have identified 43 which address genetic modification technologies. I shall send the hon. Member a list of these showing the principal collaborators. We have asked our international partners to identify the extent to which genetic modification technologies are used in the activities to which they allocate my Department's funding. When we have this information we shall carry out the next stages of the audit.

Commonwealth Development Corporation

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will list the emoluments of the *(a)* Chief Executive and *(b)* members of the Executive Management Committee of the Commonwealth Development Corporation for 1998 indicating performance-related bonus payments where applicable. [93171]

Clare Short: Total emoluments for CDC's Chief Executive in 1998 were £168,189 and for the members of the Executive Management Committee £819,429.

In 1998 CDC senior management were eligible for performance related bonuses up to a maximum of 20 per cent. of basic salary. Each individual's award (within that ceiling) was made on the basis of individual performance.

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will publish the formal maximum exposure limits for each country and each sector in which the Commonwealth Development Corporation invested for each year since 1994–95. [92945]

Clare Short: My Department has not set formal maximum exposure limits for CDC's investments, either by sector or by country. CDC has an internal portfolio management system based on management judgment, which aims to take a prudent approach to asset allocation.

Public Appointments

Joan Ruddock: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development how many appointments to public bodies were made by her Department in *(a)* 1997–98 and *(b)* 1998–99, broken down by (i) gender and (ii) ethnicity; and if he will list the chairmen appointed to those bodies in those years, similarly broken down. [92523]

Clare Short: Appointments made by my Department to Public Bodies for the years 1997–98 and 1998–99 are as follows:

Year	*Total*	*White*	*Ethnic minority*	*Male*	*Female*
1 June 1997 to 31 May 1998	41	35	6	23	13
1 June 1998 to 31 May 1999	15	15	0	9	6

Information on the ethnic origin of Chairmen appointed to public bodies in the periods requested cannot be provided as the small numbers involved could lead to the identification of individuals without their consent.

I would also like to refer my hon. Friend to my Departmental Plan on Equal Opportunities published by the Government on 25 May 1999 and deposited in the Libraries of both Houses. The plan sets objectives and targets for improving representation of women, people from ethnic minority groups and people with disabilities.

Sierra Leone

Mr. David Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what humanitarian aid her Department is providing for Sierra Leone; and if she will make a statement. [92576]

Clare Short: Since January 1999 my Department has provided over £2.3 million pounds of humanitarian assistance to Sierra Leone through the supply of emergency medical supplies, assistance in the areas of water, sanitation, healthcare, shelter and agriculture.

NORTHERN IRELAND

Market Research

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if she will list the title and purpose of each item of market and opinion research commissioned by or through her Department, agencies and non-departmental public bodies since May 1997, stating in each case whether the results were published. [89686]

Mr. Paul Murphy *[holding answer 5 July 1999]:* The information requested has been placed in the Library.

Garvaghy Road

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if she will ask for a report from the Chief Constable of the RUC on the display of a UVF flag adjacent to the police check point on the Garvaghy Road, Portadown; and if she will make a statement. [91708]

Mr. Ingram *[holding answer 16 July 1999]:* Since early 1999, many roads and streets in the Portadown area have become the focus for the erection of flags and emblems by respective communities. Complaints in respect of the erection of these have been registered by both communities.

Currently, police have powers to remove such flags or emblems only in circumstances wherein a breach of the peace is considered imminent. Outside of such circumstances, the matter of removal of the material rests with the proprietor or owner of the property in question.

Section 31 of the Northern Ireland (Emergency Provisions) Act 1978 provides for an offence of displaying public support for a proscribed organisation. However the flag in question commemorates the formation of the original Ulster Volunteer Force in 1912, prior to the First World War, and therefore does not satisfy the necessary elements of this offence.

Occupational Therapists

Mr. McGrady: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many *(a)* full-time and *(b)* part-time occupational therapists were employed by the (i) Down Lisburn Trust, (ii) Newry and Mourne Trust and (iii) Banbridge and Craigavon Trust (1) in 1997, (2) in 1998 and (3) at the latest available date. [92012]

Mr. McFall: The information requested is set out in the table.

	1997		*1998*		*1999*	
Trust	*Full time*	*Part time*	*Full time*	*Part time*	*Full time*	*Part time*
Down Lisburn	30	16	29	16	31	18
Newry and Mourne	17	1	17	1	17	1
Craigavon and Banbridge	17	11	17	11	17	11

Housing

Mr. McGrady: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, pursuant to her answer to the hon. Member for Hull, North (Mr. McNamara) of 17 June 1999, *Official Report*, column *210*, on housing, what progress has been made in drafting the legislation to regulate nomination to the Board of the Housing Executive. [92031]

Mr. Paul Murphy: A specific provision, to regulate the nominations by the Northern Ireland Housing Council to the Board of the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, has been prepared for inclusion in the draft legislation mentioned in the reply I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Hull, North on 17 June 1999, *Official Report*, column *210*.

Community Care

Mr. McGrady: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many patients have been discharged from hospitals in the Down Lisburn Trust with community care packages; and how many have been retained in hospitals awaiting such packages since 1 April. [92010]

Mr. McFall: Since 1 April 1999, nine patients have been discharged with community care packages from hospitals within the Down Lisburn Trust. There are at present 33 hospital patients who have been waiting three weeks or more for a community care package.

Mr. McGrady: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what was the financial allocation from each health and social services board in Northern Ireland to each health trust for community care provision for *(a)* 1997–98, *(b)* 1998–99 and *(c)* 1999–2000. [92008]

Mr. McFall: Although service agreements have not yet been finalised, the financial allocations from each health and social services board in Northern Ireland to each health and social services trust for community care provision for *(a)* 1997–98, *(b)* 1998–99 and *(c)* 1999–2000 are as follows:

£ million

	1997–98	*1998–99*	*1999–2000*
Northern Health and Social Services Board			
Causeway HSS Trust	23.036	24.014	27.153
Homefirst Community HSS Trust	70.787	73.509	77.053
United Hospitals HSS Trust	3.354	3.354	3.421
Other Trusts	0.215	0.224	0.223
Total	97.392	101.101	107.85
Southern Health and Social Services Board			
Armagh and Dungannon HSS Trust	25.350	26.344	27.194
Craigavon and Banbridge HSS Trust	21.742	23.169	23.927
Newry and Mourne HSS Trust	28.472	29.461	30.443
Others	8.975	9.700	9.702
Total	84.539	88.674	91.266
Eastern Health and Social Services Board			
Down Lisburn HSS Trust	58.636	60.751	67.319
North and West Belfast HSS Trust	58.604	60.677	67.319
Ulster Community Hospitals HSS Trust[1]	63.949	66.234	73.439
South and East Belfast HSS Trust	85.264	88.315	97.917
Total	266.453	275.977	305.994
Western Health and Social Services Board			
Sperrin HSS Trust	36.727	38.405	40.128
Foyle HSS Trust	41.935	43.758	45.662
Total	78.662	82.163	85.790

[1] North Down and Ards HSS Trust prior to April 1998

Mr. McGrady: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what proportion of the financial allocation from the Eastern Health and Social Services Board towards the Down Lisburn Trust in respect of community care provision for 1999–2000 has been expended to date. [92009]

Mr. McFall: Although service agreements have not yet been finalised, of the amount the Eastern Health and Social Services Board proposed to allocate to Down and Lisburn Trust for community care provision for 1999–2000, 24.4 per cent. has been spent to date.

Long-term Care

Mr. McGrady: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what response she proposes to make to the Royal Commission's report on Long-Term Care. [92015]

Mr. McFall: While the Commission was sitting, work was already taking place in some of the areas which the report highlights, such as developing a national strategy for carers and the extension of the direct payments scheme to people 65 and over. Where the Commission is recommending new policies for the future, these proposals will require more detailed consideration in coming months.

Official Documents

Mr. Wilshire: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if she will publish a list of all those official documents of the last Administration which have been seen by *(a)* her, *(b)* other Ministers in her Department, *(c)* special advisers in her Department and *(d)* non-career civil servants appointed since May 1997 in her Department. [92167]

Mr. Paul Murphy *[holding answer 20 July 1999]:* A large number of official documents were generated during the period of the previous Administration, many of which were published or put in the public domain. Since May 1997, the Northern Ireland Office has been guided by the convention governing access to the papers of a previous Administration, as set out in the then Prime Minister's reply to a written question on 24 January 1980, *Official Report,* column *305–07.*

Belfast Harbour Estate

Mr. McGrady: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland following the Judicial Review, in respect of D5's planning application for a shopping development at Sydenham on the Belfast Harbour estate, what plans she has for an investigation into *(a)* this matter and *(b)* other planning cases where misleading information may have been given to the Minister for the Environment in advance of a decision. [92297]

Mr. Paul Murphy: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has no plans for an investigation into this matter. The Planning Service will reconsider its advice on the application for planning permission in the light of the Judicial Review decision. The Secretary of State is not aware of any planning cases where misleading information may have been given to the Minister.

Paramilitary Violence

Mr. William Ross: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if she will list for the week ended *(a)* Saturday 3 July, *(b)* Saturday 10 July and *(c)* Saturday 17 July the number of violent incidents involving paramilitary groups which took place in Northern Ireland indicating how many involved (i) Loyalist and (ii) Republican groups. [92424]

Mr. Ingram: The number of security incidents during the period are as shown:

Period	*Deaths*	*Shooting incidents*	*Bombing incidents*
27 June-3 July	0	5	3
4 July-10 July	0	1	2
11 July-17 July	0	0	0

The number of casualties as a result of paramilitary-style attacks during the period 27 June to 17 July are as follows:

Period	*Assault*	*Shootings*	*Total*
Loyalist			
27 June-3 July	1	1	2
4 July-10 July	0	1	1
11 July-17 July	0	0	0
Republican			
27 June-3 July	1	1	2
4 July-10 July	4	0	4
11 July-17 July	0	0	0

Notes:
1. The shooting and bombing incidents cannot as yet be firmly attributed to a grouping.
2. Figures may be subject to minor amendment.

Mr. William Ross: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if she will list for the week ended *(a)* Saturday 3 July, *(b)* Saturday 10 July and *(c)* Saturday 17 July the number of (1) punishment beatings and (2) punishment shootings which took place in Northern Ireland indicating how many in each category were committed by (i) Loyalist and (ii) Republican groups. [92425]

Mr. Ingram: The number of casualties as a result of paramilitary-style attacks during the period 27 June to 17 July are as follows:

	Assaults	*Shootings*	*Total*
Loyalists			
27 June - 3 July	1	1	2
4 July - 10 July	0	1	1
11 July - 17 July	0	0	0
Republican			
27 June - 3 July	1	1	2
4 July - 10 July	4	0	4
11 July - 17 July	0	0	0

Ministerial Meetings (US)

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many times ministers in her

Department held meetings with ministers and officials of the United States Government between 1 May 1997 and 1 January 1998, indicating the dates and locations of each meeting, the Ministers involved and the US representatives at each meeting. [92269]

Mr. Paul Murphy: NIO Ministers have met representatives of the US administration on a number of occasions, both in the United Kingdom and the US, to discuss a wide range of issues.

The following meetings have taken place between 1 May 1996 and 1 January 1998:

Dates/location	*Minister*	*US Representative*
22–23 May Washington	Secretary of State	Mr. Randolph Bell, Director, UK, Benelux and Ireland Affairs, State Department Ms Virginia Manuel, Department of Commerce Ms Nancy Soderberg, National Security Council Mr. Sandy Berger, Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs Mr. Jim Steinberg, Deputy Assistant to the President and Senior Director for European Affairs Mr. Sandy Vershbow, Special Assistant to the President and Senior Director for European Affairs Mr. Anthony Wayne, Senior Deputy Assistant Secretary, Bureau of European & Canadian Affairs, State Department Ms Mary Ann Peters, Director for European Affairs Mr. Strobe Talbot, Deputy Secretary of State Ms Janet T Reno, Attorney General, Department of Justice Ms Madeleine Albright, US Secretary of State, State Department Mr. Larry Butler, Director for European Affairs Mr. Don Brandler, Special Assistant to the President and Senior Director for European Affairs
30 June Hillsborough Castle	Mr. Ingram	Mr. John Dalton, Secretary to the US Navy
9 July London	Mr. Ingram	Mr. William Daly, US Secretary of State for Commerce
3–6 August Washington	Mr. Ingram	Mr. Jim Steinberg, Deputy Assistant to the President and Senior Director for European Affairs Ambassador Thomas Pickering, Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs at the State Department
23–24 September Washington	Mr. Murphy	Mr. Anthony Wayne, Senior Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for European and Canadian Affairs Mr. Randolph Bell, Director, UK, Benelux and Ireland Affairs Mr. Jim Steinberg, Deputy Assistant to the President and Senior Director for European Affairs Mr. Larry Butler, Director for European Affairs Mr. Don Bandler, Special Assistant to the President and Senior Director for European Affairs
5–13 October Washington	Mr. Ingram	Mr. Robert Bryant, Deputy Director, FBI Mr. John Lewis, Head of National Security Division, FBI Mr. Steve Jennings, Deputy Chief, International Counter-terrorism Unit, FBI Mr. Enrique Ghimenti, Chief, Global Counter-terrorism Squad, FBI Mr. Tim Gossfield, Supervisor, Irish Counter-terrorism Squad, FBI Ms Carol Stroud, Analyst, FBI Mr. Gerry Schroeder, Acting Counsel for Intelligence, Department of Justice Ms Sara Criscatelli, Attorney, Criminal Division, Department of Justice Mr. Dana Biehel, Deputy Chief, Terrorism and Violent Crimes Section, Department of Justice Mr. Ellis Mottur, Acting Assistant of Commerce for Trade Development Mr. Charles Ford, Minister-Counsellor for Commercial Affairs Virginia Manuel, Executive Assistant to the Assistant Secretary of Commerce for Market Access and Compliance
13 November Washington	Secretary of State	Ms Janet Reno, Attorney General, Department of Justice Ms Madeliene Albright, US Secretary of State, State Department Mr. Sandy Berger, US National Security Adviser
4 December Hillsborough Castle	Secretary of State	Jim Lyons, Special Adviser to President Clinton and Secretary of State for Economic Initiatives in Ireland Kathy Stephens, US Consul General

Parades Commission

Mr. Donaldson: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland for what reasons the results of the opinion survey commissioned by the Parades Commission was published exclusively in the *Belfast Telegraph*; and if the full report is available to the public. [92953]

Mr. Ingram: This is a matter for the Parades Commission. However, I understand that two of the preliminary survey responses were made public at the time of the launch of the Commission's Annual Report. The *Belfast Telegraph*, the largest circulating local daily newspaper, then requested full details for publication when these became available. No other media outlet requested such details.

Mr. Donaldson: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if she will place in the Library a copy of the final report of the opinion survey commissioned by the Parades Commission from Research and Evaluation Services. [92954]

Mr. Ingram: Copies of the final report will be placed in the Library of the House as soon as they become available and I will send a copy to the hon. Member.

Mr. Donaldson: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what was the tender process for the commissioning of the recent public opinion survey undertaken by the Parades Commission; what was the fee agreed at time of contract; and what was the final cost. [92957]

Mr. Ingram: This is a matter for the Parades Commission. However, I understand that three companies were invited to tender for the opinion survey. The tenders submitted by each firm were evaluated in line with Government Purchasing Agency procedures. The fee agreed at the time of contract, and the final cost, was £9,500 plus VAT.

Mr. Donaldson: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what was the method of participant selection for those members of the public interviewed by Research and Evaluation Services for the Parades Commission survey published this year. [92958]

Mr. Ingram: This is a matter for the Parades Commission. However, I understand that the representative aspect of the survey is documented, in table 3 of the survey, by age, sex, socio-economic status, religion and area of residence, and is compared to the 1991 census. Details of relevant numbers of each category are given in tables 2 and 3 of the Survey.

Mr. Donaldson: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if she will make available a copy of the questionnaire used by Research and Evaluation Services in the course of compiling their recent report for the Parades Commission. [92955]

Mr. Ingram: I understand the questionnaire is included in the final report of the opinion survey at Appendix 1.

Mr. Donaldson: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what was the breakdown of participation by members of the public in the opinion survey undertaken by Research and Evaluation Services for the Parades Commission by *(a)* religion and *(b)* postcode. [92956]

Mr. Ingram: This is a matter for the Parades Commission. However, I understand that the breakdowns were as set out:

(a)

Religion	*Percentage sample*
Roman Catholic	37
Protestant	56
None	2
Other	1
Refused	3
Total	99

(b) No breakdown of participation by postcode is available, but the interviewees reflect the geographic percentages of population relative to local government districts. These are shown in table 1 of the Survey.

Mr. Donaldson: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland for what reasons the Parades Commission's opinion survey was not published until 21 June. [92952]

Mr. Ingram: This is a matter for the Parades Commission. However, I understand the final draft of the opinion survey was not available until 16 June 1999 and that the survey was published immediately on agreement of this final draft.

Lisburn Institute of Further and Higher Education

Mr. Donaldson: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what account she took of *(a)* the population and *(b)* the industrial needs of the Borough of Lisburn in making her decision on the allocation of places to Lisburn Institute of Further and Higher Education. [92951]

Mr. McFall: As a result of the Comprehensive Spending Review, an additional 600 full-time higher education places were secured in the further education sector over the next two years. These places have been allocated to six areas of skills needs identified as being important for the development of the regional economy. The six vocational areas are computing, construction, electronics, hospitality and catering, manufacturing engineering and software engineering.

Colleges of further and higher education were invited to submit bids for the additional places to the Department of Education. Bids were assessed against five common criteria so that places could be awarded on the basis of a college's ability to deliver high quality, relevant provision in the specified vocational areas. The five criteria were: expertise and experience of teaching staff, links with industry; resources; senior management commitment; and track record in provision of higher education. The population of the council area in which a college is situated was not taken into consideration.

Assembly (Salaries)

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if the members of the Northern Ireland Assembly are being paid. [92573]

Mr. Paul Murphy: Yes. The Assembly, which is currently in recess, is being paid under the New Northern Ireland Assembly (Salaries and Allowances) Order 1999 which was made under the Northern Ireland (Elections) Act 1998.

Adam Lambert

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many persons are thought by the RUC to have been involved in the murder of Adam Lambert on 9 November 1987; how many persons were arrested in connection with this murder; how many were *(a)* charged and *(b)* convicted; and what sentences were given. [93090]

Mr. Ingram: Police arrested eight suspects in connection with the murder, two were charged (one was withdrawn by the Director of Public Prosecutions) and one person was convicted and sentenced to life imprisonment for murder.

Ministerial Staff

Mr. John D. Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland to which office in the Northern Ireland Civil Service the Special Advisers to the former Deputy First Minister (Designate) have been transferred; what staff have been retained in the Department of the former First Minister (Designate); and if she will make a statement. [92940]

Mr. Paul Murphy: Following the resignation of the hon. Member for Newry and Armagh (Mr. Mallon) as Deputy First Minister (Designate) the appointments of his Special Advisers were automatically terminated under the

terms of their contracts. However, the future arrangements for the Office of the Deputy First Minister (Designate) are currently under consideration.

PRIME MINISTER

Coral Reef Degradation

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Prime Minister, pursuant to the oral answer of 1 July 1999, *Official Report*, columns 419–20, which is the lead ministerial department on Her Majesty's Government's policy on coral reef degradation. [89963]

The Prime Minister: As is the case for a range of cross-cutting issues, there is no single Government Department responsible for coral reef degradation. Departments lead on the aspects for which they are directly responsible, consulting other Departments where necessary. For example:

The Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions is concerned with coral reefs within the context of biological diversity and the marine environment;

The Department for International Development deal with matters relating to coral reefs as they affect economic development in overseas coastal communities;

The Foreign and Commonwealth Office is responsible for particular issues concerning coral reefs in British overseas territories; and

The management of fisheries and deposits in the sea are largely devolved matters. Insofar as these areas may impact on coral reefs, responsibility within the UK is shared by the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, the Department of Trade and Industry, the Scottish Executive Rural Affairs Department, the National Assembly for Wales Agriculture Department and the Departments of Agriculture and the Environment for Northern Ireland.

Where particular issues involve the interests of a number of Departments, the ENV Committee provides a forum for Ministerial and official discussion of these issues. It is well known that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions takes a strong personal interest in the issue of coral reef degradation and ensures that it is accorded due attention within Government.

Luxembourg Compromise

Mr. Woodward: To ask the Prime Minister when he last invoked the Luxembourg Compromise. [91495]

The Prime Minister: The Luxembourg Compromise has been invoked twice by the United Kingdom—once in July 1978 and once in May 1982.

This Government's positive and constructive approach to Europe has meant that we can achieve successful outcomes for the United Kingdom, for example, most recently in the lifting of the beef ban.

New Deal (Young People)

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Prime Minister how many individuals his office has recruited under the New Deal for Young People. [91885]

The Prime Minister: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given by my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Cabinet Office to my hon. Friend the Member for Slough (Fiona Mactaggart) on 25 May 1999, *Official Report*, column *116*. One placement has been in my Office and I am delighted to say that the person is now in unsubsidised employment. Subject to the necessary security clearances, I intend to take additional New Dealers in the future.

Business Ambassadors

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Prime Minister if he will list those occasions when he has met Ambassadors for British Business. [91875]

The Prime Minister: The Ambassadors for British Business initiative was launched by my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary in November 1997. It aims to harness the expertise of leading figures in Britain's private sector to promote British strengths abroad, for example by making speeches to overseas audiences in the course of travel on their company business.

In the course of my duties, I am delighted to have met over half of the 31 business people who participate in this scheme. The Ambassadors do an excellent job in promoting British business at no cost to the taxpayer.

Internal Histories

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Prime Minister what is the *(a)* purpose and *(b)* audience of internal histories; and what procedures determine the selection of (i) topics and (ii) authors. [91850]

The Prime Minister: The purpose of internal histories is to provide factual, accurate and authoritative background information for members of departments on particular topics; planning and decision making; to evaluate the effectiveness of policy and to point out possible lessons for the future. The target audience for internal histories is primarily relevant departmental staff.

These histories are not written for publication but as public records they are considered under the Public Records Acts for release to the Public Record Office. As has been the practice under successive administrations, it is a matter for Departments whether they wish to conduct an internal history and topics are usually commissioned by senior staff in departments in response, for example, to a need for analyses of major developments or operations or to provide factual reports on particular events. Authors are usually drawn from officers from the department with relevant experience or from within their historical branches.

Human Rights

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Prime Minister if he will list those foreign Governments, indicating the serving head of Government, who have received letters of protest from Her Majesty's Government regarding human rights abuses since 1970. [91869]

The Prime Minister: We frequently raise human rights concerns with other Governments. While occasionally we do this in writing, we more regularly do so through bilateral representations by Ministers and officials or with EU partners. For example, we have made such representations regarding China, Burma, Colombia and Belarus. However, there is no operational need to keep the type of list requested and one is therefore not available.

Ministers have made written representations for example to the Malaysian Government, the Ugandan Government, the Indonesian Government and the Government of Zimbabwe.

Kosovo

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Prime Minister how long the meeting was with KLA officials on 18 May which he attended; and if he will list the participants. [91871]

The Prime Minister: Details of participants were given in my earlier answer of 21 June 1999, *Official Report*, column *313*. In line with normal practice appropriate officials accompanied me at the meeting which lasted just over half an hour.

Gold Sales

Mr. Cash: To ask the Prime Minister if he will place in the Library a copy of his letter to the President of South Africa relating to the sale of gold, delivered to the President of South Africa on 17 June. [91872]

The Prime Minister: As we announced on 7 May 1999 *Official Report*, column *485*, we have undertaken the sale of gold to produce a better balance in the portfolio of UK reserves. On the advice of the Bank of England we made this public to ensure the sale was carried through on a clear and transparent basis. I wrote to the South African President on 11 June to set out these reasons in some detail and to follow up discussions we had already had with his Government. However, the letter also contained information received in confidence from the South African government. It is established practice under Section 1(c) of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information not to disclose such information.

Public Appointments

Mr. Singh: To ask the Prime Minister (1) how many appointments to quangos he made between (i) 1 June 1997 and 31 May 1998 and (ii) 1 June 1998 and 31 May 1999; [92042]

(2) how many members of Britain's *(a)* ethnic minority communities and *(b)* Asian community he appointed to quangos between (i) 1 June 1997 and 31 May 1998 and (ii) 1 June 1998 and 31 May 1999. [92113]

The Prime Minister: The number of appointments I have made to bodies listed in the Cabinet Office publication "Public Bodies" are as follows:

Between 1 June 1997 and 31 May 1998—81

Between 1 June 1998 and 31 May 1999—58.

In addition The Queen has made a number of appointments to such bodies on my recommendation.

My hon. Friend the Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office set out the Government's new policy on collection and disclosure of ethnic origin data for public appointees in his answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington, North (Helen Jones) on 11 November 1998, *Official Report*, column *200*. This policy came into effect with regard to new appointments and re-appointments from 1 April 1999.

However, owing to the small number of public appointments I have made since 1 April 1999 (two women and five men) information about ethnic origin cannot be provided since to do so would risk identifying individuals without consent.

Information on ethnic origin with regard to appointments I have made prior to 1 April 1999 is not held in the form requested. However, I have asked my Office to research what information is available and I will write to my hon. Friend in due course.

China (Human Rights)

Mr. Stevenson: To ask the Prime Minister what improvements have been made by the Chinese Government in respect of *(a)* human rights and *(b)* the situation in Tibet since his discussions with Jiang Zemin in Beijing in October 1998. [92051]

The Prime Minister: We continue to monitor the observance of human rights in China and the situation in Tibet. We regularly raise our concerns with the Chinese authorities. We are addressing the issue with China through our bilateral and EU/China human rights dialogues. Since October, two rounds of talks have taken place as well as three EU/China human rights seminars. China has signed the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and invited the UN Special Rapporteur on Torture to visit. These positive steps will help to bring about China's closer co-operation with UN human rights mechanisms. We will continue to encourage China to ratify the international covenants which it has signed and we will continue to support developments in China's legal system which we believe will bring about positive change to human rights in the longer term.

Special Advisers

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Prime Minister, pursuant to his answer of 6 July 1999, *Official Report*, column *433*, on Special Advisers, if he will set out the terms of the similar arrangements which applied under previous Administrations as they relate to briefing hon. Members of the party in Government. [91858]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 21 July 1999]:* The introduction of the "Model Contract for Special Advisers" in May 1997 set out for the first time in a public document the duties and responsibilities of Special Advisers. These include helping to brief party MPs and officials on issues of Government policy, which, like the other duties, is not new. It ensures that Party publicity is factually accurate and consistent with Government policy. Successive Administrations have recognised that this is an appropriate task for Special Advisers.

Policy Unit

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Prime Minister on how many occasions members of his policy unit have visited the Republic of Ireland on official business since 1 May 1997, indicating the name of the member and the dates of travel in each case. [92272]

The Prime Minister: None.

Ministerial Meetings

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Prime Minister how many times he has held meetings with Ministers and officials of the Irish Government since 1 January 1998, indicating the dates and locations of each meeting and the names of the Irish Ministers and officials at each meeting. [92270]

The Prime Minister: Since I came to office I have had numerous meetings with the Irish Government to discuss the political situation in Northern Ireland and a range of other issues of mutual interest. Given the frequency and nature of the meetings, it is not possible to list all the separate occasions and locations. The meetings have, however, usually been held in London, Dublin or Belfast and made public in the normal way at the time. In addition, I have of course met the Taoiseach at European and other international meetings. In line with normal practice, I was supported at the meetings by the appropriate number of officials.

Animal Welfare

Mr. Baker: To ask the Prime Minister for what reason no announcement has yet been made in respect of the co-ordination within Government of animal welfare policies; when he expects to make such an announcement; and if he will make a statement. [92308]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 22 July 1999]:* We are committed to continue working to ensure highest possible standards of animal welfare. Major steps already taken include announcing at the end of last year the end to all cosmetics testing on animals in the United Kingdom and no new licences have been issued for such tests since we came to power. We have also negotiated the phase-out across Europe of battery cages for laying hens. To date, co-ordination between Government Departments has been on an informal basis. However, this will be put on a formal basis this autumn by the establishment of an Interdepartmental Ministerial Group.

Bilderberg Group

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Prime Minister from whom members of the Government received invitations to attend meetings of the Bilderberg Group. [92863]

The Prime Minister: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave to the hon. Member for Hereford (Mr. Keetch) on 7 May 1999, *Official Report*, columns *476–77*.

Who sends invitations is a matter for the Bilderberg Group.

European Commission

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Prime Minister if he will make a statement on the current state of disciplinary proceedings against Commission officials implicated in alleged fraud; how many are involved; at what levels; and what is the timescale for concluding such proceedings. [92865]

The Prime Minister: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given to the hon. Member for Ludlow (Mr. Gill) by the Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office my right hon. Friend the Member for Gateshead, East and Washington, West (Ms Quin) on 20 January 1999, *Official Report*, column *505* in which she undertook to write to the hon. Member. She did so on 30 April 1999 and a copy of the letter was placed in the Libraries of the House.

The European Commission has been asked to provide an update on progress made since then and when proceedings are expected to conclude. I have asked my right hon. Friend the Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office to write to the hon. Member when this information is received.

Ministerial Travel

Mr. Baker: To ask the Prime Minister on what date he last used a train in the course of his official duties. [92654]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 23 July 1999]:* In accordance with the terms of the Ministerial Code, Ministers are required always to make efficient and cost-effective travel arrangements. Trips in and around London will normally be made by Government car. The last time I used a train was on 22 June 1999 to travel to Birmingham to attend a Conference to mark the anniversary of the New Deal and to present awards to the 100,000th New Dealer.

Tibet

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Prime Minister (1) what discussions he proposes to have about the continued occupation of Tibet with the Chinese President Jiang Zemin, when he visits the United Kingdom in the autumn; [92188]

(2) what representations he proposes to make to the Chinese President, Jiang Zemin, this autumn about the detention of Gedhun Choekyi Nyima, recognised by the Dalai Lama as the 11 Panchen Lama of Tibet. [92189]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 23 July 1999]:* We are very much looking forward to the first ever State Visit by a President of the People's Republic of China this Autumn. During President Jiang's visit we expect to discuss a full range of bilateral, regional and international issues.

Sutherland Commission

Mr. Hammond: To ask the Prime Minister, pursuant to his oral answer to the hon. Member for Montgomeryshire (Mr. Öpik) of 21 July 1999, *Official Report*, column 1184, when he expects his Government to complete its consideration of the majority and minority reports of the Sutherland Commission; and if the Government will then make a formal response to the Commission's recommendations in respect of funding of nursing and personal care. [93030]

The Prime Minister: We are considering the Royal Commission's proposals and the reactions to the Commission's report. We will announce our decisions in due course.

CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

Ministerial Travel

Mr. Baker: To ask the hon. Member for Middlesbrough, representing the Church Commissioners, on what date he last used a train in the course of his official duties. [92653]

Mr. Stuart Bell: To attend the Church of England General Synod in York in July 1998.

SCOTLAND

European Communities Working Groups

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will list the European Communities working groups which met over the last 12 months with a representative from his Department in attendance; if he will list the number of times each met; if he will indicate the nature of the Government's representation; and if he will make a statement. [88472]

Dr. Reid: Officials from my Department regularly attended European Communities working groups when matters of importance to Scotland—in particular, fisheries, agriculture and structural funds issues—were being discussed. Occasionally, my Department was represented by officials from the United Kingdom's Permanent Representation to the European Union.

Oncologists

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will list the number of clinical and medical oncologists per 100,000 population for each health authority in Scotland. [90806]

Dr. Reid: I refer the hon. Member to my reply of 28 June 1999, *Official Report*, column *30*. Clinical and medical oncologists are not based throughout Scotland, but are employed in Cancer Centres in five locations—Aberdeen, Dundee, Edinburgh, Glasgow and Inverness. They provide services at the centres and on an outreach basis according to need, to cover all health authorities. There is not a specific number of oncologists or proportion of oncologists' time assigned to each NHS Trust or Health Board.

From 1 July, this is a matter for the Scottish Parliament.

Scottish Adjacent Water Boundaries Order 1999

Mr. Alasdair Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland for what reasons, prior to laying the Scottish Adjacent Waters Boundaries Order 1999 (S.I., 1999, No. 1126), his Department did not invite observations from the Scottish Parliament. [91074]

Dr. Reid: Observations were not invited from the Scottish Parliament because it did not exist when the Draft Order was laid before this Parliament on 8 March and debated by both Houses on 23 March.

Genetically Modified Fish

Joan Ruddock: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland, pursuant to his answer of 21 July 1999, *Official Report*, column *531*, what was the transgenic nature of the work at Otter Ferry Salmon Ltd.; and what were the results of the research. [93195]

Dr. Reid: The work involved the production of genetically modified Atlantic Salmon. Copies of a growth hormone gene taken from Chinook Salmon were introduced into 10,000 Atlantic Salmon eggs by micro-injection. The fish were grown in a land-based containment facility for up to one year. A high level of containment was maintained throughout the project. A small number of fish were identified as transgenic, based on accelerated growth. Approximately 50 of the fish grew at four times the normal rate, with no sign of abnormalities. The project was terminated after approximately a year, and all the fish were destroyed.

Departmental Nomenclature

Mr. David Stewart: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will make an announcement on the name by which his Department is to be known. [93604]

Dr. Reid: With the agreement of the Prime Minister, my Department will be known as the Scotland Office.

HEALTH

Millennium Compliance

Mr. Burns: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list those NHS Trusts in England which are not millennium compliant. [90104]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 7 July 1999]:* At 31 May 1999, there were four out of 477 National Health Service organisations considered by the NHS Executive to be making 'unsatisfactory' progress in their preparations for Year 2000. They were: Rochdale Healthcare NHS Trust; Mid Essex Hospital Services NHS Trust; Oxfordshire Ambulance NHS Trust; Luton and Dunstable Hospital NHS Trust. In each case action is being taken by the NHS Trusts concerned with the support of the NHS Executive to ensure they will be fully prepared with compliant systems and equipment or effective contingency plans in place by 30 September 1999, the deadline set for all NHS organisations.

Mr. Burns: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what action is being taken to ensure Mid Essex Hospital Trust is millennium compliant. [90003]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 7 July 1999]:* Mid Essex Hospital Services National Health Service Trust is working towards the 30 September deadline to ensure that all systems are compliant or that effective contingency plans are in place if full compliance cannot be achieved. The NHS Trust has appointed its Director of Nursing as the new project manager in charge of its response to the year 2000 issue and the Chief Executive of the NHS Trust is personally involved in the process. The NHS Executive Eastern Regional Office year 2000 team and the NHS Trust are working closely to ensure that appropriate plans

are in place and that all deadlines are met. Work is being undertaken in the following areas, which were assessed as "unsatisfactory" in the 31 May returns:

The production and regular updating of inventories for information technology systems.

The identification of proposals to fix or replace information technology systems which are not year 2000 compliant.

The assessment of legal liabilities arising from year 2000 non-compliance.

The identification of key areas of risk, which would result in year 2000 compliance not being addressed by 30 September 1999.

It is the NHS Trust's intention that it will meet the deadline of 30 September.

Myodil

Mr. Viggers: To ask the Secretary of State for Health on what date the drug Myodil was granted a product licence of right under the terms of the Medicines Act 1968. [90764]

Ms Jowell: Documentation held by the Medicines Control Agency indicates that a product licence of right for Myodil was granted in September 1972, although the MCA cannot categorically verify that date. An entry on the MCA's computerised Produce Licence database gives the date of authorisation as 19 November 1973. This may be the date on which the formal notification was sent to the company. There were over 39,000 applications for product licences of right and it is reasonable to assume that there would have been some delay in processing those applications.

Fluoridation

Mr. Todd: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will review the legal framework regulating the fluoridation of water supplies; and if he will make a statement. [91552]

Ms Jowell: The White Paper "Saving Lives: Our Healthier Nation" acknowledged that present legislation on fluoridation is not working. We have commissioned a scientific review of the evidence on fluoride and health, which is due to be complete by the end of February 2000. If the review confirms that there are benefits to dental health from fluoridation and that there are no significant risks, we intend to introduce a legal obligation on water companies to fluoridate where there is strong local support for doing so.

Mr. Crausby: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what estimate he has made of the cost of fluoridating all drinking water in the north-west. [92699]

Ms Jowell: Assuming the review of scientific evidence shows benefits from fluoridation and no significant risks, decisions on schemes will be taken by local authority area and costs will be assessed for each individual scheme.

Cancer Care

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) if he will list the members of the Cancer Care Action Group and the organisations for which they work; [91983]

(2) if he will report on the progress made by the Cancer Care Action Group in identifying and implementing improvements to the quality of care for patients and their relatives; and if he will make a statement. [91984]

Mr. Hutton: We recognise the importance of voluntary sector organisations in the care and support of patients with cancer. The Cancer Care Action Group has been established to promote more effective involvement of these organisations in the development and implementation of policy on cancer care. The Group includes representatives of cancer-related voluntary sector organisations and the National Health Service Executive. The organisations represented are:

Breakthrough Breast Cancer

Breast Cancer Care

Cancer Black Care

CancerBacup

Cancerlink

Colon Cancer Concern

Crocus Trust

Help the Hospices

Leukaemia Care Society

Macmillan Cancer Relief

Marie Curie Cancer Care

National Cancer Alliance

National Conference of Cancer Self Help Groups

National Council for Hospices and Specialist Palliative Care Services

The Prostate Cancer Charity

St. Christopher's Hospice

Sargent Cancer Care for Children

Sue Ryder Foundation

Women's Nationwide Cancer Control Campaign.

The Group is chaired by the Chief Nursing Officer and representatives of the NHS Executive and members of the National Cancer Forum also attend.

The Cancer Care Action Group first met in January 1999. It reviewed and advised on current cancer policy initiatives, the development of the National Health Service Cancer Information Strategy and psychosocial support for patients with cancer. The group also identified the need for further work to improve voluntary sector involvement in initiatives to improve quality in the NHS, and in education and training for health professionals.

Nurses (Expenses)

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what action he is planning to take to ensure that nurses are refunded the costs of all work-related journeys; [92208]

(2) how many clinical nurses working in the community are not refunded for the cost of their work-related journeys; [92207]

Mr. Denham: It is the responsibility of local employers to ensure that systems are in place to refund all staff for the costs of expenses necessarily incurred on National Health Service business. I am not aware of any clinical nurses working in the community who are not refunded

expenses necessarily incurred on NHS business. I will be happy to look into any particular case the hon. Member has in mind.

Doctors (General Practice)

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to review the procedures for the selection of doctors to vacant general practices; and when those procedures were last revised. [92228]

Mr. Denham: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has no current plans to review the procedures for the selection of doctors to vacant general practices.

The procedures were last revised on 10 December 1998 when The National Health Services (General Medical Services) Amendment (No. 2) Regulations 1998 were issued.

Barnet Hospital

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many people failed to attend appointments arranged for acute treatment at Barnet Hospital in 1998–99. [92365]

Mr. Denham: Data are not collected from individual hospitals, only National Health Service trusts. Barnet General Hospital is part of Wellhouse NHS Trust.

In 1997–98 there were 6,592 did not attends (DNAs) for first outpatient attendances and 19,183 DNA's for subsequent outpatient attendances arranged for acute treatment, at Wellhouse NHS Trust.

In 1998–99 there were 753 failed to attends for elective inpatient admission and 6,370 DNAs for outpatient appointments.

Primary Care Groups

Mr. Hammond: To ask the Secretary of State for Health, pursuant to his answer of 16 July 1999, *Official Report*, column *362*, on primary care groups (management allowances), when he expects the information requested to be available centrally. [92394]

Mr. Denham: Validated information is expected to be available in the autumn.

Children (Care and Treatment)

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what initiatives he has announced to enhance the care and treatment of children. [92439]

Mr. Hutton: A number of major initiatives have recently been announced. The "Sure Start" project is aimed at developing partnerships and local services for young children and their families in areas of disadvantage to ensure that the health, educational, social and emotional needs of children aged under 5 years are met, and that they arrive at school ready to thrive. In England £452 million has been committed to the development of the Sure Start project over the next three years.

On child and adolescent mental health services, specific targets have been set in the National Priorities Guidance 1999–2002—which reflects the unevenness and inequality in the current pattern of these services, recognises our commitment to service improvement and features an additional investment of £84 million over the next three years.

On 13 July the Department and the Department for Education and Employment Ministers wrote to chief executives of local education authorities offering funding to support local healthy schools programmes to safeguard and improve the physical and mental health and well being of pupils and teachers as a factor in improving school standards. The budget for this programme in 1999–2000 is £4 million.

Last May we announced the introduction of Diana Children's Community Nursing Teams, to help families in the community with children suffering from life threatening illnesses, the budget for which is £4.2 million over the next three years.

The "Quality Protects" programme, which is funded at £375 million over the next three years, was announced last September. This initiative will transform the management and delivery of children's social services and provide better life chances for children in the care of local authorities and children in need.

AD2000

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many people have been recruited to take part in the AD2000 trial based at the Clinical Trials Unit University of Birmingham; what the target number of participants is; and when he expects the trial to be completed. [92434]

Mr. Hutton: The AD2000 study opened to recruitment in the West Midlands in October 1998 and the national launch was held in December 1998. As of 21 July, 239 patients had been entered from 20 centres. The target is 3,000 participants. The first results—on the short-term effects of donepezil on behavioural problems, activities of daily living, and well-being of carers—are expected to become available in the year 2000. The AD2000 study is also investigating the longer-term effects of donepezil on disease progress and the cost-effectiveness of donepezil, in particular the need for institutionalisation. Long-term effectiveness results are not expected until after the year 2002 when recruitment should be completed.

Nurses (Salaries)

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what is the average salary of *(a)* male and *(b)* female nurses. [92436]

Mr. Denham: We estimate that the average annual basic pay for male and female nurses (qualified and unqualified), after the implementation of the April 1999 pay award, is £15,900 and £16,000 respectively. The national terms and conditions for National Health Service nursing, midwifery and health visiting staff are the same for male and female staff. Therefore, the difference between these figures simply reflects the variations in the grade and seniority mix of male and female nurses.

These estimates are based on the results from the Department's August 1997 Earnings Survey, scaled up to reflect pay awards since August 1997. The figures are the average full-time equivalent basic pay levels i.e. the basic

pay of part-time staff was scaled up to that of full-time staff, and exclude payments for overtime and other leads and allowances.

Acute Care

Mr. Norman: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many hospitals in the NHS have no *(a)* piped oxygen facilities and *(b)* air conditioning or temperature control in their acute wards. [92371]

Mr. Denham: The information requested is not available centrally.

Under-age Tobacco Sales

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what discussions he has had with national representatives of trading standards officers about implementation of the proposed Draft Tobacco (Prohibition of Advertising and Promotion) Regulations 1999. [R] [92249]

Ms Jowell: Officials of the Department have met representatives of the Local Government Association and trading standards officers' umbrella body, the Local Authorities Co-ordinating body on Food and Trading Standards to discuss the proposed Enforcement Protocol for local authorities to tackle under-age tobacco sales.

Draft Concordat (Wales)

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will publish, before the summer adjournment, the most recent draft concordat between his Department and the National Assembly for Wales. [92333]

Ms Jowell: Work on the health and social care concordat is proceeding well. A draft of the concordat should be ready to be discussed with colleagues in Wales once the overarching concordats have been put to the First Secretary. I do not intend to publish the concordat in advance of that.

Imported Food Regulations 1984

Mr. Crausby: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many prosecutions have been made for breaches of the Imported Food Regulations 1984 since they came into force. [92697]

Ms Jowell: The general provisions of the Imported Food Regulations 1984 and the Imported Food (Scotland) Regulations 1985 were replaced by the Imported Food Regulations 1997, which apply to the whole of Great Britain. Figures on the number of prosecutions under these Regulations are not kept centrally.

Doctors (Complaints)

Mr. Crausby: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what recent representations he has received about the procedure available to investigate complaints against doctors; and if he will make a statement. [92637]

Mr. Denham: The procedures for investigating complaints against doctors generate much interest and are regularly the subject of correspondence. Complaints often involve complex assessments of clinical judgments which require expert review. Detailed guidance has been provided to National Health Service employers for the handling of complaints and any disciplinary action which needs to be taken as a result. Investigations need to be dealt with as quickly as possible. They should balance the employer's responsibility to protect the interests of patients with the need to ensure fair treatment for the doctor complained against.

Northwick Park Hospital

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what steps are being taken to modernise the accident and emergency department at Northwick Park hospital; and at what cost. [92631]

Mr. Denham: Northwick Park Hospital, which forms part of The North West London Hospitals National Health Service Trust, has received two tranches of NHS modernisation funding to develop its accident and emergency facilities:

February 1999—£782,000 to provide 5 additional treatment rooms, a new x-ray machine and enable improvements to the entry areas and layout within the Department; May 1999—£630,000 to provide a six bedded resuscitation unit and ancillary accommodation.

Implementation of these improvements will help to reduce the length of time patients wait to be treated and the quality of the environment in which they are treated.

GM Crops

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if GM crops designed to produce products or by-products with medicinal properties will be subject to regulation under the Medicines Act 1968. [92722]

Ms Jowell *[holding answer 23 July 1999]:* Products and by-products made from genetically modified crops which satisfied the definition of a medicinal product, as defined in Article 1 of Directive 65/65/EEC, would be subject to medicines legislation. The Medicines Act does not cover the regulation of crop cultivation. The Department of the Environment Transport and the Regions is responsible for implementing Directive 90/220 on the deliberate release of genetically modified organisms.

Correspondence

Mr. Burns: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he expects to provide a substantive answer to the questions tabled for answer on 7 July 1999 about millennium compliance by the hon. Member for West Chelmsford (Ref. 90003 and 90104). [92580]

Mr. Denham: I have replied to the hon. Member today.

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when will he reply to the letter from the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam of 3 March concerning a constituent, Mrs. J. Timms. [92925]

Mr. Denham: I shall reply to the hon. Member's letter shortly.

Acquired Brain Injuries

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health, pursuant to his answer of 3 December 1998, *Official*

Report, column *258*, on acquired brain injuries, when the consultation on new guidance will commence; and when it will be completed and published. [92568]

Mr. Hutton: Consultation is currently taking place with the National Health Service and the voluntary sector. It is expected that the guidance will be published in the spring of 2000.

Beta Interferon

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health, pursuant to his answer of 22 February 1999, *Official Report*, column *139*, on beta interferon, when he plans to announce his decisions following the consultation on the paper, "Faster Access to Modern Treatment". [92734]

Mr. Denham: Ministers will be making an announcement in due course.

Community Care (Direct Payments) Act 1996

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment he has made of the implementation of the Community Care (Direct Payments) Act 1996 by local authorities. [93070]

Mr. Hutton: The number of people receiving direct payments is increasing steadily. The latest data which are available show 1,400 people receiving direct payments on 30 September 1998, compared with 1,000 people on 1 December 1997. The Department is working with local authorities, users and other stakeholders to increase further the number of people who are able to benefit from the increased independence which direct payments can offer.

North and East Devon Health Authority

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health, pursuant to his answer of 15 February 1999, *Official Report*, column *525*, on the North and East Devon Health Authority, when he plans to publish his assessment of the Appeal Court decision. [92567]

Mr. Denham: I will write to the hon. Member.

Residential Allowance

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health, pursuant to his answer of 9 March 1999, *Official Report*, column *204*, on residential allowance, when he will publish his proposals for consultation. [92566]

Mr. Hutton: I will write to the hon. Member.

Dr. Moor

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will state the costs to the NHS of *(a)* the legal and administrative arrangements for the selection to the vacant general practice formerly held by Dr. Moor of Wigrove Road, Fenham, Newcastle and *(b)* subsequent locum and other temporary arrangements after Dr. Moor's resignation. [92237]

Mr. Denham: The information requested is not available centrally.

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when Dr. Moor resigned from his general practice in Wigrove Road, Fenham, Newcastle and what was the date of each subsequent *(a)* advertisement of the practice, *(b)* selection panel hearing and *(c)* appeal hearing. [92235]

Mr. Denham: Dr. Moor resigned from his practice in Wingrove Road, Fenham, Newcastle on 31 March 1998.

The advertisement for the practice vacancy appeared in the British Medical Journal on 30 January 1998.

Selection panel hearings have been held on the following dates:

27 and 28 February 1998

2 October 1998

21 July 1999.

There have been no appeal hearings to date.

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Secretary of State for Health for what reasons he directed the advertising of the vacancy to the general practice formerly held by Dr. Moor of Fenham, Newcastle to be made a second time; and how many NHS patients were on the practice list at the time. [92236]

Mr. Denham: An appeal on a point of law by an unsuccessful Partnership was made against this practice vacancy and was subsequently upheld.

Accordingly my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State instructed the Health Authority to select a fresh selection panel to reconsider the original applications in accordance with Regulation 17(11) of the General Medical Services Regulations 1992.

There were 3,393 patients on the practice list at the time the vacancy was declared.

Medical Student Places

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he expects to announce a decision on the allocation of additional medical student places. [92461]

Mr. Denham: The Higher Education Funding Council for England announced the allocation of 684 extra medical student places to Higher Education Institutions on 22 June 1999. These were in addition to 158 places that had already been allocated earlier this year. An announcement of more than 100 further places is planned for the spring of next year.

General Practice Vacancies

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many appeals against selections to general practice vacancies were handled by the NHS Executive; what was the average length of time from advertising the practice vacancy to the appeal; and in how many cases (i) more than one appeal was heard and (ii) the same practice vacancy was advertised more than once, in each year since 1994. [92233]

Mr. Denham: The information requested is not available centrally.

National Institute for Clinical Excellence

Dr. Harris: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will place in the Library copies of the

instructions and guidance issued by his Department to the National Institute for Clinical Excellence, since its establishment. [93053]

Mr. Denham: I will write to the hon. Member.

Lancashire and South Cumbria (Health Authority Reorganisation)

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what plans he has to make changes to the health authority structures in the regions of Lancashire and South Cumbria; [92926]

(2) what estimate he has made of the savings which could be made from the unification of North West Lancashire and South Lancashire health authorities in terms of management costs. [92927]

Mr. Denham: The National Health Service Executive North West is presently considering the impact of recent policy changes on organisations across the whole region, including health authorities and trusts. It is proposing to engage Members of Parliament, health authorities, NHS trusts, primary care groups, community health councils and others in local dialogue to discuss the way ahead. At this stage, the regional office has no specific intentions, nor has it made any recommendations for health authority changes in Lancashire and South Cumbria. Any reconfigurations which may emerge from this process will reflect these discussions and not be driven purely by financial considerations.

Accident and Emergency Units

Mr. Lilley: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many accident and emergency units in England and Wales have been closed following merger with a neighbouring accident and emergency unit in each year since 1980. [92571]

Mr. Denham: The information requested is not collected centrally. It is for health authorities to decide what facilities are required for local populations.

Public Appointments

Joan Ruddock: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many appointments to public bodies were made by his Department in *(a)* 1997–98 and *(b)* 1998–99, broken down by (i) gender and (ii) ethnicity; and if he will list the chairmen appointed to those bodies in those years, similarly broken down. [92516]

Ms Jowell: The information requested is given in the table. The Department's goals and objectives for ensuring recruitment from all sections of the community were published by the Government on 25 May in "Quangos: Opening Up Public Appointments 1999–2002" copies of which are available in the Library.

The names of those appointed as chairman as at 1 March 1998 are listed in the Departmental Public Appointments Annual Report 1998, copies of which are available in the Library. Information as at 1 April 1999 will be published shortly and copies of the 1999 Annual Report will be placed in the Library.

They show that between 1 April 1998 and 31 March 1999, 13.1 per cent. of all appointments made were to people from an ethnic minority background while 48.1 per cent. were to women. This compares with 10.7 per cent. and 45.5 per cent., during the previous 12 month period.

Appointments made by gender and ethnicity between 1978–98 and 1998–99

	Appointments made between 1 April 1997–31 March 1998	*Appointments made between 1 April 1998–31 March 1999*
All posts		
White		
Male	555	658
Female	487	620
Ethnic minority		
Male	77	106
Female	48	87
Total male	632	764
Total female	535	707
Chairman		
White		
Male	106	146
Female	62	89
Ethnic minority		
Male	6	8
Female	2	4
Total male	112	154
Total female	64	93

Workplace Back Pain

Mr. David Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what investment his Department is making in pilot projects to combat back pain in the workplace. [92929]

Ms Jowell: We are providing £500,000 to support pilot projects under the 'Back in Work' programme. Project proposals of between £5,000 and £50,000 have been invited from businesses, trade unions and workplace organisations. The closing date for applications is 31 August.

This programme is part of the Healthy Workplace Initiative which is jointly sponsored by the Department and the Health and Safety Executive. The Healthy Workplace Initiative was launched on 9 March this year by myself and my hon. Friend the Minister with responsibility for health and safety.

Social Care Workers

Mr. David Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to encourage the social care work force to obtain additional qualifications. [92937]

Mr. Hutton: I will write to my hon. Friend.

Quality Projects Initiative

Mr. David Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement about the progress of the Quality Projects Initiative. [92936]

Mr. Hutton: The quality protects programme was launched in September 1998 and is designed to transform the management and delivery of children's social services. It is supported by a new £375 million special children's grant.

All local authorities are required to submit an annual quality protects management action plan (MAP) to show how they intended to improve their children's services. The MAPs for Year 1 submitted in January were all assessed as reaching an acceptable standard. As a result of this I wrote to all local authorities confirming that subject to Parliamentary approval they would be receiving payment of their allocation of the children's special grant for 1999–2000. In their MAPs due to be received in January 2000 we will expect to see evidence of real improvements in the quality of services being provided by local authorities.

On 29 June we published a national overview report, *Mapping Quality in Children's Services: An Evaluation of Local Responses to the Quality Protects Programme,* which presents the key messages and findings from the first round of MAPs. Copies of the report are available in the Library. It identifies many examples of good practice from across the country but it also highlights major areas where improvement is urgently needed. To support local authorities tackle some of these development needs we will be publishing a national work programme later in the summer which will set out a plan of work by the Department at national, regional and local level. Sixteen quality protects project teams have been set up within the Department to develop policy and disseminate good practice on a range of issues including disabled children, children's participation, placement choice, new child protection guidance and ethnic minority children.

We shall also be publishing our revised objectives for children's services, supported by a full set of performance indicators, which sets out clearly our expectations of the part to be played by local authorities in delivering better outcomes for some of the most vulnerable children in our society.

We have appointed eight regional development workers to drive forward measures to improve services and to work with local authorities to help implement their management action plans.

When we launched the quality protects programme we said that elected members had a crucial role in ensuring that the programme was a success. In order to help members understand their roles and responsibilities, we have recently held seven joint Departmental/Local Government Association regional seminars for members.

Personal Social Services

Mr. David Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what percentage of total gross expenditure in England in 1998–99 on personal social services was accounted for by services for *(a)* children and *(b)* the elderly. [92938]

Mr. Hutton: Gross expenditure data for England in 1998–99 on personal social services are not available until spring 2000. Comparative data for 1997–98 showed that 50 per cent. of total gross expenditure was accounted for by services for the elderly and 23 per cent. for children.

Casualty Department Modernisations

Mr. David Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many casualty department modernisation schemes are planned this year to *(a)* provide for expansion or redevelopment and *(b)* improve telemedicine links. [92928]

Mr. Denham: Of the 169 Accident and Emergency modernisation schemes going forward this year, there are 63 involving expansion and redevelopment. A further 45 schemes involve redesign or general refurbishment of Accident and Emergency departments. In addition 34 schemes will improve telemedicine links.

PRESIDENT OF THE COUNCIL

Millennium Compliance

47. **Mr. Michael J. Foster:** To ask the President of the Council if she will make a statement on the preparedness of key sectors of the UK infrastructure for the millennium bug. [91385]

Mrs. Beckett: I refer my hon. Friend to the oral answer I gave today to my hon. Friend the Member for Warwick and Leamington (Mr. Plaskitt), *Official Report,* columns 14–15.

HOUSE OF COMMONS

Question Time

48. **Mr. Bercow:** To ask the President of the Council if she will ensure that oral questions to the Secretaries of State for Defence, Culture, Media and Sport, International Development and Northern Ireland last for one hour each. [91386]

Mr. Tipping: No. Within the current time available this could only be done at the expense of questions to other Ministers.

53. **Mr. Amess:** To ask the President of the Council what proposals she has for reform of Question Time. [91486]

Mrs. Beckett: I have no immediate plans for procedural change but am prepared to look at any constructive proposals. Some adjustment to the question rota will be discussed through the usual channels in the autumn to reflect the consequences of devolution.

Thursday Sittings

49. **Mr. Edwards:** To ask the President of the Council what assessment she has made of the experiment in relation to Thursday sitting hours. [91387]

Mrs. Beckett: I refer my hon. Friend to the oral reply I gave earlier to my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes, South-West (Dr. Starkey), *Official Report,* column 16.

House of Lords Reform

50. **Shona McIsaac:** To ask the President of the Council if she will make a statement on progress on proposals for the reform of the House of Lords. [91388]

51. **Dr. Iddon:** To ask the President of the Council if she will make a statement on progress on proposals for the reform of the House of Lords. [91389]

Mrs. Beckett: The Royal Commission on the reform of the House of Lords issued a consultation document in March of this year and I understand that, in response, it has received over 1,300 written submissions concerning the long-term reform of the House of Lords from members of the public, MPs, peers, academics and a range of organisations.

The Commission is keen to secure the widest possible range of views on the issues raised by its terms of reference and it has organised a series of public meetings throughout the UK to enable it to probe and test the written evidence it has received and to hear the views of members of the general public. The final meeting will be in London on 27 July.

There is no reason to believe that the Royal Commission will not report on schedule by the end of this year.

Legislative Process

52. **Mr. Fabricant:** To ask the President of the Council what plans she has to speed up the legislative process. [91485]

Mrs. Beckett: I have no plans to speed up the legislative process as such. The House's procedures already provide sufficient flexibility in cases of urgency. I am looking at ways of improving the quality of legislation. When this involves the publication of draft Bills for pre-legislative scrutiny, this may appear to lengthen the legislative process.

Gender Impact Assessment

Jackie Ballard: To ask the President of the Council if she will list the subject of each gender impact assessment drawn up by her Department since June 1997, indicating in each case whether the outcome has been *(a)* put out to consultation and *(b)* published. [92004]

Mrs. Beckett: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given on 22 July 1999, *Official Report*, column *636*, by my right hon. Friend the Minister for Public Health.

As part of the Government's commitment to ensuring that their policies are relevant to the lives that people live today, my Department will work closely with the Women's Unit to develop good practices for carrying out gender impact appraisal.

Management and Services Review

Mrs. Roe: To ask the hon. Member for Roxburgh and Berwickshire (Mr. Kirkwood), representing the House of Commons Commission, if he will make a statement on the Report of Mr. Michael Braithwaite on the Review of Management and Services to the House of Commons Commission. [93530]

Mr. Kirkwood: On 26 October 1998, Mr. Michael Braithwaite was invited by the House of Commons Commission to undertake a review of the system of management and decision-making responsibilities for services to the House which was set up following the inquiry in 1990 by Sir Robin Ibbs.

The Commission has considered the Report of the team lead by Mr. Braithwaite at three meetings, the last of which was on 19 July. The Report was published today as House of Commons paper 745.

The Commission is grateful to Mr. Braithwaite and his colleagues for reporting fully on the complex issues referred to them and for their constructive recommendations. The team considers the proposals in the Report provide a coherent framework for building on the Ibbs Report's recommendations on management, financial control and decision-making in the House.

The Commission welcomes comments from Members, staff of the House and others which should be addressed, in writing, to the Secretary of the Commission.

Parliamentary Data and Video Network

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Chairman of the Information Committee what monitoring is undertaken of the frequency with which hon. Members and staff are unable to access the PDVN network; with what results; and if he will make a statement. [92801]

Mr. Allan: The Parliamentary Data and Video Network (PDVN) is monitored on an operational basis with real time information. This indicates to Parliamentary Communications Directorate staff when an individual piece of infrastructure equipment is not responding to the network. This is a dynamic process and is actioned for fault reporting purposes.

There is no individual monitoring of access problems by individuals, but trends are established and pursued. It is currently not possible to report on the availability of individual services on the PDVN. Tools to provide this information will be implemented in the coming months.

Regrettably, there have recently been some serious problems with the network infrastructure which have prevented access to PDVN users. A project to replace the overloaded components of the network was initiated some time ago and will be implemented during the forthcoming summer recess.

Women's Organisations (Consultation)

Jackie Ballard: To ask the President of the Council if she will list the women's organisations which have been consulted over proposed legislation by her Department during this session; and if their responses have been published. [86996]

Mrs. Beckett: The Privy Council Office has made no proposals for primary legislation during this Session.

However, the Government are committed to making sure that policies are inclusive and take full account of the needs and experience of all those affected by them. "Guidelines on Policy Appraisals for Equal Treatment", published in November 1998, commit policy makers to assessing how proposals affect different groups of people.

DEFENCE

Army Personnel Centre

Ann Keen: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what key targets have been set for the Army Personnel Centre for the financial year 1999–2000. [93586]

Mr. Doug Henderson: The Chief Executive of the Army Personnel Centre has been set the following Key Targets for 1999–2000.

Key Target 1—The percentage of filled posts (excluding posts gapped for less than 28 days and all posts for private soldiers and subaltern officers) to be 91 per cent. or greater.

Key Target 2—The proportion of personnel posted in-year by the APC, whose rank and Service qualifications of the post, to be 92 per cent. or greater.

Key Target 3—The percentage of in-year postings authorised by the APC where personnel are given at least 6 months notification (see Note) to be 52 per cent. or greater.

Note:

Short-notice operational requirements and postings following initial training and long career courses are excluded

Key Target 4—The percentage of change requests received by the APC which are authorised and/or accurately processed within 5 working days of receipt at the Document Handling Centre to be 93 per cent. or greater.

Key Target 5—The percentage of due terminal benefits made by the fifth working day after discharge/retirement of following receipt of the correct authorisation paperwork by Pensions Division, whichever is later, to be 97 per cent. or greater.

Key Target 6—To achieve a year-on-year reduction of 1 per cent. in operating costs.

2nd Division

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what estimate he has made of the cost of transferring the HQ of 2nd Division from York to Edinburgh; and if he will make a statement. [91320]

Mr. Doug Henderson: The main cost of the move will be works required to prepare the headquarters building in Edinburgh, for which some £250,000 has been allowed in this current financial year, and staff transfer costs, for which provision of some £750,000 has been made over the next two years. As far as savings in annual staff costs are concerned, I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave to the hon. Member for Salisbury (Mr. Key) on 19 July 1999, *Official Report*, column *424*.

Depleted Uranium Ammunition

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what assessment he has made of the environmental effects of targeting depleted uranium ammunition on dummy armour. [91844]

Mr. Spellar: This is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency. I have asked the Chief Executive to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Elizabeth Peace to Mr. John Bercow, dated 26 July 1999:

I have been asked to reply to your parliamentary question about the environmental assessment of targeting depleted uranium (DU) on dummy armour as such firings were part of a research programme managed by the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency (DERA) on behalf of the Ministry of Defence (MOD).

DU ammunition was last fired at the DERA Eskmeals range at hard targets or dummy armour in September 1995. Public concern about the risk of contamination from DU prompted DERA, in December 1993, to commission an independent study by W S Atkins Environment. The report of the study, a copy of which is available in the Library of the House, concluded that there was no significant risk to the public, site personnel or the environment. The comprehensive environmental monitoring programme, that DERA continues to conduct, confirms that this is still the case. The monitoring reports are all within the public domain; the most recent reports, for 1995/96, were presented to the Environment Agency and local councils at the beginning of last year and further reports will be available to the public in due course as a matter of routine.

I hope the above is helpful.

JP233 System

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what exports of JP233 Runway Denial System the Government have approved; and if he will make a statement on JP233 system support technicians with respect to their recall from abroad by his Government. [91880]

Mr. George Robertson: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given on 15 July 1999, *Official Report*, column *286*. The Government are strongly committed to applying the terms of the Ottawa Convention under which JP233 would be prohibited as an anti-personnel landmine. The recall or reassignment to other tasks of any technicians working overseas is a matter for their employer.

Chinook Helicopters

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence, (1) pursuant to his answer of 14 July 1999, *Official Report*, column *229*, if he will place the full contents of the Air Safety Action Message CH-47–99-ASMA-02 161228Z in the Library and indicate the actions taken by his Department for each of the checks identified; [92096]

(2) if he will assess, in relation to the crash of Chinook ZD576, the circumstances of the US incident that resulted in the issuing of the Air Safety Action Message CH-47–99-ASAM-02 161228Z; and if he will make a statement; [92088]

(3) if he will list the reported instances of hydraulic contamination reported on Chinook helicopters for each year since 1993; [92086]

(4) if hydraulic contamination has been identified as the *(a)* possible and *(b)* confirmed cause of instances of uncommanded flight manoeuvres on the Chinook helicopter since December 1993; [92087]

(5) if Air Accidents Investigation Branch personnel investigating the fatal crash of RAF Chinook ZD576 have identified problems relating to hydraulic contamination; and if he will make a statement; [92061]

(6) what instances of *(a)* confirmed and *(b)* suspected hydraulic contamination have been reported on Chinook helicopters since the issuance of the Air Safety Action Message CH-47–99-ASAM-02 161228Z. [92085]

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) what design changes were made to the FADEC software for RAF Chinook MK2 after May 1994; and what was the cost to his Department of this work; [92329]

(2) pursuant to his answer of 13 July 1999, *Official Report*, column *96*, on Chinook helicopters, if the redesign changes incorporated in the FADEC software undertaken by Textron Lycoming between 1989 and June 1994 were covered by warranty; [92324]

(3) pursuant to his answer of 13 July 1999, *Official Report*, column *96*, on Chinook helicopters, what was the cost to his Department of the redesign changes incorporated in the FADEC software by Textron Lycoming between 1989 and June 1994; [92323]

(4) how many representations he has received since 1 May, requesting that he re-open the inquiry into the loss of the RAF Chinook on the Mull of Kintyre. [92330]

Mr. Doug Henderson: I will write to the hon. Members and copies of my letters will be placed in the Library of the House.

Kosovo

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence by what criteria the Government will decide what proportion of the costs incurred by the British armed forces *(a)* during the air campaign over the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and *(b)* as part of the contribution to KFOR, will be met from the Treasury Contingency Reserve and what proportion from his Department's budget; and if he will make a statement. [92295]

Mr. George Robertson: As I explained to the House on 21 June 1999, *Official Report*, column 743, it has been agreed with my Treasury colleagues that the Reserve will cover the net additional costs of those operations where my Department is unable to accommodate them without detriment to other commitments.

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many troops the UK has pledged to KFOR; how many have been deployed so far; and when he expects all the UK troops pledged to KFOR to be deployed. [92823]

Mr. George Robertson: The United Kingdom has provided all of the forces for NATO which were requested by NATO. We currently have around 10,000 personnel committed to KFOR operations.

The withdrawals of the 1st Battalion Parachute Regiment, the 1st Battalion Royal Gurkha Rifles and the 1st Battalion Irish Guards, which I announced on 19 July 1994, *Official Report*, column *418*, means that number will reduce to around 7,000 by mid-October as other nations build up their contributions.

The UK contribution to KFOR will be kept under review.

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what discussions *(a)* he, *(b)* British military personnel and *(c)* his officials, (i) have had and (ii) will have with (1) French, (2) German and (3) Spanish authorities to review operations surrounding the Kosovo conflict. [91577]

Mr. George Robertson: The Ministry of Defence is looking at the lessons learned from the Kosovo conflict, and is contributing to similar work at NATO. I and my Department will continue to have contacts with Allies, including France, Germany and Spain on a wide range of issues, including lessons learned.

Mrs. Mahon: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many soldiers aged under 18 years are currently deployed in NATO's K-FOR in *(a)* the Balkans and *(b)* Kosovo. [92126]

Mr. George Robertson: Information is not available in precisely the detail requested. However, as at 1 June 1999, 17 soldiers aged under 18 were stationed in the former Yugoslavia.

Mr. Alan Williams: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when he expects to be able to provide a figure for the number of Serbian tanks destroyed in Kosovo. [92493]

Mr. George Robertson: The NATO Munitions Effectiveness Assessment Team is carrying out a full assessment of the damage inflicted on Serbian military vehicles. Their findings are expected by the end of the year.

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what arrangements he will make for the winter accommodation of British forces in Kosovo in respect of *(a)* corimec cabins, *(b)* new hard-walled buildings and *(c)* requisitioned buildings; and what is the latest date by which (i) these decisions must be taken and (ii) the purchase and construction cycle must start and finish. [92490]

Mr. George Robertson: On Friday 23 July, the Defence Procurement Agency placed a contract with Hunting Engineering Ltd. to supply, build, maintain and operate temporary field accommodation (TSA) for our forces in Kosovo at an estimated cost of about £110 million. TFA will comprise hard-walled living accommodation, appropriate to the range of weather conditions encountered in the area, together with administrative and other facilities. The accommodation is planned to be fully deployed by December and is expected to obviate the need to occupy requisitioned buildings.

Cadets

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many people recruited to each of the armed forces in the most recent year for which figures are available had been a member of the *(a)* Army Cadets, *(b)* Sea Cadets, *(c)* Air Training Corps and *(d)* Combined Cadet Force. [92540]

Mr. Doug Henderson: Full information is not available to answer the question precisely as raised. The information available for Financial Year 1998–99 is as follows:

Of the people who joined the Army, 2,762 had been members of the Army Cadets, and 562 had been members of the Combined Cadet Force.

Of the people who joined the Naval Service, it is known that 371 had been members of the Sea Cadets, 232 had been members of the Combined Cadet Force, and 456 had been members of either the Air Training Corps or the Army Cadets. This is based on research covering about 85 per cent. of entrants in the year.

Of the people selected to join the Royal Air Force, 693 had been members of either the Air Training Corps or the Combined Cadet Force (RAF section).

Joint Strike Fighter

Mr. Menzies Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the expenditure made by his Department on the Concept Demonstration phase of the Joint Strike Fighter project for each financial year from 1995–96 to 1999–2000. [91336]

Mr. George Robertson: This is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Defence Procurement Agency. I have asked the Chief Executive to write to the right hon. Member.

Letter from Sir Robert Walmsley to Mr. Menzies Campbell, dated 26 July 1999:

I am replying to your question to the Secretary of State for Defence about expenditure made on the Concept Demonstration Phase of the Joint Strike Fighter project for each financial year from 1995–96 to 1999–2000. This matter falls within my area of responsibility as Chief of Defence Procurement and Chief Executive of the Defence Procurement Agency.

Payments made by my Department to the United States on the Concept Demonstration Phase of the Joint Strike Fighter programme from 1995–96 to 1999–2000 are as follows:

Year	*£ Million*
1995–96	Nil
1996–97	9.0
1997–98	46.7
1998–99	34.1
1999–2000	21.0 (Forecast)

All figures are at outturn prices for the years in question.

Armed Forces (Deaths)

Ms Drown: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many 16 and 17 year-olds have died while on service and in training in the UK armed forces since 1982; and if he will list the causes of death in each case. [92492]

Mr. Doug Henderson: A total of 92 Service personnel who were aged 16 or 17 have died since 1 January 1982. Nearly half these deaths occurred off-duty, and the majority of these were as a result of traffic accidents. A summary of the information is as follows:

Cause of death	*Deaths*
Battle wound or injury	
Direct result of action by or against organised enemy	3
Other battle casualties	1
Intentional inflicted non-battle casualties	
Assault	[1] 1
Self-inflicted	[2] 9
Accidental injuries	
Off duty	[3] 42
Schemes and exercises	4
All other training	8
On duty	5
Natural causes (diseases)	[4] 19
All deaths	92

[1] This death arose from a fight off duty
[2] All self-inflicted deaths occurred off duty
[3] 35 of the deaths were as a result of RTAs
[4] Includes one death as a result of heart failure that is recorded as occurring on duty

Public Appointments

Joan Ruddock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many appointments to public bodies were made by his Department in *(a)* 1997–98 and *(b)* 1998–99, broken down by (i) gender and (ii) ethnicity; and if he will list the chairmen appointed to those bodies in those years, similarly broken down. [92517]

Mr. Spellar: The following number of appointments and reappointments were made to Non-Departmental Public Bodies (NDPBs) for which my department is responsible:

(a) 1 June 1997 to 31 May 1998: 37; (i) 32 male, five female; (ii) 37 white. This includes the following appointments of Chairmen: His Honour Judge Rogers (Advisory Committee on Conscientious Objectors), Mr. John Bridgeman (National Employers' Liaison Committee) and Mr. G. Richards (Oil and Pipelines Agency).

(b) 1 June 1998 to 31 May 1999: 31; (i) 24 male, seven female; (ii) 31 white. This includes the following appointments of Chairmen: Sir John Cadogan (Defence Nuclear Safety Committee), Sir Michael Beetham (RAF Museum), Sir Barry Wilson (Royal Naval Museum) and Baroness Dean (Armed Forces Pay Review Body).

These figures include new appointments as well as reappointments.

Appointments to the technical Boards under the Defence Scientific Advisory Council are not included (they have previously been included in answers to similar questions). The Cabinet Office has recently agreed that, as these Boards are sub-Committees of the Council, they should not be classified as advisory NDPBs. Appointments to the Council itself are included.

Within the overriding principle of selection based on merit, MOD is committed to increasing diversity in appointments to its NDPBs and raising the representation of women, people from ethnic minority groups and disabled people in line with government-wide objectives. To this end, MOD publishes an annual Plan for Public Appointments and Equal Opportunities (the plan for 1999–2002 was published in "Quangos: Opening up Public Appointments") which sets objectives and targets.

Territorial Army

Mr. Sanders: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the recruitment totals from 1990 to the present for each TA centre in Devon. [89182]

Mr. Doug Henderson: I will write to the hon. Member and copy of my letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

Armed Forces Deployments

Mr. Steinberg: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many British troops *(a)* are serving with NATO and *(b)* are involved in peacekeeping operations. [90983]

Mr. George Robertson: Some 16,300 UK Service personnel are currently serving with NATO, either in support of NATO operations in Kosovo, Albania and Bosnia, or in Headquarters appointments. Just over 300 are deployed in support of the UN's peacekeeping operation in Cyprus.

Turkish Defence Minister (Visit)

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what were the dates of the recent visit to the United Kingdom of the Turkish Defence Minister; what was his itinerary; which Ministers and companies he met; and what portion of the cost of the visit was met by the United Kingdom Government. [92084]

Mr. Doug Henderson: The Turkish Defence Minister visited the United Kingdom on 12–14 July. On 13 July, he held meetings with the Secretary of State for Defence, and visited Royal School of Artillery, Larkhill. On the evening of the 13th, the Under-Secretary of State for Defence held a dinner in his honour. On 14 July, he visited Flag Officer Sea Training and the Permanent Joint Headquarters. He met representatives of the following UK companies: Marconi Electronics Systems Ltd., Matra British Aerospace Dynamics UK, Alvis plc, GKN Westland Helicopters Ltd. and British Aerospace plc. The United Kingdom Government paid for the in-country costs of the Turkish Defence Minister; the Turkish ambassador held a private dinner on 12 July.

Personnel (Bosnia)

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many United Kingdom service personnel have been killed in Bosnia in the last three years. [92214]

Mr. George Robertson *[holding answer 21 July 1999]:* Since 1 January 1996, 23 United Kingdom Army personnel have died while serving in Bosnia. There were no deaths of Royal Navy and Royal Air Force personnel.

None of these deaths were the result of hostile action.

Turkey

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many United Kingdom military personnel have visited Turkey in each of the last three years; and in which capacities. [90441]

Mr. Doug Henderson: Senior military personnel who have visited Turkey in the last three years are as follows: in 1997, the Commander in Chief Fleet; in 1998, the Vice Chief of the Defence Staff, the new Commander in Chief Fleet, the Assistant Chief of the General Staff and Flag Officer Sea Training and in 1999, the Chief of the Defence Staff, the Chief of the Air Staff and the Judge Advocate General. There have also been high-level visits to UK forces deployed on Operation 'Northern Watch'. A full list of all military personnel who have visited Turkey is not held centrally and could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Armed Forces Chaplains

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) if he will list the religious faiths ministered to by chaplains in each of HM armed forces; if he will list for each faith *(a)* the number of chaplains at each rank and *(b)* the highest rank obtained by a chaplain since 1969; what bodies govern the promotion of chaplains; and when the rules governing armed service chaplains were last amended; [92932]

(2) if he will break down into budget heads the annual cost of the chaplaincy service for each of the armed forces. [92933]

Mr. Doug Henderson: I will write to my hon. Friend and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

Absence without Leave

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many service men and women were reported absent without leave in 1998; and how many were not recovered. [92735]

Mr. Doug Henderson: I will write to my hon. Friend and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

Firearms Training

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence, pursuant to the answer of 25 May 1999, *Official Report*, column *98*, on firearms training, if he will list the schools where a combined cadet force gives pupils access to firearms training; how many firearms, of what calibre, are stored on school premises; and how many pupils are enrolled in training programmes each year. [92677]

Mr. Doug Henderson: I will write to my hon. Friend and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

Armed Forces (Religious Faiths)

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many persons in each of the armed forces subscribe to or identify with each major religious faith according to personnel records. [92934]

Mr. Doug Henderson: I will write to my hon. Friend and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

Weapons Exports

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence, pursuant to his answer to the hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) of 15 July 1999, *Official Report*, column 286, on weapons exports, from which section of the defence budget the costs are to be met; what is the size and timing of the expenditure involved; and by what means Parliament will be informed of the expenditure after it has been incurred. [92423]

Mr. George Robertson: The costs will be met from Section J of Vote 1. The exact size and timing remains to be determined, but I refer my hon. Friend to the Minute laid before Parliament on 4 February 1999 which reported the estimated cost to be between £15 and £17 million. Once the gift has been made in full, it will be recorded in the Appropriation Account.

Portsmouth Naval Base

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what physical constraints would prevent Portsmouth Naval Base becoming the home base port for the two new aircraft carriers for the Royal Navy if their overall weight displacement was over 46,000 tons. [92422]

Mr. George Robertson: The size of the new aircraft carrier is currently estimated to be up to 40,000 tonnes but this will very much depend on the design selected. There are no known physical constraints that would prevent Portsmouth Naval Base from becoming the base port for the vessels currently envisaged.

Treasury Contingency Fund

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what applications his Department has made to the Treasury Contingency Reserve for funds in each year since 1989; how much was requested; how much was received; and if he will make a statement. [92283]

Mr. George Robertson: I will write to the hon. Member and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

Suppliers (Contracts)

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what contracts exist with suppliers outside the United Kingdom for the replacement of ordnance and ammunition expended in operations by the British armed forces; which companies service those contracts, and for which items; and if he will make a statement. [92284]

Mr. Spellar: I will write to the hon. Member and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

Anglo-US Defence Co-operation

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) how many staff from the United States Defence Nuclear Facilities Safety Board have been stationed at the Atomic Weapons Establishment as part of an exchange of staff since 1 January 1997; [92257]

(2) if he will make a statement on the collaboration between the Atomic Weapons Establishment and the United States Defence Nuclear Facilities Safety Board; and if he will list the co-operative agreements between the Atomic Weapons Establishment and the United States Defence Nuclear Facilities Safety Board which have been in existence since 1 January 1990, indicating when each agreement was made; [92258]

(3) how many staff from the Atomic Weapons Establishment have been stationed at the United States Defence Nuclear Facilities Safety Board as part of an exchange of staff since 1 January 1997; [92256]

(4) how many times members of staff from the Atomic Weapons Establishment have visited the United States Defence Nuclear Facilities Safety Board since 1 January 1997; on what dates each visit took place; and what was the purpose of each visit. [92255]

Mr. George Robertson: I will write to the hon. Member and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

Low Flying Sorties

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many low-level sorties under 220 feet were undertaken during *(a)* the Kosovo conflict and *(b)* the Gulf War. [92634]

Mr. George Robertson: The RAF did not undertake any operational low-level sorties during the course of the Kosovo campaign. Precise figures for the Gulf war are not available, but in excess of 170 operational low-level sorties were flown by the RAF at altitudes below 250 feet.

Royal Tournament

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence, pursuant to his answer of 19 July 1999, *Official Report*, column *426*, on the Royal Tournament, if he will arrange for performances of the Royal Military Tattoo 2000 to be staged at principal garrison towns in addition to those at Horse Guards Parade in London. [92627]

Mr. George Robertson: The Royal Military Tattoo 2000 is the Armed Forces' flagship contribution to the nation's Millennium celebrations with a theme of Defence of the Realm: Past, Present and Future. It will combine pageantry, son et lumière and state of the art technology and has been specifically design for production on Horse Guards Parade. It is not suited to being staged at other venues around the country without major modification and considerable additional expense.

Royal Ordnance, Bridgwater

Mr. Tom King: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the strategic security of supply for ammunition and explosives in relation to Royal Ordnance, Bridgwater, indicating the actions he is proposing. [92553]

Mr. George Robertson *[holding answer 23 July 1999]:* The Ministry of Defence recognises that the British Armed Forces need to have access to reliable sources of supply for ammunition and explosives. We are currently negotiating with Royal Ordnance potential partnering arrangements covering a wide range of ammunition products. It is too early to predict the outcome of these negotiations. The industrial base required to support the company's likely future business, including individual Royal Ordnance factories, is a matter for the company.

RAF Menwith Hill

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list all current bilateral agreements between the United Kingdom and the United States affecting RAF Menwith Hill. [92943]

Mr. Doug Henderson: The presence of the United States Visiting Forces at RAF Menwith Hill is governed by the NATO Status of Forces Agreement of 1951 and other arrangements appropriate to the relationship which exists between the governments of the United Kingdom and United States for the purposes of our common defence. These arrangements are confidential and are withheld under exemption 1 of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information relating to defence, security and international relations.

Married Quarters

Mr. Blunt: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what was the average annual cost of maintaining a Defence Housing Executive administered married quarter for the latest year for which figures are available. [92191]

Mr. Spellar: In the Defence Housing Executive (DHE) 1999 Corporate Plan, the action plan sets out a key target relating to the unit cost of housing and aims to achieve a figure of less than £5,400 per property. The figure is calculated by dividing the total cost of the DHE (£349,152 million including some £100 million rental payment to Annington Homes Ltd) by the number of properties occupied (including those which are Substitute Services Families Accommodation) (63,195). The equivalent figure for Financial Year 1998–99 is £5,460. The cost of the upgrade programme is not included as this is outside the routine cost of housing provision.

Future Aircraft Carrier

Mr. Menzies Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what assessment his Department has made of the impact of recent operations in South East Europe on the Future Aircraft Carrier programme. [91335]

Mr. George Robertson: Recent operations in the Gulf and the Balkans have demonstrated the important part that aircraft carriers can play in supporting a range of activities from peacekeeping to military action. We are carrying out a full study into the lessons learned from the Kosovo conflict. Initial conclusions will be made available to the House in the Defence White Paper in the autumn and a more definitive account should be available by next spring.

Overseas Students (Sandhurst)

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) if, in respect of overseas students at the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst for each year from 1992 to 2000 inclusive, he will list the total number of overseas students indicating their countries of origin. [92488]

(2) in respect of overseas students at the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst *(a)* what is the current cost per student to (i) the defence budget and (ii) the Foreign and Commonwealth Office budget and *(b)* what is the total annual cost to those budgets. [92489]

Mr. Doug Henderson: I will write to the hon. Member and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

Armed Forces Training

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many soldiers, sailors and airmen were in training on 1 April. [92944]

Mr. Doug Henderson: On 1 April 1999, the number of soldiers, sailors and airmen/airwomen under training were:

Naval Service (including RN ratings and RM other ranks)—3,542

Army soldiers—12,490

RAF airmen/airwomen—2,345.

Radiation Exposure

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what research his Department has *(a)* undertaken and *(b)* assessed in relation to the heath effects of (i) radiation emanating from military use of infra-red cameras and (ii) microwave radiation emitted from military surveillance equipment; what guidance is issued to personnel using this equipment; what instructions have been issued to medical staff in order to monitor any effects from the use of this equipment; and what instructions have been issued to military personnel to protect civilians from radiation exposure. [92935]

Mr. Spellar: I will write to my hon. Friend and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

Traumatised Service Personnel

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what *(a)* financial and *(b)* material assistance his Department has provided to the Ty Gwyn clinic for traumatised service personnel at Colwyn Bay; what similar facilities exist elsewhere in the United Kingdom; and what rules govern the admissions policy of military hospitals for dealing with post-traumatic stress disorder. [92736]

Mr. Doug Henderson: My Department does not provide financial or material assistance to the Ty Gwyn clinic, and I am not aware of any similar facilities in the United Kingdom which specialise in the treatment of traumatised Service personnel. Admission of Service personnel suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder to the Duchess of Kent's Psychiatric Hospital, Catterick, would be on the basis of clinical judgment. Former Service personnel are eligible for treatment of post traumatic stress disorder at the Duchess of Kent's Psychiatric Hospital, free of charge as NHS patients, if they live within the catchment area of the hospital. If not, the cost of treatment would need to be met by their local health authority in accordance with NHS budgetary procedures. Admission of former Service personnel would depend on spare capacity being available.

Armed Forces Personnel

Mr. Ottaway: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many personnel have *(a)* left and *(b)* joined the (i) Army, (ii) Navy and (iii) RAF in the last two years for which figures are available. [88704]

Mr. Doug Henderson *[pursuant to his reply 2 July 1999, c. 293]:* I regret to inform the hon. Member that some of the information I gave was incorrect. For outflow of UK Regular Forces between 1 April 1998–31 March 1999, the figure for the Royal Air Force should read 4,889 and the total should read 27,435.

Tomahawk Missiles

Mr. Menzies Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what assessment his Department has made of the impact of the cessation of production of Block III Tomahawk missiles in the United States later this year on the capabilities of the Royal Navy submarine fleet. [91328]

Mr. George Robertson: The Tomahawk Block III production line at Raytheon was closed for new orders some time ago, and we expect that the missiles ordered by the UK will all have been delivered by the end of 1999. The capabilities of the RN submarine fleet will not be affected by the closure.

The US Department of Defence has now embarked on a programme for refurbishment and upgrade of older missile stock up to Block III standard which will carry it

through the period up to 2004–05, when the next version of Tomahawk, called Tactical Tomahawk (TACTOM), becomes available. The replacement of the Royal Navy's Tomahawk missiles used in the Balkans, currently being negotiated, will come from this refurbishment and upgrade programme.

Ballistic Missile Pre-feasibility Study

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will place in the Library a copy of the unclassified version of the summary of the ballistic missile defence pre-feasibility study. [92487]

Mr. George Robertson: I am placing in the Library today a declassified version of the report which presents the findings of the Ministry of Defence UK Ballistic Missile Defence Pre-Feasibility Programme. In addition to the report itself, I am placing in the Library two related documents, an Executive Summary of the report and a Statement of Work, setting out the scope of the Pre-Feasibility Study.

Trident Warhead

Mr. Alan Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what work is *(a)* in progress and *(b)* planned on changing the Trident warhead from fixed to variable yield. [93172]

Mr. George Robertson: The UK has flexibility in the choice of yield for the warheads on its Trident missiles.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Racial Discrimination

Angela Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when the Government intend to submit to the relevant international bodies its latest periodic reports under the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination and the Council of Europe Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities. [93579]

Mr. Straw: The United Kingdom's Fifteenth Report under the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination and its first Report under the Council of Europe Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities were submitted to the United Nations and Council of Europe respectively on 23 July 1999. Copies of the Reports have been placed in the Library.

Leave to Remain

Angela Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to replace the current application forms for foreign nationals wishing to apply for leave to remain in the United Kingdom. [93580]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The current application forms expire on 14 October 1999. Revised versions of the seven existing forms will be prescribed during September and it is planned to make them available before the end of that month. From the time they are issued until 1999, applications may be made on either the newly prescribed forms or the present versions. Only the new forms may be used for applications made on, or after, 15 October 1999. Copies will be placed in the Library as soon as they are available.

Immigration Rules

Ms Moran: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the purpose of the concession to Immigration Rules in respect of the one year rule and women suffering domestic violence. [92471]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: Under the Immigration Rules, spouses of British Citizens or of people settled in the United Kingdom are not given settlement on arrival or following the marriage; they are granted an initial period of 12 months. At the end of this 12 month probationary period, settlement will be granted if the Secretary of State is satisfied that the marriage is still subsisting and that each of the parties has the intention of living permanently with the other as his or her spouse.

If, for whatever reason, the marriage has broken down during the probationary year, settlement is normally refused. That is because the fundamental reason for the person's admission in the first place—to continue or commence stable family life—no longer exists. In the past, cases where violence was the reason for the breakdown of a marriage have been considered sympathetically but it was held that domestic violence could not normally override the requirements of the Immigration Rules.

The probationary period is intended as a safeguard against abuse. If settlement were granted immediately there would be no recourse against applicants who desert their partners as soon as they arrive in the country. The absence of a probationary period would also allow more bogus marriages to escape detection. We, therefore, have no intention of abolishing this requirement of the Rules, which in the generality of cases is the only sensible way to operate a firm but fair immigration control.

However, we were aware that this policy placed a small minority of individuals in a distressing dilemma in that their insecure immigration status left them feeling "trapped" in a violent marriage. They faced a stark choice between staying within the violent relationship or leaving their sponsor and being refused settlement.

As I said in my reply to my hon. Friend on 16 June 1999, *Official Report*, columns *164–65*, the domestic violence concession has been introduced for overseas spouses who wish to remain in the United Kingdom, but who wish to leave their partner because of domestic violence before completion of the 12 month probationary period. The concession allows them to settle in the United Kingdom even though they are no longer living with their sponsor provided they comply with the conditions set out in the concession.

Ms Moran: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to monitor the impact of the concession to immigration rules on domestic violence and the one year rule. [92470]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The concession will be closely monitored in order to assess its effectiveness. Arrangements have been made for officials to note the details of all applications under this concession once a decision has been reached.

Ministerial Travel

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department on what date he last used a train in the course of his official duties. [92675]

Mr. Straw *[holding answer 23 July 1999]:* I last travelled by train during the course of my official duties when I visited a Drugs Arrest Referral Scheme, the Television Video Links Project and delivered a speech at the Association of Chief Police Officers' Conference in Manchester on 14 July.

Passport Agency

Mr. Beith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what computer systems, printers, laminators and other production equipment which were planned to have been replaced by the introduction of new systems by private contractors are still being used at *(a)* Liverpool and *(b)* Newport offices of the Passport Agency; and if he will make a statement. [92905]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The United Kingdom Passport Agency planned to retain its existing main computer and some peripheral equipment in all its Regional passport offices until the new issuing system had been implemented in all six offices. This was to facilitate communication and data collection, service telephone inquiry bureau and provide a contingency.

In the Liverpool office, older equipment continues to be used to service urgent applications for customers calling at the office, in the telephone inquiry bureau and in administrative sections. In Newport, the older system is used in the telephone inquiry bureau and in administrative sections.

The delay in implementing new systems at other passport offices will mean longer use of old equipment and the Agency is negotiating with support companies to ensure maintenance and development work is carried out.

Wormwood Scrubs

Mr. Beith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, pursuant to his answer of 20 July 1999, *Official Report*, column *466*, on Wormwood Scrubs, if he will place in the Library a copy of the action plan drawn up in response to the Chief Inspector of Prisons' first 15 recommendations contained in his 1996 inspection report including the response to the recommendations to date; and if he will make a statement. [93026]

Mr. George Howarth: I have arranged for copies of the response to the first 15 recommendations contained in Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Prisons' report of his 1996 inspection of Wormwood Scrubs to be placed in the Library.

Child Curfews

Mr. Beith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what forecast he has made of the number of local child curfews *(a)* applied for and *(b)* implemented, in the first year of the provision being available; and if he will make a statement. [92885]

Mr. Boateng: I have not made a forecast. Applying for a local child curfew is optional for local authorities, to be considered in the light of the wider crime and disorder strategies they are developing under the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 and of the outcome of local consultation.

Gender Impact Assessments

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the subject of each gender impact assessment drawn up by his Department since June 1997, stating in each case whether the outcome has been *(a)* put out to consultation and *(b)* published. [91683]

Mr. Straw: I refer the hon. Member to the reply given to her on 22 July 1999, *Official Report,* column *636*, by my right hon. Friend the Minister of State, Department of Health.

As lead department for race equality issues, the Home Office is committed to ensuring that through the impact of its policies, all sections of society are treated equally. The Department is working closely with the Women's Unit to develop good practice for carrying out gender impact appraisal.

Policy appraisal for equal treatment—including the impact of policies on women—is an integral part of policy development. Guidance was issued throughout the department on 4 December 1998 and is part of the department's policy development checklist.

Correspondence

Mr. Beith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he expects to reply to the letter from the right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed dated 10 March seeking his Department's approval for an exhibition in the Upper Waiting Hall relating to crime reduction. [92773]

Mr. Straw *[holding answer 23 July 1999]:* We have no record of having received the letter of 10 March to which the right hon. Member refers, but have since received a copy from his office.

"Kno Way" is an excellent example of a project involving the police, business and the voluntary sector in tackling crime and anti-social behaviour. It is to be particularly praised in addressing the issue of safety for vulnerable and elderly people.

An exhibition about the project in the Upper Waiting Hall of the House of Commons would have the full support of my Department. I will be writing to the right hon. Member formally to record my views.

Mr. Steen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he expects to reply to the letter dated 7 June from Mr. K. Allden, of Brixham, South Devon, concerning an incident involving the Devon and Cornwall Constabulary. [93186]

Mr. Boateng: Mr. Allden was sent a reply to his letter on 14 July.

Immigration and Nationality Directorate

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what is the earliest date of unopened post received by the Immigration and Nationality Directorate. [93029]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: There is currently no unopened post in the Mail Handling Section. However, there is a separate procedure for dealing with applications and accompanying fees in the Travel Documents Case Management Unit. These letters are normally unopened until they are processed and a cashier issues a receipt for the fee. As at 26 July, the earliest date of unopened Travel Documents applications was 16 June.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what is the current backlog of cases at the Liverpool office of the Immigration and Nationality Directorate; and how many of these cases have been outstanding for over *(a)* six months, *(b)* 12 months and *(c)* two years. [92898]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: At 30 June 1999, the current backlog of cases in the Liverpool office stands at 95,200. 84,000 cases have been outstanding for six months; 50,800 have been outstanding for 12 months and 3,200 for two years. This Government inherited large backlogs and are putting in place steps to deal with them.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on progress made with the pilot implementation of the integrated information technology system in the Immigration and Nationality Directorate. [92902]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: Pilot implementation will begin only after the system has passed its contractual acceptance tests. Those tests represent the final stage of the formal testing process which began in June. I intend that the testing should be exhaustive. The pilot stage is accordingly unlikely to begin much before the end of this year.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many cases are held in the Central Work in Progress Store of the Immigration and Nationality Directorate; and how many of the cases have been outstanding for more than *(a)* six months, *(b)* one year and *(c)* two years. [92901]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: There are approximately 110,144 cases held in the Work in Progress Store of the Immigration and Nationality Directorate. Of these cases, 20,927 have been outstanding for more than six months, 36,330 have been outstanding for more than one year, and 52,887 have been outstanding for more than two years.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what targets he has set for the Immigration and Nationality Directorate to reply to correspondence from *(a)* hon. Members and *(b)* members of the public; and what has been the performance of the Immigration and Nationality Directorate in meeting those targets in each month since the beginning of 1999. [93028]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The Home Office Public Service Agreement commits the Immigration and Nationality Directorate to reply to 95 per cent. of correspondence from *(a)* hon. Members within 15 working days. Since January 1999, a monthly average of 16 per cent. met the target.

In respect of *(b)*, correspondence from members of the public, the Home Office Public Service Agreement commits the Immigration and Nationality Directorate to reply to 95 per cent. of correspondence within 20 working days. Since January 1999, a monthly average of 72 per cent. met the target.

UK/US Treaties

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the current bilateral *(a)* treaties and *(b)* agreements between the United Kingdom and US Governments which include provisions relating to the interception of communications. [93073]

Mr. Straw: There are arrangements appropriate to the relationship which exists between the Governments of the United Kingdom and the United States for the purpose of our common defence. It is the long-standing practice of this Government and previous Administrations not to comment on the detail of such confidential arrangements.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what discussions have taken place in the period 1 May 1997 to 31 December 1998 between Ministers and United States citizens concerning the interception regime operated in the United Kingdom. [93072]

Mr. Straw: During the period in question, I have had discussions with the Attorney-General of the United States Government on several occasions about the interception regime operated in the United Kingdom, in particular in the context of encryption and the use of intercept product as evidence.

Passports

Mr. Beith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if court orders can be endorsed in children's passports; and if he will make a statement. [93165]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: Where children hold passports, a court can require the surrender of a passport to prevent a child being removed from the jurisdiction, and so the endorsement of a court order may not be necessary. However, the endorsement of passports with summaries of court orders has been considered by the Parent/Carer Child Abduction Co-ordinating Group, which is an inter-departmental group of officials, together with Re-unite. The Group will be looking at the effectiveness of introducing endorsements of the passports of children at risk of abduction.

Mr. Beith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if the contract for the supply of blank passports to the Passport Agency which expires in October 1999 has been renewed. [93088]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: Discussions are in progress with the contractor to ensure a continuing supply of blank passport books.

Mr. Beith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what arrangements are in place for the updating of photographs on children's passports before a formal renewal of the passport is required; and if he will make a statement. [93166]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: There is no legal requirement for the photograph on a child's passport to be updated before the formal renewal of the passport after five years. While the appearance of young children can change rapidly, a photograph provides evidence to an immigration officer of basic characteristics, and only in a minority of cases would a child not be able to be identified. The United Kingdom Passport Agency has issued passports to young children for many years without difficulty prior to the policy change in October 1998 requiring separate passports. An application can be made for an amended passport with a new photograph in at a cost of £11.

Mr. Beith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what proposals have been made to his Department for private sector involvement in the issuing of passports; if he will list the proposals received; and if he will make a statement. [93168]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: It would not be appropriate to disclose details of the proposals submitted for Private Sector Involvement in the Issue of the British Passport. This information is commercially confidential. The high level criteria applied in awarding the United Kingdom Passport Agency's contract for the passport issuing arrangements were security, continuity of service, compatibility, management information systems, archive system, commercial and technical criteria, examining support/speed/method/customer service, evergreening and cultural compatibility. On the basis of these criteria, contracts were awarded to the supplier who put forward the best solution.

Mr. Beith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what factors led to the timing of the introduction of new computer systems at the Passport Agency; and if he will make a statement. [93169]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The factors that led to the timing of the introduction of the new computer systems in the United Kingdom Passport Agency were the need to modernise existing systems, to enhance the Agency's capacity to prevent passport fraud and improve the security of the British passport, to replace obsolete printing equipment, to provide better customer information and to continue to improve the Agency's efficiency and effectiveness and the need for the introduction of the new system to coincide with its quiet season between October and the end of the year. The new computer systems were introduced at the Agency's request.

Mr. Beith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department on what date work on the procurement of private sector involvement in the issuing of passports began; and if he will make a statement. [93170]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The procurement exercise to involve the private sector in the issuing of passports began with the placing of a notice in The Official Journal of the European Communities and Government Opportunities on 25 October 1996. A description of the procurement methodology is given in Annexe B of the summary of the business case for private sector involvement which has been placed in the Library.

Mr. Beith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many passports have been issued by the Passport Agency in each year since 1995–96 and in 1999–2000 to date. [93167]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The information requested is given in the table.

1 April to 31 March	*Number*
1995–96	4,686,524
1996–97	5,076,035
1997–98	4,872,233
1998–99	4,737,057
1999/2000[1]	1,988,562

[1] The final figure includes up to 18 July 1999 and shows record levels of production

Stalking

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many prosecutions have been brought under anti-stalking legislation; how many such prosecutions were successful; and in how many cases the Crown Prosecution Service has appealed against the sentences given. [92234]

Mr. Boateng: Available data from the Home Office Court Proceedings Database, for 1997 and provisionally for 1998, are given in the table.

Part IV of the Criminal Justice Act 1988 provides that the Attorney-General may refer to the Court of Appeal sentences for certain offences which he believes to be unduly lenient, for the Court of Appeal to review and, if appropriate, increase. Offences contrary to sections two and four of the Protection from Harassment Act 1997 do not come within the ambit of part IV and so there have been no such references.

Number of persons proceeded against at magistrates courts and convicted at all courts for offences under s2 and s4 of the Protection from Harassment Act 1997[1] England and Wales, 1997 and 1998[2]

Offence/disposal	*1997*	*1998[2]*
Section 2—Offence of harassment (summary)		
Total proceeded against	507	4,304
Total convicted	249	2,221
Conviction rate[3]	49	52
Section 4—Putting people in fear of violence		
Total proceeded against	243	1,505
Total convicted	76	522
Conviction rate[3]	31	35

[1] Came into force on 16 June 1997
[2] Provisional
[3] The number of offenders convicted at all courts as a percentage of defendants proceeded against at magistrates courts

Police Service (Women)

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many women left the police service before reaching normal retirement age in each of the last five years; what were the reasons for their early retirement; if he will list the number and reasons for women's early retirement in Merseyside Police; and what initiatives he has to retain in and recruit women to the police service. [92259]

Mr. Boateng: The Police service, supported by the Government, seeks to encourage applications to the police service from all under represented groups. As part of this strategy, we are proposing to review the whole recruitment process from application to selection with a view to removing any discriminatory practices.

Women now represent 15.17 per cent. of police officers in England and Wales and there has been a steady increase in female representation at senior ranks. There are now three women chief constables out of a total of 43.

While we are encouraged with the steady increase in the number of women officers and we welcome local force initiatives, we do accept that women are still poorly represented, and we intend to look at what further action can be taken to increase female representation throughout the service.

The number of women who left the police service before reaching normal retirement age, together with the number and reasons for women taking early retirement in Merseyside are listed in the tables:

Numbers of women leaving the service in England and Wales

	1993	*1994*	*1995*	*1996*	*1997*
Police dismissed or required to resign	118	95	110	14	18
Police voluntary resignations	194	187	172	258	241
Police medical retirements	380	390	376	348	316
Police ordinary retirements	78	30	63	40	53
Police deaths	4	9	11	7	6
Total wastage	774	711	732	667	634
Left before ordinary retirement	696	681	669	627	581

Women leaving the Merseyside Police

	1993	*1994*	*1995*	*1996*	*1997*
Police dismissed or required to resign	4	4	0	0	1
Police voluntary resignations	5	1	2	9	5
Police medical retirements	23	26	33	19	20
Police ordinary retirements	2	1	0	0	3
Police deaths	0	0	0	0	3
Total wastage	34	32	35	28	30
Left before ordinary retirement	32	31	35	28	27

Single Currency

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how much expenditure his Department *(a)* has incurred to date and *(b)* expects to incur in the future, on preparations for possible United Kingdom entry into the European single currency; and if he will make a statement. [92554]

Mr. Straw *[holding answer 23 July 1999]:* Following the publication of the Government's Outline National Changeover Plan, the Home Office is considering what preparation may be necessary for the introduction of the euro. The Home Office has no specific budget for euro preparations.

Existing staff resources have been used in the initial management planning that has taken place to date. No additional cash expenditure has been incurred. Nor will any additional funds be sought in the foreseeable future to draw up plans. Departmental changeover work will continue using existing staff resources.

Ms Loraine Whiting

Mr. Wyatt: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will set up a public inquiry into the death of Ms Loraine Whiting, a constituent of the hon. Member for Sittingbourne and Sheppey. [92497]

Mr. Straw *[holding answer 23 July 1999]:* This tragic case has already been investigated at a Coroner's inquest and by the Police Complaints Authority. I do not consider that a further inquiry would bring any significant new information about the case to light.

Immigration Appellate Authority

Mr. Steen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will instruct the Immigration Appellate Authority to send an explanatory statement to Mr. Wright of Holne, near Buckfastleigh, Devon, in relation to its decision of 2 December 1998 to refuse a visa to his wife Mrs. Miranda Musraj (Wright); and if he will make a statement. [92216]

Mr. Mike O'Brien *[holding answer 21 July 1999]:* The Immigration Appellate Authority (IAA) sent an explanatory statement to Mrs. Musraj (Wright) and her representative on 23 July 1999. The date set for the hearing of the appeal is 18 August 1999 at 10 a.m. at Taylor House, London. It is not the normal practice of the IAA, who are completely independent of the Home Office, to send a copy of the statement to any person other than the appellant and their nominated representative.

Public Safety Radio Communications Project

Mr. Sayeed: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how he will ensure that Bedfordshire Police Authority has sufficient funds to cover the introduction of the Public Safety Radio Communications Project. [92533]

Mr. Boateng: The Police Information Technology Organisation (PITO), which is responsible for managing the Public Safety Radio Communications Project (PSRCP) is at an advanced stage of negotiations with British Telecommunications which will lead to a firm price for authorities to consider as part of their business case.

Over the next three years, the police service will receive an additional £1.24 billion in central government funding. The Government have also relaxed the rules on the use of capital receipts from the sale of assets. Police Authorities now have the freedom to use all proceeds from sales for capital investment. The scope for additional funding for the PSRCP is under consideration.

Metropolitan Police

Mr. Greenway: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many officers left the Metropolitan police other than through ill health and ordinary retirement *(a)* during 1998 and *(b)* during 1999 to date. [93085]

Kate Hoey: The Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis tells me that the number of officers leaving the Metropolitan police other than through ill health and ordinary retirement was 645 in 1998 and 389 to 22 July 1999.

Mr. Greenway: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what is his latest estimate of the number of police officers expected to retire from the Metropolitan police *(a)* during 1999, *(b)* in 2000 and *(c)* in 2001. [93086]

Kate Hoey: The Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis tells me that the number of officers expected to retire from the Metropolitan police service during 1999 to 2001 is:

1999: 1,000

2000: 950

2001: 900.

Mr. Greenway: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what proportion of officers who left the Metropolitan police other than through ill health and normal retirement during the past two years *(a)* left the police service altogether and *(b)* transferred to other UK police forces. [93087]

Kate Hoey: The Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis tells me that the information requested is given in the table:

Percentage

	1997	*1998*
Officers leaving the police service altogether	18.4	23.1
Officers transferring to other police forces	18.8	13

Note:
When 100 per cent. = the total number of officers who left the Metropolitan police in each year.

Mr. Greenway: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many detective inspector and detective chief inspector posts within the Metropolitan Police remain unfilled. [93083]

Kate Hoey: The Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis tells me that at the end of June, 73 detective inspector posts were unfilled, and there was one detective chief inspector more than the budgeted manpower target.

Mr. Greenway: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many police recruits were admitted to each initial training course at the Metropolitan Police Training College at Hendon *(a)* during 1998 and *(b)* during 1999 to date. [93084]

Kate Hoey: The Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis tells me that the number of police recruits admitted to each initial training course at the Metropolitan Police Training College at Hendon during 1998 and 1999 to date, is as given in the table:

Recruit intake	*1998*	*1999*
Intake 1	93	143
Intake 2	71	142
Intake 3	153	183
Intake 4	140	145
Intake 5	183	90
Intake 6	178	93
Intake 7	174	[1]110
Intake 8	131	—
Intake 9	149	—

[1] expected

Tobacco

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what discussions he has had with national representatives of trading standards officers about implementation of the proposed Draft Tobacco (Prohibition of Advertising) Regulations 1999. [R] [92248]

Mr. Straw: To date, I have had no meetings to discuss the proposed Draft Tobacco (Prohibition of Advertising) Regulations 1999 with national representatives of trading standards officers.

Football Offences

Joan Ruddock: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many people in London have been charged with offences under the Football (Offences) Act 1991 following incidents at London clubs. [92396]

Kate Hoey: The Metropolitan Police advise that in season 1998–99 there were 47 arrests under the Football (Offences) Act 1991. Of these, 24 people were charged with offences under the 1991 Act. A further eight people were issued with a caution. Information is not readily available for earlier years and I will write to my hon. Friend when this becomes available.

Firearms Consultative Committee

Mr. Greenway: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has for the future of the Firearms Consultative Committee. [93082]

Mr. Boateng: Under the terms of the Firearms Consultative Committee Order 1996, the Firearms Consultative Committee will continue in existence until 1 February 2000. It is open to the Government at that stage to make a further Order for three years. This will be considered nearer the time.

Mr. Greenway: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he expects to appoint a new chairman to the Firearms Consultative Committee. [93081]

Mr. Boateng: We are presently considering the arrangements for chairing the Firearms Consultative Committee.

Fire Service

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what contingency plans he has made in relation to the possibility of a national firefighters' strike. [92899]

Mr. George Howarth: There are already well-established contingency arrangements for dealing with threats of industrial action in the fire service. These include arrangements, where possible and where needed, for military assistance to fire authorities so that emergency fire cover can be provided. The Government are also ready to consider such other measures as may be appropriate, to discharge their overriding responsibility for ensuring the protection and security of the public.

Police Discipline

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what was the outcome of the disciplinary proceedings against two police officers involved in a disturbance on the Holloway Road on 17 March 1996; and what measures have been taken to address the concerns of the victims. [92679]

Kate Hoey: The Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis tells me that a Commander's Discipline Board found two officers guilty of making an unnecessary arrest, and disciplined them. Both officers were cleared of using excessive force. The person who was arrested made a formal complaint, which led to disciplinary proceedings. It will have been for the Police Complaints Authority to inform the complainant of the outcome.

Local Inmates Database

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, pursuant to his answer of 12 July 1999, *Official Report*, column *77*, on the Local Inmates Database, what is the ethnic composition of the prison population. [92930]

Mr. George Howarth: The requested information is given in the table. This information is included in the April 'Prison Population Briefing' at the internet site http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/areas/prisf.htm.

Population in prison by ethnic group, sex and nationality—England and Wales 31 March 1999

			Ethnic group (percentage)			
Type of prisoner	*Total*	*Total percentage*	*White*[1]	*Black*	*South Asian*	*Chinese and other*
Males and Females	64,212	100	82	12	3	3
British Nationals	58,884	100	86	10	2	2
Foreign Nationals	5,262	100	79	12	3	6
Unrecorded	66	100	33	35	11	21
Males	61,036	100	82	12	3	3
British Nationals	56,199	100	86	10	2	2
Foreign Nationals	4,775	100	81	13	3	3
Unrecorded	62	100	34	33	12	21
Females	3,176	100	76	19	1	4
British Nationals	2,685	100	86	11	1	2
Foreign Nationals	487	100	50	0	0	50
Unrecorded	4	100	23	59	3	15

[1] Includes those with no recorded ethnic group

Firearms Clubs

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, pursuant to the answer of 25 May 1999, *Official Report*, column *98*, on firearms training, if he will list those schools that have target-shooting clubs approved by his Department; how many firearms, of what calibre, are stored on school premises; and how many pupils are enrolled in these clubs each year. [92678]

Mr. Boateng: For reasons of security, it is not our policy to publish the locations at which firearms are stored. Records of the number and calibre of firearms held by individual schools and of the number of pupils enrolled in the shooting club are not kept centrally. Each school club appoints a responsible adult to take charge of all aspects of shooting at the school. The responsible adult must have personal experience of the weapons used by the school and at least one year's experience of exercising control of the age group of pupils concerned. This adult is issued with a firearm certificate by the police on which the club's guns are entered. Before any school club is granted approval, the police inspect the armoury in which the guns will be stored. No club is allowed to hold more guns on the club certificate than can be safely stored in the armoury under secure conditions. Nor are they allowed to possess guns with muzzle energies and velocities greater than those stipulated on the range safety certificate.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Film Council

2. **Ms Lawrence:** To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what assessment he has made of the ways in which the establishment of the new Film Council will benefit the British film industry. [91340]

21. **Mr. Efford:** To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what assessment he has made of the ways in which the establishment of the new Film Council will benefit the British film industry. [91359]

Mr. Chris Smith: The Film Council will deliver a coherent strategy for the development of a sustainable UK film industry, taking forward the vision set out in the Film

Policy Review. The Council will be a Lottery distributor in its own right, guaranteeing, for the first time, a dedicated share of Lottery resources for film amounting to at least £27 million, a significant increase on previous years.

Over the next three years, the Film Council will receive in the region of £150 million to put into support for the film industry and film culture.

Cyclists (Royal Parks)

10. **Mr. Bradshaw:** To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what progress he has made on proposals to improve provision for cyclists in the Royal Parks. [91348]

Mr. Alan Howarth: The Royal Parks Agency has agreed to provide a number of new cycle routes through the Royal Parks. Progress depends on the availability of resources and the outcome of consultation. I have asked the Agency to consider how provision for cyclists can be extended further.

New Opportunities Fund

11. **Mr. Ben Chapman:** To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport when the New Opportunities Fund will award its first grants. [91349]

Mr. Banks: The New Opportunities Fund announced its first awards on 12 July 1999. A total of £1,870,443 has been awarded under its out-of-school-hours child care programme to 115 projects across the UK creating a total of 8,736 new out-of-school child care places.

Funding Agreements

12. **Mr. Jenkins:** To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what the objectives are of the three-year funding agreements negotiated by his Department with its sponsored bodies. [91350]

Mr. Chris Smith: Funding agreements provide a focus for my Department's relationship with its sponsored bodies. They detail the outputs which each of the bodies has agreed to achieve in return for public funding.

BBC Scotland

14. **Mr. Dalyell:** To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what discussions he has had with the Scottish Executive on the relationship between BBC Scotland and the rest of the BBC. [91352]

Mr. Chris Smith: I have had no such discussions. The BBC's Royal Charter and Agreement ensure the Corporation's independence in the management of its day-to-day affairs.

Cultural Events (Access)

15. **Mr. Coaker:** To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what measures his Department is taking to provide greater access to cultural events for schoolchildren from a wider range of social backgrounds. [91353]

Mr. Banks: Working with our sponsored bodies, my Department encourages all publicly funded organisations to ensure the widest possible access to cultural events. The New Audiences fund, managed by the Arts Council of England, has provided grants to pilot projects aimed at attracting new and younger audiences to such events. For example, New Generation Audiences will provide free tickets to cultural events to schoolchildren and encourage them to exchange information using the latest technologies.

Seaside Resorts

16. **Mr. Quinn:** To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what steps his Department is taking to encourage family holidays at UK seaside resorts, with particular reference to Scarborough and Whitby. [91354]

Janet Anderson: Our strategy, "Tomorrow's Tourism", contains a host of initiatives designed to promote quality in tourism in this country, including a model regeneration plan for resorts. It also identifies actions to help increase access to tourism for those with low incomes, for families, for elderly people and for people with disabilities.

Single Regeneration Budget awards of over half a million pounds to the Yorkshire and Humberside Coastal Tourism Initiative (which includes Scarborough and Whitby) and almost £3 million to the Falsgrave Community Investment Initiative in Scarborough will help encourage families to holiday in the area.

National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts

17. **Mr. Flynn:** To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will make a statement on progress with the establishment of the National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts. [91355]

Mr. Chris Smith: NESTA is preparing to launch its main programmes in the Autumn and has already launched eight pioneer projects.

Cricket

18. **Mr. Edwards:** To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what plans he has to encourage more state schools to play cricket. [91356]

Mr. Banks: As well as the various initiatives aimed at encouraging sport in schools through Sport England's Active Schools programme, the English and Wales Cricket Board have an number of initiatives aimed specifically at encouraging schools to play cricket. These include the Wrigley Schools Cricket Tournament, a Kwik Cricket based competition for state primary schools and the production of a new Development Game for secondary schools designed to bridge the gap between Kwik and hardball cricket.

Social Exclusion

19. **Ms Keeble:** To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what assessment his Department has made of the contribution that arts and sport can make to tackling social exclusion; and if he will make a statement. [91357]

Mr. Chris Smith: My Department has led an inter-departmental Policy Action Team which reported to the Social Exclusion Unit on the contribution arts and

sport can make to combating social exclusion. The team found that participation in the arts and sport can develop individuals' talents and self-confidence, encourage collective effort and contribute to improvements in health and education attainment and reductions in crime and unemployment. Copies of the report have been placed in the Libraries of the House.

Netball

20. **Angela Smith:** To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what support his Department provides for netball in Essex. [91358]

Mr. Banks: This year, Sport England will provide the All England Netball Association with over £420,000 to promote netball in all parts of the country, including Essex. Some of this funding will be used to employ a team of seven development officers, one of whom is responsible for Essex.

Essex Local Authorities are planning to run a netball event as part of the Millennium Youth Games next year with the support of lottery funding.

Competitive Sports (Schools)

22. **Mr. Robathan:** To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what plans he has to encourage competitive sport within schools. [91360]

27. **Ms Bridget Prentice:** To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what contribution the national lottery is making to encourage the playing of competitive sporting fixtures in schools. [91365]

Mr. Banks: We are well aware of the value of encouraging competitive games both within and between schools. As well as being one of the criteria schools have to meet to be awarded a Sportsmark, we have asked Sport England to ensure that arranging inter-school competitive fixtures is a key part of the job description of the new Active Schools Co-ordinators. This initiative will be supported by £30 million from the Lottery Sports Fund.

Sports (National Lottery Funding)

23. **Maria Eagle:** To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what steps he will take to ensure that sports bodies which receive money from the national lottery are accountable for their spending. [91361]

Mr. Banks: Sports bodies are fully accountable to Sport England for all aspects of their projects and are required to sign a contract to this effect before receiving funding.

Youth Music

24. **Mr. White:** To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport when schools will be able to apply for funding to promote youth music from the new body set up by his Department and the Department for Education and Employment. [91362]

Mr. Alan Howarth: The National Foundation for Youth Music, which is a charitable body operating independently of Government, is currently consulting on its proposed criteria and eligibility. The consultation period will conclude on the 1 October, after which finalised criteria and eligibility will be published.

30. **Helen Jones:** To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what estimate he has made of the number of children who will benefit from the new National Foundation for Youth Music. [91368]

Mr. Chris Smith: The National Foundation for Youth Music is an independent body, and is responsible for identifying its policies and outputs without reference to Ministers. The Foundation's ultimate aim is to ensure that every child has the opportunity to access music-making.

Museum Attendance

25. **Mr. McNulty:** To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what assessment he has made of the impact of introducing free entry for children on museum attendance. [91363]

Mr. Alan Howarth: The number of child visits at those national museums and galleries in England which adopted free entry for children from April this year is being regularly monitored. An assessment of the policy's effectiveness will be made when sufficient information is available from which to draw reliable conclusions.

Royal Parks Constabulary

26. **Mr. Mackinlay:** To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will review the powers of the Royal Parks Constabulary constables in relation to the area and roads surrounding St James's and Hyde parks. [91364]

Mr. Alan Howarth: I have no plans to review the powers of the Royal Parks Constabulary in relation to the area and roads surrounding St. James's and Hyde Parks. The Constabulary's primary duty is to maintain order in the Royal Parks and making them safe for park users. If there is a need to apprehend a person beyond the boundary of a Royal Park, they can call upon the Metropolitan Police for assistance. Constitution Hill in the Green Park, Birdcage Walk in St James's Park, and the North, South, West and East Carriage Drives in Hyde Park are already the policing responsibility of the Royal Parks Constabulary.

Sports (Women)

28. **Mr. Fearn:** To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what action his Department is taking to increase the proportion of adult women who participate in sport. [91366]

Mr. Banks: The Government has made clear its determination to improve opportunities for women at all levels in sport, whether as participants, competitors, coaches or administrators. We are working closely with the Sports Councils and others to find ways to encourage more women to take part in sport, and our Sports Strategy will address the issue of increasing participation by all sections of the community.

Football World Cup 2006

29. **Mr. Stringer:** To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what recent representations he has made to the Football Association about the bid to host the 2006 World cup. [91367]

Mr. Banks: The Government are providing the fullest diplomatic and promotional support for The FA's bid in accordance with FIFA bidding guidelines. As Parliamentary time allows, I will continue to meet members of the FIFA Executive when they visit this country, and accompany the 2006 bid team abroad when requested.

I am determined that The FA's bid should continue to be pursued with the utmost vigour and integrity, and very much hope that the bidding process between now and July 2000 will be conducted in a spirit of friendly rivalry. I believe it is an excellent bid with a very good chance of success.

Millennium Dome

34. **Ms Moran:** To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what will be the arrangements by which schools may apply for free tickets for schoolchildren to the millennium dome. [91372]

Janet Anderson: The New Millennium Experience Company has sent to schools an Information and Booking form for educational visits to the Dome at Greenwich. The form is available from NMEC's 12 regional offices. The form includes details about the Education Tours scheme through which up to one million free tickets will be available to schools. Each school will be able to apply for up to 100 free tickets. As the brochure explains, details of how to apply for free education tours will be sent to schools in September. Copies of the Information and Booking Form will be placed in the Libraries of the House.

35. **Mr. Efford:** To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will make a statement on the effect which the millennium experience will have on the tourist industry. [91373]

Mr. Chris Smith: The British Tourist Authority (BTA) has estimated the number of overseas visits to the UK in 2000 as 27.5 million. The New Millennium Experience Company (NMEC) forecasts 2.4 million overseas visitors to the Dome. The BTA has also indicated that as a direct result of the Millennium Experience an additional £300m-£500m of overseas tourist revenue will be brought into the UK economy. It is conceivable that as a result of the Millennium celebrations this figure could be doubled if the knock-on effect to related industries is taken into account. The BTA has further estimated that 10,000–15,000 new tourism-related jobs will be created. This is excellent news for the whole of the UK.

36. **Mr. Ben Chapman:** To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will make a statement on the representation of the various English regions through the Millennium Experience. [91374]

Janet Anderson: While there are no exhibits within the Dome which are dedicated specifically to the English regions, there are a number of opportunities for regional representation. For example, I am pleased to say that as part of the "Our Town Story" project, the Wirral is due to have its day in the Dome on 31 May 2000.

"Our Town Story", sponsored by McDonald's, is linked to the Theatre space and Education Centre at the Dome. It enables more than 20,000 schoolchildren and other members of the community in every education authority and library board area in the UK to stage a performance in the Dome telling the story of their community. The "Our Town Story" stage will seat 500 people and will be a professionally equipped theatre space.

37. **Mr. Fraser:** To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will make a statement on the importance being attached to religion in the organisation of the millennium celebrations. [91375]

Mr. Chris Smith: The Government recognise the important significance of the year 2000 as a Christian anniversary, and is keen to see this reflected in the official celebrations. However, we also wish to ensure that celebrations are accessible and relevant to people of all religious persuasions and none. Through the Lambeth Group, my Department, the Millennium Commission and the New Millennium Experience Company are working closely with the Christian churches, ecumenical groups and other faith communities to ensure that the spiritual aspect of the occasion receives proper recognition. We are also working with Church groups in the four nations of the UK to deliver ecumenical Millennium Church Services in London, Edinburgh, Cardiff and Belfast on Sunday 2 January 2000.

38. **Mr. Quinn:** To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what measures will be in place to facilitate visits from schoolchildren from the most peripheral parts of the United Kingdom to the dome at Greenwich; and if small, rural schools in Scarborough and Whitby will be eligible for such arrangements. [91376]

Janet Anderson: The New Millennium Experience Company (NMEC) is not responsible for travel arrangements to the Dome for schoolchildren or any other groups. Very few, if any, visitor attractions subsidise or pay for school travel and very few provide significant numbers of free entry tickets for schoolchildren. NMEC is providing up to one million free school tickets under the Education Tour scheme. All schools in the UK can apply for these tickets. NMEC has also worked hard to negotiate deals with travel providers and operators which represent good value for money for visitors to the Dome. NMEC has informed schools about these providers and operators in their area.

39. **Mr. Dalyell:** To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what proportion of school pupils from Scotland will be able to visit the dome on a free basis. [91377]

Janet Anderson: There are up to one million free tickets available to schoolchildren. Final details of allocations, including the ballot arrangements, will be announced in due course. However, the free tickets will be on a pro rata to school population basis. Under the Education Tours Scheme, schools in Scotland will be allocated about 8.5 per cent. of the free tickets. However,

NMEC are not able at this stage to indicate how those tickets will be finally apportioned to the individual Local Education Authorities (LEA's) or individual schools.

40. **Mr. Alan W. Williams:** To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will extend the duration of the millennium dome exhibition beyond 31 December 2000. [91378]

Mr. Chris Smith: The Millennium Experience at the Dome is planned as the centrepiece of the nation's millennium celebrations and will run for one year from 1 January 2000 to 31 December 2000, and be a truly unique and once-in-a-lifetime experience for visitors. The Government are committed to identifying a sustainable, viable use for the Dome after the Millennium Experience ends and launched a competition for that purpose on 4 March 1999. The competition is proceeding well and the outcome will be announced in Spring 2000.

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what training Millennium Dome staff will receive in order to deal with problems; and what powers they will have in respect of the public. [91267]

Janet Anderson: All staff will receive appropriate training in line with best practice for the nature and scope of their duties and responsibilities.

Sports Participation

Mr. Fearn: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what action his Department is taking to increase the proportion of *(a)* pensioners, *(b)* people with disabilities and *(c)* people from ethnic minorities who participate in sport. [91311]

Mr. Banks: The Government fund Sport England to develop programmes in all these areas. On *(a)*, Sport England believes in lifelong participation in sport, and its Active Communities programme has seen substantial investment in initiatives with particular appeal to older participants, such as capital Lottery funding for walking, keep-fit/yoga, swimming, cycling, golf and bowls. For example, 290 awards have been made to bowls projects, grants of £26 million supporting project costs of £42.5 million. Through the monitoring of completed Lottery projects, Sport England reports that participation among senior citizens at these facilities has doubled.

Sport England also monitors the age structure of the population and its Facilities Planning Model (a mathematical model aimed at assessing the needs for sport and recreational facilities) is used, on a local community and national level, to determine facilities required for each age group, including older people. Through its advice to local authorities Sport England encourages the needs and concerns of older people to be incorporated in Local Sports Strategies and Best Value practices.

Other work in this area includes support for GP referral schemes, working with the health sector to encourage physical activity to maintain good health.

On *(b)*, Sport England has adopted the approach that, wherever possible, support should be channelled through mainstream sport rather than separate disability organisations. This decision was based on consultation and feedback from all parts of sport for people with disabilities.

Sport England has overseen the formation of the National Federation of Disability Sport, which brings together all the key disability sports organisations. With the election of a management board and appointment of key staff at both a national and regional level, it is able to ensure that people with disabilities can receive proper sporting opportunities.

As well as its own Disability Advisory Group, Sport England also has a service team of staff with the appropriate skills to co-ordinate and audit the disability work that Sport England is doing across the range of all its service areas, including Lottery programmes. Baselines of sporting provision for people with disabilities in England have been established and research carried out to find out their exact needs.

On *(c)*, Sport England has made special efforts to tackle the problems that exist in this area, including setting up its own advisory Group and working with the Commission for Racial Equality jointly to appoint two staff to work on anti-racism initiatives with the governing bodies of sport.

Six sports were initially identified as priority areas for work: cricket, basketball, rugby league, rugby union, athletics and swimming. The starting point for each sport is the formulation of a racial equity statement.

Sport England has also given financial support to help develop action plans for sports which seek the elimination of racism.

Sport England has contracted the Office for National Statistics to conduct a survey to measure accurately levels of participation by members of the ethnic minorities. By establishing the sporting needs of the Black, Asian and other ethnic minorities support can be much more effectively tailored.

Sport England has also organised and run generic equity workshops for the governing bodies of sport. This is a structured programme and part of the Running Sport range of education and training support.

In addition, following the publication of the Football Task Force's report "Eliminating Racism from Football", I asked the football authorities to consider how they could implement the recommendations.

This has been a good start, but I want to ensure that racism is tackled by all sports. To that end I have written to the Governing bodies of cricket, tennis, athletics, rugby union and league asking them how the problems can be addressed within their sports. I hope to meet with those Governing Bodies, the Commission for Racial Equality and the Local Government Association to discuss how we can go about removing racism from sport in the very near future.

Lottery Funding (East Midlands)

Mr. Conker: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (1) if he will take steps to ensure that

the Gedling Borough Council area receives a comparable share of the lottery money per capita to other parts of the country; [91561]

(2) what steps he is taking to address the unequal regional distribution of lottery grants, with particular reference to the East Midlands. [91560]

Mr. Banks: We recognise that some parts of the country have done less well than others from Lottery funding. We are determined to ensure that Lottery money is allocated more fairly and equitably in the light of need across the whole of the United Kingdom.

The National Lottery Act 1998 contained a number of measures designed to bring this about. Distributors must now examine the needs of their sectors systematically and draw up strategic plans which reflect those needs and their proposals for addressing them. They have new powers to encourage specific applications where these are not forthcoming spontaneously, to delegate decision-making closer to the grass roots, and to enter into joint schemes. Revised Policy Directions issued to the distributors last year also stressed the need to ensure that all parts of the country have access to Lottery funds.

Last November, my Department hosted a conference in Barnsley to discuss how the Lottery can assist in the regeneration of coalfield communities. In addition, we are working with the distributors to examine the reasons for the low take-up of funds in many coalfield areas. The results of the first phase of this research, which establishes the extent of the problem, were published on 13 July 1999. We are currently analysing these results and are about to commission further work to consider what needs to be done to ensure that such areas receive their fair share of Lottery money.

Welsh Language Television

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what plans he has to improve the reception of television channels carrying Welsh language programmes throughout Wales; and if he will make a statement. [92711]

Janet Anderson: BBC Wales and S4C analogue broadcasts presently reach 97.6 per cent. of the population of Wales. The nine Welsh transmitter sites in the launch phase for digital terrestrial television will deliver BBC services to 70 per cent. of the population and S4C services to 63 per cent. BBC and S4C also broadcast their services on digital satellite, and will broadcast on digital cable when available. The BBC, ITC and the digital broadcasters are now considering plans for the further development of digital terrestrial television across the UK.

Public Appointments

Joan Ruddock: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how many appointments to public bodies were made by his Department in *(a)* 1997–98 and *(b)* 1998–99, broken down by (i) gender and (ii) ethnicity; and if he will list the chairmen appointed to those bodies in those years, similarly broken down. [92520]

Mr. Chris Smith: The information is noted in the following table, which includes all appointments which fall under my responsibility or where my role is to advise my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister, or through him Her Majesty The Queen.

Department for Culture, Media and Sport, Her Majesty The Queen and Prime Minister

	1 April 1997 to 31 March 1998	*1 April 1998 to 31 March 1999*
Gender		
Male	72 (62.6%)	121 (64.3%)
Female	43 (37.4%)	67 (35.7%)
Total appointments	115	188
Of which chairmen:		
Male	12 (92.3%)	14 (82.3%)
Female	1 (7.7%)	3 (17.7%)
Total	13	17
Ethnicity		
White	95 (82.6%)	153 (81.3%)
Ethnic	8 (6.9%)	12 (6.4%)
Unknown[1]	12 (10.4%)	23 (12.2%)
Of which chairmen:		
White	12 (92.3%)	13 (76.4%)
Ethnic	0	0
Unknown[1]	1 (7.7%)	4 (23.5%)

[1] Where information on ethnic background is not known or where appointees have declined to disclose this information

My Department has published an action plan on equal opportunities in "Quangos—Opening up Public Appointments 1999–2002", which was published by the Government on 25 May 1999 and deposited in the Libraries of both Houses. The action plan sets out DCMS objectives and targets for improving representation of women, people from ethnic minority groups and from people with disabilities.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Compliance Costs

Mr. Chidgey: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what reductions were achieved in the compliance costs of regulation administered by his Department and its public bodies for the last year for which data are available; what mechanisms exist for monitoring the post-implementation costs of such regulation; and if he has established targets for reduction in the compliance costs of regulation administered by his Department and its public bodies. [92317]

Mr. Mudie: Details of regulations that imposed compliance costs on business are published in the Department's regulatory impact assessments and laid before the House. A summary of all the regulatory impact assessments published by the Department and the other regulatory Departments in Whitehall are published every six months in a White Paper, and are available on a monthly basis on the Cabinet Office Regulatory Impact Unit's website.

The Department published details on the quality and quantity of its regulatory activity in the Departmental Annual Report.

There is no arbitrary target for reducing the compliance costs of regulation. However, all Departments are required to make an assessment of the risks, costs and benefits of any regulatory proposal that has an impact on businesses, charities and voluntary bodies before they decide to act. Without an assessment of this kind there can be no collective agreement of a regulatory proposal.

University Appointments

Joan Ruddock: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many professors were appointed to university posts in *(a)* 1997–98 and *(b)* 1998–99, broken down by (i) gender and (ii) ethnicity. [92511]

Mr. Mudie: The available data include those entering their current Higher Education Institution on appointment as professors either on promotion or as a result of a move from a professorial post elsewhere. Those gaining professorial rank within their existing institution are therefore excluded.

Figures for the two most recent years are shown in the table.

Professors entering Higher Education Institutions in the UK

	1996–1997		1997–1998	
Ethnicity	*Men*	*Women*	*Men*	*Women*
White	209	43	264	41
Black Caribbean	0	0	0	1
Black African	0	0	1	0
Black Other	1	0	0	0
Indian	3	0	2	1
Pakistani	0	0	1	0
Bangladeshi	1	0	0	0
Chinese	3	0	3	0
Asian Other	0	0	0	0
Other	7	0	5	1
Information not provided	55	7	63	9
Total	279	50	339	53

Public Appointments

Joan Ruddock: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many appointments to public bodies were made by his Department in *(a)* 1997–98 and *(b)* 1998–99, broken down by (i) gender and (ii) ethnicity; and if he will list the chairmen appointed to those bodies in those years, similarly broken down. [92515]

Mr. Mudie: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Employment made a total of 68 appointments and re-appointments to non-departmental public bodies (NDPBs) in 1997–98. Of these, 48 were men and 20 were women. Three were from ethnic minorities. Included in the total of 68, are the appointments or re-appointments of seven chairs, all of whom were men. None was from an ethnic minority.

In 1998–99, my right hon. Friend made a total of 142 appointments and re-appointments to NDPBs. Of these, 101 were men and 41 were women. Nineteen were from ethnic minorities. Included in that total of 142, are the appointments or re-appointments of eight chairs, one of whom was a woman. None was from an ethnic minority.

Secondary School Teachers

Mr. David Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what measures the Government are taking to expand the availability of secondary school teachers specialising in *(a)* physics, *(b)* mathematics and *(c)* information technology; and if he will make a statement. [92577]

Ms Estelle Morris: The wide ranging reforms to the teaching profession set out in our Green Paper "Teachers—meeting the challenge of change" will make teaching more attractive. Over time, it will substantially boost our ability to ensure the supply of high quality teachers we need.

We are also investing £130 million in shorter term measures, many of which target these shortage subjects. Last October, I announced £5,000 incentives for graduates in maths and science subjects to go into teaching. These have already brought a substantial increase in PGCE applications in those subjects, by 37 per cent. for maths and 33 per cent. for physics. This comes on top of £10 million of financial assistance for trainee teachers in shortage subjects, including maths, physics and technology, and the waiver of PGCE tuition fees. We have also launched a scheme to recruit 600 mature maths and science graduates and match them to vacancies in schools. Other action targeting these subjects includes the high-profile national advertising campaigns of the Teacher Training Agency. They also work closely with higher education institutions and professional subject associations on a range of initiatives to boost recruitment to teaching.

Special Educational Needs

Mr. David Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many children of secondary school age have a statement of Special Educational need and what proportion that represents of the overall numbers of such children in *(a)* North West Leicestershire, *(b)* the county of Leicestershire, not including the City of Leicester, *(c)* the City of Leicester, *(d)* the East Midlands and *(e)* England. [92507]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The information available is shown in the table.

Numbers and percentage of pupils in maintained secondary schools by local education authority area in England January 1999 (provisional)

	Numbers of pupils with statements of Special Educational need	*Numbers of pupils in schools*	*Percentage of pupils with statements*
Rutland	68	2,122	3.2
Leicestershire	1,318	42,598	3.1
City of Leicester	677	17,979	3.8
East Midlands	6,615	277,995	2.4
England	77,370	3,123,048	2.5

Mr. David Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many children of primary school age have a statement of Special Educational need and what proportion that represents of the overall numbers of such children in *(a)* North West

Leicestershire, *(b)* the county of Leicestershire, not including the City of Leicester, *(c)* the City of Leicester, *(d)* the East Midlands and *(e)* England. [92508]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The information available is shown in the table.

Numbers and percentage of pupils in maintained primary schools by local education authority area in England January 1999 (provisional)

	Numbers of pupils with statements of Special Educational need	*Numbers of pupils in schools*	*Percentage of pupils with statements*
Rutland	53	2,595	2.0
Leicestershire	940	50,205	1.9
City of Leicester	619	30,428	2.0
East Midlands	5,655	381,082	1.5
England	69,833	4,460,614	1.6

Leicestershire Education Authority

Mr. David Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what capital investment in schools in the Leicestershire Education Authority has taken place in *(a)* 1997–98, *(b)* 1998–99 and *(c)* 1999–2000 to date; and what the planned levels are for the next two years. [92579]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Table A shows the capital investment the Government have made in schools in Leicestershire in the three years up to 1999–2000. Table B shows the level of investment the Government intend to make for the following two financial years, provided resources allow. This represents commitments arising from existing projects. We cannot indicate what investment we will make in new projects in Leicestershire at this stage.

Table A: Expenditure in each year and the amount of Government support

£

	1997–98	*1998–99*	*1999–2000*
LEA's Education Capital Programme, supported by the following government programmes and initiatives[1]	5,273,000	7,505,000	[9]—
Annual Capital Guidelines[3]	1,563,000	2,155,104	3,426,036
Supplementary Credit Approvals[4]	368,000	323,000	1,019,000
New Deal for Schools[5]	677,000	1,705,684	2,862,282
Class Sizes	[9]—	380,822	755,330
Removal of Outside Toilets	[9]—	64,024	[9]—
Energy Management	[9]—	186,150	[9]—
Security in Schools[6]	[9]—	193,000	201,000
National Grid for Learning[6]	[9]—	998,000	900,000
Grant to Voluntary Aided Schools (inc. VA Challenge Fund)[7]	154,000	170,000	188,000
Grant to Grant Maintained Schools	149,345	276,172	504,157

[1] Education Capital Programme: Includes capital expenditure supported by the Authority's own resources.
[2] Education Capital Programme 1998–99: This figure is provisional only, based on estimates by the Department of Environment, Transport and the Regions.
[3] Annual Capital Guidelines: This is used in the calculation of the LEA's Basic Credit Approval (BCA), where the LEA's capital receipts are taken into account. Just because a project has been taken account of in calculating the ACG, it does not mean that the LEA has to use its BCA for that purpose.
[4] Supplementary Credit Approval (SCA): Unlike BCA, receipts are not taken into account when calculating the level of SCA. However, unless the SCA specifically says otherwise, the LEA is not obliged to use the SCA for the purpose for which it was calculated.
[5] New Deal for Schools (NDS): Some of the grant figures for VA schools would have changed slightly in order to reflect the actual costs of the project.
[6] National Grid for Learning and Security in Schools: While the majority of the expenditure supported by the grant will be capital in nature, some will be revenue. It is not possible to isolate the two elements.
[7] VA Grant: Capital grant is paid in respect of Governors' liability, at a rate of 85 per cent. Actual amount of grant paid may change depending on the costs of project on tender.
[8] Not available.
[9] Not applicable.

Note:
The following initiatives had not been established in 1997–98: Toilets, Energy, Class Sizes and National Grid for Learning.

Table B: Provisional Indicators: Amounts already committed as part of future ACGs and Grants provided resources allow

£000

To be part of:	*2000–01*	*2001–02*
Annual Capital Guideline	3,123,002	767,493
VA Grant	0	0
NDS Grant	1,471,000	238,719
Class sizes	0	0

Note:
There has been no application from Leicestershire for PFI credits.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Millennium Dome

Mr. Alan W. Williams: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what contribution the Office of Science and Technology plans to make to exhibitions at the Millennium Dome. [91148]

Mr. Battle: The prime responsibility for exhibitions at the Millennium Dome rests with the New Millennium Experience Company.

However, officials from the Department of Trade and Industry and the Office of Science and Technology have had several discussions with the New Millennium Experience Company about ideas and source material for exhibits which promote greater public understanding of science, engineering and technology and its key role in shaping the world of the 21st century. These have covered such areas as sustainable development, bio-engineering and future transport technology.

Post Office

Rev. Martin Smyth: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many appointments to the Post Office within the last 12 months have been made before the final date of *(a)* trawl and *(b)* external application was reached. [91001]

Mr. Ian McCartney: I understand from the Post Office that it does not use a trawl system for job vacancies. All vacancies filled internally are subject to an open resourcing policy, which enables anyone in any grade in the organisation to apply. Closing dates for the receipt of applications for all posts filled internally or externally are strictly adhered to, and the Post Office is not aware of any appointments made within the last 12 months before the final dates for either internal or external applications were reached.

Mr. Fallon: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, pursuant to his answer of 25 June 1999, *Official Report*, column *474*, on Parcelforce, if the loans to Parcelforce have been repaid; and if they are repayable at commercial rates of interest. [91178]

Mr. Ian McCartney *[holding answer 13 July 1999]:* The loans to Parcelforce from the Post Office Group Centre have not been repaid.

It is Post Office normal practice to charge its constituent businesses, including Parcelforce, interest at a commercial rate on their in-year funding requirements. As Parcelforce is not a legal entity and therefore has no share capital, other loans to Parcelforce from the Post Office Group Centre are treated within the Post Office Group as a surrogate for equity and, as such, do not carry an obligation for interest payments.

Mr. Reed: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on the future of Crown post offices; and when he will lift the moratorium on conversion of Crown post offices to agency status. [91314]

Mr. Ian McCartney: As announced in the White Paper "Post Office Reform: A World Class Service for the 21st Century" published on 8 July, the Government have agreed a strategy for the future of Crown post offices, which reflects proposals put by the Post Office to the trade unions, of retaining a core of directly owned and managed Crown offices at which at least 15 per cent. of the total business transacted by the counters' network will be done. The lifting of the moratorium on the conversion of Crown offices to agency status was announced on 7 December 1998 by the former Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, my right hon. Friend the Member for Hartlepool (Mr. Mandelson).

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement about the future of the powers of entry, search and arrest currently enjoyed by the Investigation Branch of the Royal Mail under his proposals for a limited company. [91481]

Mr. Ian McCartney: Consolidation of the reform package in primary legislation will involve changes to a range of existing powers in order to reflect the new framework which separates Government ownership from Post Office business operations and introduces new, independent regulation. The future of the powers of entry, search and arrest, currently available to the Investigation Branch of the Royal Mail will be considered in this wider context.

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if *(a)* the postal archives and *(b)* the Post Office Museum will become part of the public limited company under his proposals for the Post Office. [91480]

Mr. Ian McCartney: The Post Office is currently looking at plans for the future management of its heritage collection in the light of the recent closure of the National Postal Museum. No firm decisions have yet been reached but we will be assessing the impact of public limited company status on any proposed plans.

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what discussions his Department has held with the Department for Culture, Media and Sport regarding the future of the Post Office Archives and the Post Office Museum; and if he will make a statement. [91479]

Mr. Ian McCartney: There have not been any discussions between Departments, but the Post Office is considering proposals for the future management of its heritage collection in the light of the recent closure of the National Postal Museum in London. I understand that the Public Record Office and Museum and Galleries Commission guidelines continue to be met.

Viewing of the philatelic collection is available by appointment, as has always been the case. The artefacts collection is currently not on public display, but is accessible through written application to:

The Post Office Archives Centre
Freeling House,
Mount Pleasant Complex,
London.

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if, under the proposal for the Post Office outlined in the Post Office White Paper, the Government will underwrite any debt issued or raised. [91739]

Mr. Ian McCartney: As the White Paper sets out, the Government believe that borrowing by the Post Office should, on value-for-money grounds, be from the National Loans Fund, but at a commercial rate without a Government guarantee.

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list the studies carried out in Europe by the European Commission referred to on page 19 of the Post Office White Paper regarding the need for greater competition in postal services. [91747]

Mr. Ian McCartney: The European Commission had the following studies carried out in accordance with Article 7(3) of the Postal services directive 97/67/EC:

Study of the impacts of liberalisation in the postal sector: Liberalisation of incoming and outgoing intra-community cross-border mail (Price Waterhouse Coopers).

Study on costing and financing of universal service obligations in the postal sector in the European Union (NERA)

Study on the weight and price limits of the reserved area in the postal sector (Ctcon)

Study on the liberalisation of clearance, sorting and transport (Ctcon)

Study of the impact of liberalisation of direct mail (Arthur Andersen)

Modelling and quantifying the scenarios for liberalisation (MMD).

The first five of the above are available on the internet at http://www.ispo.cec.be/ under "postal services". We understand that the sixth will be available shortly.

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if the Post Office Regulator will be required to publish details of internal transfer pricing arrangements under the proposals in the Post Office White Paper. [91736]

Mr. Ian McCartney: The Government are committed to a transparent regulatory regime. The new postal services Commission will therefore not only have powers to require information, but to publish information for the benefit of consumers and in the interests of good regulation. They will, therefore, have the ability to publish details of internal transfer pricing arrangements. The Government do not propose to require them to do so.

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if, under the proposed public limited company status for the Post Office, it will be possible for the company to be put into *(a)* receivership by creditors, *(b)* voluntary liquidation and *(c)* compulsory liquidation. [91740]

Mr. Ian McCartney: Once the Post Office has become a public limited company under the Companies Acts, it will be subject to the full range of company law.

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if the Post Office's power to acquire land by compulsory purchase order will apply to its non-monopoly services following its conversion to a public limited company. [91745]

Mr. Ian McCartney: Post Office privileges which have been granted in the past, including the Post Office's power to acquire land by compulsory purchase in certain circumstances, were provided to facilitate the universal service obligations (USO) placed on the Post Office. The USO is not limited to services within the monopoly area. For example, it also covers standard parcels and the registered letter service. The Government have decided that these privileges should remain for now but that they should be kept under review by the Regulator.

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what assessment he made of the compatibility of his proposals relating to the duties to be owed by the directors of the Post Office plc with the provision of the Companies Acts. [91751]

Mr. Ian McCartney: The intention of transforming the Post Office into a public limited company is to underline the clear separation of the functions of ownership and management. In particular it will make it absolutely clear that the Directors owe their duties to the company and not directly to the Government as owner. This will reinforce the new arm's length relationship between the Government and the Post Office Board.

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what measures he has implemented to ensure that the transfer of Royal Mail Priority Services to Parcelforce does not result in any monopoly services being delivered by Parcelforce. [91735]

Mr. Ian McCartney: No monopoly business is carried by Parcelforce. However, as set out in the White Paper, under the transfer of Priority Services much of the operational activity, at least initially, continues to be carried out by Royal Mail. This raises the possibility of the Post Office monopoly business improperly subsidising wider Parcelforce business in the competitive arena. The Government therefore asked its auditors for the Post Office to look at the business case for the transfer; at the basis on which revenues and costs would be treated under the new arrangements; and, in particular, whether this was on a defensible basis from a competition point of view and with accounting transparency. In the light of the advice from the auditors, the Government have confidence that the arrangements are satisfactory. They will continue to be monitored by the auditors until the Regulator has its own arrangements in place.

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what additional Government services the Government plans to deliver through the sub-post office network. [91748]

Mr. Ian McCartney: The unrivalled reach of the nationwide network of post offices, and the trust in which it is held by its customers, make it ideally suited as a delivery channel for a wide variety of Government business. As at present, Post Office Counters Ltd. will remain free to bid for this business.

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when he plans to introduce legislation to create the Post Office as a public limited company. [91752]

Mr. Ian McCartney: As soon as parliamentary time permits, primary legislation will be brought forward to consolidate the reform of the Post Office and the postal market.

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry over what periods the Post Office will be permitted to borrow under the proposals in the Post Office White Paper. [91750]

Mr. Ian McCartney: The precise terms, including maturity of any borrowing, will depend on the investment concerned and will be discussed with the Post Office as part of the notification and approval process.

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if debt incurred by the Post Office under the proposals in the Post Office White Paper will be accounted for as Government debt. [91743]

Mr. Ian McCartney: Under national accounts definitions, as the Post Office is in the public sector, Post Office debt will score within the Public Sector Net Cash Requirement (previously Public Sector Borrowing Requirement) which is closely related to changes in Public Sector Net Debt.

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry by what mechanism the company referred to at paragraph 18, page 51 of the Post Office White Paper will enforce the duties which it is proposed the directors of that company will owe to that company. [91734]

Mr. Ian McCartney: Once the Post Office has become a public limited company under the Companies Acts, it will be subject to the full range of company law. Its directors will be subject to the legal duties imposed on directors under those Acts.

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how the non-monopoly services of the Post Office will account for the cost of capital tied up in its fixed assets; and how such fixed assets will be valued under the arrangement proposed in the Post Office White Paper. [91737]

Mr. Ian McCartney: The Postal Services Directive 97/67/EC lays down specific requirements about transparency of accounts which address these issues. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has instructed the Post Office to comply with these requirements and will be ensuring that they do so. How the non-monopoly services of the Post Office will account for the cost of capital tied up in its fixed assets, and how such fixed assets will be valued, will be a matter in the first instance for the Board of the Post Office. These accounts will be independently audited and, in due course, will also be subject to scrutiny by the new independent regulator, the Postal Services Commission. All services will be included.

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what power the proposed Post Office Regulator will have to ensure fair competition by the Post Office in the area of those non-monopoly services which are still subject to the universal service obligation. [91744]

Mr. Ian McCartney: The regulator will have a range of powers to ensure that the Post Office competes fairly and does not act anti-competitively, including in the competitive area. It is proposed that the Postal Services Commission will have concurrent powers with the Director-General of Fair Trading to apply competition rules in respect of the Post Office (and other licensed postal operators).

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if the Post Office will be included in the proposed Utilities Bill. [91741]

Mr. Ian McCartney: No. We intend to bring forward separate legislation on the Post Office as soon as Parliamentary time allows.

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what plan he has to ensure that following its conversion to a public limited company Ministers remain accountable to Parliament for the Post Office. [91757]

Mr. Ian McCartney: The current arrangements will remain in place and in fact be strengthened. The Post Office is currently required by the Post Office Act 1969 to provide my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State with its accounts and annual reports and my right hon. Friend is required to lay them before each House. This arrangement will continue. An obligation will also be laid on the Regulator to report annually to my right hon. Friend and this report will also be laid before each House. In addition, the Government have undertaken to report annually to Parliament on the progress of the reforms set out in the White Paper, and particularly on the functioning of the arm's length relationship. The aim will also be to report once the Strategic Plan has been approved, though commercially confidential details of the Plan will not be revealed. But the Government will not be involved in the day to day management or detailed issues, as noted on pages 44–45 of the White Paper.

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what safeguards will be incorporated in the measures proposed in the Post Office White Paper to ensure that the terms of the loan arrangement, other than the rate of interest, are on an arm's length basis. [91742]

Mr. Ian McCartney: The Post Office Board will be clearly accountable for running the business successfully on the basis of a rolling five-year strategic plan agreed with the Government. Any borrowing for growth investments will be on commercial terms. The Government will be responsible for approving annually the five-year rolling strategic plan and approving borrowing for major acquisitions and other growth investments, but otherwise will not be involved in normal management and commercial matters which fall to the Post Office.

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what powers will be given to the Post Office regulator to ensure that the debt:equity ratio of the Post Office non-monopoly services will be similar to those operating generally in the private sector of these markets, under the arrangement proposed in the Post Office White Paper. [91755]

Mr. Ian McCartney: To place the Post Office on a more commercial footing, and one where it can be better benchmarked against its competitors, the balance sheet will be restructured with the Post Office ceasing to hold, and have access to interest from, the present level of accumulated External Financing Limit surpluses. It is planned that the change will take effect on 1 April 2002. During the interim period, the Government will consider with the help of professional advisers the appropriate shape of the balance sheet.

The Regulator will be responsible for ensuring fair competition and that there is no undue cross subsidy from the monopoly to competitive market, nor an abuse of a dominant position. In particular, it is intended that the Regulator will be able to require the Post Office to provide regulatory accounts and other financial information clearly distinguishing between monopoly and competitive services, and in the competitive area, between Universal Service Obligation (USO) and non-USO services. It is also intended that the Regulator will have a power to impose changes in accounting practices if this would facilitate transparency.

Until we have primary legislation, the Regulator will advise my right hon. Friend on these and other matters relating to the Secretary of State's regulatory duties in relation to the Post Office.

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what fee will be paid by the Department of Social Security to sub post offices for administering cash benefit payments under the arrangements applicable from 2003. [91749]

Mr. Ian McCartney: The contractual arrangements between the Benefits Agency and Post Office Counters Ltd. are commercially confidential, as are the contractual arrangements between Post Office Counters Ltd. and certain retail banks under which customers of those banks can access their accounts at post offices.

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry under the proposals in the Post Office White Paper, what measures will be put in place to ensure that charges between the monopoly service provider division of the Post Office and the non-monopoly service provider divisions are arrived at on an arm's length basis; what services will be included in these arrangements; and how they will be valued. [91756]

Mr. Ian McCartney: The Postal Services Directive 97/67/EC lays down specific requirements about transparency of accounts which address these issues. The Secretary of State has instructed the Post Office to comply with these requirements and will be ensuring that they do so. All services will be included. How they will be valued will be a matter in the first instance for the Board of the Post Office. These accounts will be independently audited and, in due course, will also be subject to scrutiny by the new independent regulator, the Postal Services Commission.

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if the Post Office exemption from traffic regulations will apply to its non-monopoly service vehicles under the proposals set out in the Post Office White Paper. [91753]

Mr. Ian McCartney: Post Office privileges which have been granted in the past, including those relating to aspects of traffic regulations, were provided to facilitate the universal service obligations (USO) placed on the Post Office. The USO is not limited to services within the monopoly area. For example, it also covers standard parcels and the registered letter service. The Government have decided that these privileges should remain for now but that they should be kept under review by the Regulator.

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many community sub-post offices there are in the United Kingdom. [91766]

Mr. Ian McCartney: I understand from the Post office that at the end of May 1999 there were 2,082 community sub-post offices in the United Kingdom.

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what borrowing limits his Department will propose be laid down by Parliament for borrowing by the Post Office under the proposed arrangements for borrowing subject to Government approval set out in the Post Office White Paper. [91754]

Mr. Ian McCartney: Under the new framework announced in the White Paper, the Post Office will be able to borrow for growth investments up to an annual limit of £75 million in each of the next five years. The Post Office will be free to seek approval for growth investments costing more than £75 million, as necessary, but the approval of Ministers will be required. The Government will approve Post Office requests for borrowing for these larger investment cases which are consistent with the rolling five-year strategic plan, commercially robust, and pose no undue risk to the taxpayer. The precise terms of any borrowing will depend on the investment concerned.

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list the possible steps being considered by his Department under its proposals to liberalise further the postal market referred to at page 21 of the Post Office White Paper. [91746]

Mr. Ian McCartney: This is a matter to be considered by the new regulatory body, the Postal Services Commission, not the Department. The White Paper makes it clear that the Regulator should be free to consider all appropriate mechanisms.

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list those countries included in his Department's analysis of the postal services of other countries in which the postal services have been reformed in a way similar to that proposed in the Post Office White Paper; and what system of price regulation was adopted, listing in each case the appropriate formula. [91738]

Mr. Ian McCartney: Among the developed countries, Australia, New Zealand, all the Nordic countries, Ireland, Belgium and Austria have now adopted models of a government-owned plc. Of the different systems of price regulation, the information available is as follows:

Australia

Australia Post sets charges which are reviewed by an external body, the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission. The Government may disallow a variation of postage rates for ordinary post within Australia.

Denmark

In the reserved area the Minister of Transport determines the conditions for the fixing of postal charges for inland letters covered by the exclusive right. Tariffs are determined by Post Danmark and are approved on the basis of a price cap model. This consists of the rates being regulated by the percentage development in the gross price index (consumer price index) with deduction of 1 per cent.

Ireland

The Regulator is responsible for sanctioning tariff increases for letter post only.

New Zealand

Maintains a relationship between the price of the standard letter and movements in the Consumer Price Index.

Sweden

There is a price cap on the domestic letter rate for private individuals. The charge to private individuals for delivery of letters weighing up to 500g may be increased by a maximum of the average change in the net price index over a three year period.

Belgium

The postal service provider sets the tariffs and pricing structures for public service activities within the pricing framework laid down in its management contract (with the Government). Price ceilings are subject to the approval of the relevant Government minister.

Mrs. Ray Michie: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he has met representatives of the Post Office to discuss the reduction in the size of the network; and if he will make a statement. [92017]

Mr. Ian McCartney: There have not been any such meetings. The Government remain committed to a nationwide network of post offices, and will be discussing with the Post Office the criteria for access to post offices which we intend to publish by the end of this year. The Regulator will have a duty to monitor performance against these criteria.

Mrs. Ray Michie: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many staff were employed by the Post Office in Scotland for each of the past five years; and what forecast he has made of staff levels for each of the next five years. [92005]

Mr. Ian McCartney: I understand from the Post Office that the numbers of staff employed in Scotland for each of the last five years were as follows:

Year	*Royal Mail*	*Post Office Counters Ltd.*	*Parcelforce*	*Total*
1995	13,286	1,276	920	15,482
1996	13,675	1,270	930	15,875
1997	14,028	1,203	940	16,171
1998	14,872	1,207	950	17,029
June 1999	14,541	1,152	926	16,619

No forecasts of staff levels in Scotland for the next five years are available.

Mrs. Ray Michie: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many sub-post offices in Scotland were closed on a temporary basis in each of the past five years; and how many of these were subsequently re-opened. [92016]

Mr. Ian McCartney: I understand from the Post Office that the numbers of sub-post offices closed in Scotland on a temporary basis and subsequent reopenings in each of the last five years were as follows:

1994–95

29 temporary closures of which two reopened within the year; nine other offices reopened from previous years' closures.

1995–96

17 temporary closures of which three reopened within the year; three other offices reopened from previous years' closures.

1996–97

41 temporary closures of which five reopened within the year; 14 other offices reopened from previous years' closures.

1997–98

35 temporary closures of which four reopened within the year; eight other offices reopened from previous years' closures.

1998–99

44 temporary closures of which 14 reopened within the year; eight other offices reopened from previous years' closures.

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what proposals he has for continuation of free postal services for *(a)* Braille material and *(b)* talking books, as part of his programme of Post Office restructuring. [91949]

Mr. Ian McCartney *[holding answer 19 July 1999]:* As set out in the White Paper on Post Office Reform, the Government believe that there is a genuine need for special services for the blind and has made clear that the Post Office will continue to be obliged to provide them under the reform programme.

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what level of losses sustained by non-monopoly services of the Post Office following its conversion to plc status will be regarded as constituting a subsidy from the monopoly services of the Post Office. [92052]

Mr. Ian McCartney: It will be the responsibility of the Regulator to ensure that any cross-subsidy from the monopoly area to competitive activities is the minimum required, in their opinion, to ensure the continued provision of services required by the universal service obligation at a uniform tariff. It will be for the Regulator to determine the extent to which this is affected, if at all, by plc status.

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry on what date Ministers were advised that the Horizon project should be cancelled. [92134]

Mr. Ian McCartney: The decision to proceed with the Horizon project in a restructured form and without the benefit payment card culminated in an agreement in principle signed between ICL and Post Office Counters Ltd. on 24 May 1999.

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry which Minister has specific responsibility for the Horizon Project. [92067]

Mr. Ian McCartney *[holding answer 20 July 1999]:* I have specific responsibility under the Secretary of State for Post Office issues, including the Post Office's interest in the Horizon project.

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many sub-post offices in *(a)* urban, *(b)* suburban and *(c)* rural areas are provided with a guaranteed minimum level of income. [92413]

Mr. Ian McCartney *[holding answer 22 July 1999]:* I understand from the Post Office that, as part of the new subpostmasters remuneration system, all sub-post offices receive some level of guaranteed minimum income. The system, which was specifically designed to help support smaller, mainly rural offices, includes a fixed element and an element which varies according to the amount of business a sub-post office handles. The fixed element is a larger proportion of the overall pay for small offices.

Mr. Kirkwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what payments are made per transaction to post offices for processing each DSS benefit payment; and what payments will be made where post offices act as agents for banks and individual payments not made via automated credit transfer into bank accounts. [92346]

Mr. Ian McCartney: The remuneration arrangements between Post Office Counters Ltd. and subpostmasters and subpostmistresses are commercially confidential.

Mr. Kirkwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what is the average number of transactions of DSS benefit payments processed by post offices broken down by category of post office; and what estimates he has made of the forecast decrease in transactions as automated credit transfer is encouraged. [92347]

Mr. Ian McCartney: I understand from the Post Office that the number and percentage in 1998–99 of DSS benefit payment transactions processed by category of post office are as follows:

	Number of transactions	*Percentage*
Crown offices	181,469,895	23.9
Sub-post offices	572,503,350	75.4
Community offices	4,555,729	0.6
Other	759,288	0.1

Existing paper-based methods of paying benefits at post offices are to be progressively phased out between 2003 and 2005 in favour of more modern means of payment based on the existing Automated Credit Transfer system.

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many *(a)* post offices and *(b)* sub-post offices there are in each parliamentary constituency in England and Wales; how many have been opened in each of the last five years; and how many have been closed. [92460]

Mr. Ian McCartney: I understand from the Post Office that it is not possible to provide figures for post offices and sub-post offices opened and closed in each of the last five years in each parliamentary constituency in England and Wales. However, I will shortly be placing in the Library a list of the numbers as at the end of March 1998 of Crown post offices and sub-post offices in each parliamentary constituency in England and Wales. I will forward a copy of this list to the hon. Member as soon as is practicable.

Insolvency

Mr. Love: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what research he has commissioned during the current review of company law into the services provided by insolvency practitioners and their cost; when the results of that research will be published; and if he will make a statement. [91783]

Mr. Ian McCartney: A comprehensive review of company law was announced in March 1998 with the aim of a final report in the Spring of 2001. A consultation document on the strategic framework was published earlier this year with the intention to publish a summary of responses in the autumn.

In February this year a separate review, joint with the Treasury, of company rescue mechanisms was announced which will include consideration of the cost of and access to the service of insolvency practitioners. This review is expected to be completed by the end of the year.

Miners (Respiratory Diseases)

Mr. Trickett: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what guidelines his Department has set for the length of time which former miners suffering 80 per cent. emphysema should expect to wait for a spirometer test. [92121]

Mr. Battle: This is the longest running personal injury action in the UK and the development of an agreed assessment process, which can handle the 77,000 claims received, has inevitably taken some considerable time. However, as soon as agreement in principle on spirometry testing was reached in March we awarded the contract for the programme of spirometry testing throughout Scotland, England and Wales to Healthcall Services Limited. This is principally to help prioritise claims for the full medical assessment process, but will also enable us to extend offers of interim payments to new categories of miners and, in some cases, make full and final offers. Some 3,300 claimants have already been assessed, and we anticipate that the majority of the remaining existing claimants will be completed by the Autumn, with the most elderly being considered first. This should help ensure that those with severe disabilities are invited to be tested at an early stage.

Airlines

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when he expects to receive further evidence from the Director General of Fair Trading about the proposed alliance between American Airlines and British Airways. [91219]

Dr. Howells *[holding answer 13 July 1999]:* My officials have held a number of discussions with officials from the Office of Fair Trading and I have met the Director-General of Fair Trading three times to discuss this case. I am not yet at a stage at which I can reach a final decision.

Gender Discrimination

Mr. Gorrie: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many people in Scotland have *(a)* taken cases alleging gender discrimination to an employment tribunal and *(b)* had their cases upheld in the last 12 months for which figures are available and in the three previous years. [92129]

Mr. Ian McCartney: The number of people in Scotland who have taken cases alleging gender discrimination to an Employment Tribunal over the period 1 July 1998 to 30 June 1999 was 192 of which 11 were upheld. The following table provides the figures for the last three financial years.

Year	*Applications*	*Upheld*
1996–97	196	20
1997–98	240	28
1998–99	196	16

Electronic Correspondence

Mr. Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when he will make it his policy to reply to electronic correspondence electronically; and if he will make a statement. [92028]

Mr. Byers: It is already my policy to respond to electronic correspondence electronically where practicable.

Genetic Testing

Dr. Gibson: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what plans he has to introduce restrictions on the use of genetic testing by employers; and if he will make a statement. [92251]

Mr. Byers: The Government are considering carefully the Human Genetics Advisory Commission's report on "The Implications of Genetic Testing for Employment", which was published on 14 July 1999. We intend to publish our response in due course.

Biotechnology

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if the Minister for Science has completed his examination of the growth of biotechnology clusters announced on 16 April; and if he plans to publish the report of the findings. [92246]

Mr. Battle: The study led by my noble Friend the Minister for Science on biotechnology clusters has been completed and the report will be published shortly.

Statutory Instruments

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, pursuant to his answer of 19 July 1999, *Official Report*, column *374*, on statutory instruments, for what reasons the cost of providing the information would be disproportionate. [92478]

Mr. Byers *[holding answer 22 July 1999]:* It would have exceeded £500.

Ilisu Dam

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will request from the Swiss Government, their consent to place in the Library their environmental impact assessment into the Ilisu Dam project. [92757]

Mr. Wilson: The Environmental Impact Appraisal Report (EIAR) is being prepared for the company bidding for this project; supplemental reports are being prepared for the Swiss authorities. We have already asked the company and the Swiss authorities whether they are prepared to allow ECGD to release these documents. They have advised that they are not prepared to agree release at the present time. We understand that they intend to release the reports when they have been finalised.

BNFL

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what is the value of BNFL's operations in the United States of America; and if he will make a statement on future market opportunities for BNFL in the United States. [92815]

Mr. Battle: In 1997, the turnover of Westinghouse's nuclear business—which BNFL acquired for $900 million along with Morrison Knudsen in March this year—was $1.1 billion. BNFL's US subsidiary, BNFL Inc, earned revenue of $67.6 million. BNFL's current US order book is worth a potential $9 billion if all contract options are exercised. BNFL has been set the target of enhancing its financial performance further through material and progressive growth in profits generated from ordinary activities. Its success in winning an increasing share of the US clean-up business will help contribute towards this goal.

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what method is being used by BNFL to put a value on its United States contracts for the purpose of Government proposals to sell its stake in the company. [92816]

Mr. Battle: BNFL has been set the target of increasing the overall contribution made by its US business to BNFL profits, and of increasing towards 15 per cent. the proportion of BNFL profits derived from the US business.

MOX Shipments

Dr. Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, pursuant to the answer to the hon. Member for Blaenau Gwent (Mr. Smith) of 29 June 1999, *Official Report*, column *116*, on MOX shipments, if he will list the qualifications and career experience of the technical experts advising on the process of separating plutonium from MOX fuel. [92761]

Mr. Battle *[holding answer 23 July 1999]:* I refer my hon. Friend to the answer given by my hon. Friend the Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, to my hon. Friend the Member for Blaenau Gwent (Mr. Smith), 7 July 1999, *Official Report*, column *578*. The advice in that reply was given by the Head of the Safeguards Office in the Department of Trade and Industry who has a first class honours degree in chemistry. This official worked initially for the Ministry of Defence at the Atomic Weapons Establishment, Aldermaston, dealing with plutonium chemistry, measurement methods and underground nuclear testing. He then moved to the UKAEA's Harwell Laboratory, where he led work on the development of radiometric instrumentation for the non-destructive measurement of nuclear materials. Before moving to the DTI as Head of the Radiation Dosimetry Branch of the National Physical Laboratory, this official was responsible for the UK's long-term research and development programme concerning the management and disposal of radioactive wastes at the then Department of the Environment. The official has been chairman of the IAEA's Standing Advisory Group on Safeguards Implementation since August 1996.

Competitiveness Indices

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what are his Department's currently preferred indices of competitiveness; and what their levels were in May of each year since 1979. [92561]

Mr. Byers: The Competitiveness White Paper, published on 16 December 1998, announced the Government's intention to develop a set of competitiveness indicators to measure the UK's progress. This work is in hand and will be published in due course.

Unfair Dismissals

Mr. Jenkins: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many and what proportion of *(a)* men and *(b)* women who have appealed to an employment tribunal in respect of unfair dismissal during the last 12 months have had their claim upheld. [92510]

Mr. Ian McCartney: Between 1 July 1998 and 30 June 1999, the Employment Tribunals received a total of 35,017 applications for unfair dismissal. Of those determined at a tribunal hearing the following numbers were upheld:

	Male	*Female*
Total determined	3,585	1,770
Numbers successful	1,493	791

Arms Exports (Africa)

Mr. Menzies Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many licences Her Majesty's Government have *(a)* granted and *(b)* refused for the export of arms to (i) Zimbabwe, (ii) Uganda and (iii) Rwanda for the period 1 January 1998 to the present day; and if he will make a statement. [91333]

Dr. Howells: The entry in the relevant legislation under which the export of goods is controlled is known as their rating. The Export Control Organisation's computer databases have been interrogated and the following results were obtained. Between 1 January 1998 and 7 July 1999, 46 Standard Individual Export Licences (SIELs) and 23 Open Individual Export Licences (OIELs) were issued covering the export to consignees or end-users in Rwanda, Uganda or Zimbabwe of goods subject to export control by being listed in Part III of Schedule 1 to the Export of Goods (Control) Order 1994, the so-called Military List.

In the same period, two applications for such SIELs were refused; no applications for such OIELs were refused in full.

Individual licences may cover a range of goods with various ratings and OIELs may also cover a range of countries. Where this is so, the licence is included in the table in the total for all of the relevant ratings and/or countries.

Individual Licences issued between 1 January 1998 and 7 July 1999 covering the export to Rwanda, Uganda and Zimbabwe of goods on the Military List

Rating	*Number of SIELs issued covering goods with this rating*	*Number of applications refused for such SIELs*	*Number of OIELs issued covering goods with this rating*
Rwanda			
PL5006	1	0	0
Uganda			
ML2	1	0	0
ML3	2	0	0
ML6	2	0	0
ML11	1	0	1
ML15	0	0	1
Zimbabwe			
ML1	11	0	3
ML2	7	0	2
ML3	5	1	4
ML4	1	1	0
ML5	3	0	0
ML6	3	0	3
ML10	4	0	4
ML11	7	1	4
ML13	1	1	2
ML15	1	0	1

Individual Licences issued between 1 January 1998 and 7 July 1999 covering the export to Rwanda, Uganda and Zimbabwe of goods on the Military List

Rating	*Number of SIELs issued covering goods with this rating*	*Number of applications refused for such SIELs*	*Number of OIELs issued covering goods with this rating*
ML22	3	0	0
PL5002	0	0	3
PL5017	4	0	0
PL5018	1	0	2
PL5021	2	0	0

This information does not cover any Media OIELs that may have been issued during this period. Media OIELs authorise the export to all destinations of protective clothing, mainly for the protection of aid agency workers and journalists, when working in areas of conflict. This information should be considered in light of the answer given by the then Minister for Small Firms, Trade and Industry my hon. Friend the Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Mrs. Roche) to my hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley (Caroline Flint) on 30 October 1997, *Official Report*, columns *870–71*.

Certain Open General Export Licences cover the export to specified countries, including Uganda and Zimbabwe, of certain goods on the Military List. Copies of all Open General Export Licences valid at any time during the period are in the Library of the House.

Premium Telephone Lines

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what plans he has to review the regulatory framework governing the use by businesses of premium telephone lines; and if he will make a statement. [92276]

Mr. Wills: The Independent Committee for the Supervision of Standards of Telephone Information Services (ICSTIS) has responsibility for regulating premium rate services. ICSTIS enforces an effective Code of Practice which has provisions to ensure that consumers are given adequate information to enable them to take informed decisions about the use of premium rate services. The Code ensures that the costs of calls to premium rate lines used by businesses must be given in advertisements and has provisions limiting the time spent by callers on these services. ICSTIS and Oftel are planning to review the regulatory framework for premium rate services later this year to ensure that consumers continue to benefit from the right level of protection.

Money Lenders

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what plans he has to review the regulatory framework governing the activities of private money lenders; and if he will make a statement. [92275]

Dr. Howells: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State published last week the Government's Consumer Strategy White Paper "Modern markets: confident consumers", which sets out many proposals to improve and review consumer credit legislation. These include:

reviewing the consumer credit licensing system;

requiring wealth warnings to be included in documents given to prospective customers instead of transient advertisements on radio, television and cinema;

changing the wealth warning required in advertisements for equity release schemes;

changing the way the annual percentage rate of charge (APR) of the total charge of credit is calculated in the UK so that it is calculated on the same basis throughout the European Union;

changing the way the APR for low-start mortgages is calculated; and

reviewing rules on extortionate credit.

A copy of the White Paper is available from the Library of the House.

Compliance Costs

Mr. Chidgey: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what reductions were achieved in the compliance costs of regulation administered by his Department and its public bodies for the last year for which data are available; what mechanisms exist for monitoring the post-implementation costs of such regulation; and if he has established targets for reduction in the compliance costs of regulation administered by his Department and its public bodies. [92314]

Mr. Byers: Details of regulations which impose compliance costs on business are published in the Department's regulatory impact assessments copies of which are placed in the Libraries of both Houses. A summary of all regulatory impact assessments published by the Department and the other regulatory Departments in Whitehall are published every six months by way of Command Paper, and are available on a monthly basis on the Cabinet Office Regulatory Impact Unit's website. Where appropriate, regulatory impact assessments also contain information on how a regulation will be monitored.

The Department published details on its regulatory activity in its Departmental Expenditure Plans Report (Cm. 4211). Recent examples of measures already taken or planned to reduce burdens on business include:

the establishment of a new Small Business Service which will offer smaller firms practical assistance to help them meet their regulatory obligations. Consultation on its proposed role began on 30 June;

consultation on proposals for a new service to help new small employers get to grips with running a payroll, to be operated through the Small Business Service;

plans to consult on increasing the threshold below which companies need not have their accounts independently audited from its current level of £350,000; and

proposals to amend the Working Time Regulations to give more flexibility and to reduce the detailed record-keeping for employers.

Although there is no arbitrary target for reducing the compliance costs of regulation we are committed to minimising the burden of regulation on business. In addition all Departments are required to make an assessment of the risks, costs and benefits of any regulatory proposal which has an impact on businesses, charities and voluntary bodies before they decide to act. Without an assessment of this kind there can be no collective agreement to a regulatory proposal.

Government Patents

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list the Government patents held by his Department. [93078]

Dr. Howells: There are 15 patents currently in force for which my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry is the proprietor. Their details are as follows:

GB2325266: Blind or Curtain

GB2323496: Measurement of Effective Radiating Area of a Transducer

GB2309777: Interferometer

GB2307052: Real Time Radiation Resistant Meter

GB2293162: Apparatus for Verifying the Performance of Optical Fibre Measurement Equipment

GB2289345: Optical Lenses

GB2285150: Timing Apparatus

GB2278738: Electromagnetic Machine

GB2278434: A Broadband Interferometer

GB2265525: Method of Allocating Broadcasting Criteria in a Network

GB2226443: Helium-Neon Lasers

GB2238449: Improvements in or relating to T. D. M. A. Systems

GB2215847: Magnetometers Using High Temperature Superconductors

GB2211930: Improvements in or relating to Monitoring Pyrogenic Processes

EP0862745: Nuclear Magnetic Resonance Level Gauging Device.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Gender Impact Assessments

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will list the subject of each gender impact assessment drawn up by his Department since June 1997, indicating in each case whether the outcome has been *(a)* put out to consultation and *(b)* published. [91999]

Angela Eagle: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given to her on 22 July 1999, *Official Report*, column *636*, by my right hon. Friend the Minister for Women.

As part of the Government's commitment to ensuring that its policies are relevant to the lives that people live today, this Department is working closely with the Women's Unit on gender issues. Our approach to developing policy initiatives is consistent with the principles set out in the joint document from the Cabinet Office, Home Office and Department for Education and Employment, "Policy Appraisal for Equal Treatment", which was published in November 1998.

Family Credit

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many families claiming family credit have *(a)* one child, *(b)* two children, *(c)* three children, *(d)* four children, *(e)* five children and *(f)* six children or more; and if he will break these numbers down by regions. [92574]

Angela Eagle: The information is in the table.

Number of children in families receiving family credit by Government Office Region as at February 1999

	All children	Number of children 1	2	3	4	5	6 or more
Great Britain	788.1	301.5	281.5	135.0	49.7	14.2	6.3
North East	51.0	20.8	19.1	8.2	2.0	0.7	*0.1
North West	120.8	47.0	43.7	20.0	7.0	2.3	0.8
Yorkshire and Humberside	92.8	34.2	34.2	15.9	5.8	1.9	0.8
East Midlands	64.0	23.6	23.1	11.4	4.3	1.1	0.5
West Midlands	83.7	30.3	28.6	15.3	6.3	2.1	1.0
Eastern	52.0	19.4	18.6	8.6	3.9	1.0	0.6
London	60.2	21.6	20.3	11.2	4.7	1.4	0.9
South East	71.9	26.1	25.2	13.1	5.2	1.7	0.6
South West	62.4	23.0	22.0	11.8	4.4	0.6	0.6
Wales	49.3	19.4	18.1	8.3	2.8	0.5	*0.2
Scotland	80.0	36.0	28.6	11.2	3.2	0.8	*0.2

Notes:
1. Numbers are in thousands and rounded to the nearest hundred. Figures marked "*" are subject to a high degree of sampling error and should only be used as a guide to the current situation.
2. Cases are allocated to each Government Office Region by matching the postcode against the 1999 version of the Postcode Directory.
3. Children are defined as aged 0–18.

Source:
Family Credit 5 per cent. sample of awards

Housing Benefit

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what new instructions have been issued regarding counting money in claimants' current accounts as capital for the purpose of determining entitlement to housing benefit. [92575]

Angela Eagle: We have not issued any new instructions regarding counting money in claimants' current accounts as capital for the purpose of determining entitlement to Housing Benefit. The policy remains that all holdings with a clear monetary value are treated as a claimant's capital. This includes the amount held in their current account after offsetting any amounts of income paid into the account used in the assessment of Housing Benefit entitlement.

Disability Living Allowance Advisory Board

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what recent studies have been commissioned by the Disability Living Allowance Advisory Board relating to the needs of severely and profoundly deaf people; and what recommendations from those studies his Department has acted on. [92562]

Mr. Bayley: The Disability Living Allowance Advisory Board (DLAAB) is an advisory body and does not itself commission work. However, in 1998 the Board was commissioned by the Department of Social Security to undertake a study on deafness in children and young adults. This work will be completed shortly.

In addition, the Department more recently commissioned the Board to undertake a study of deaf-blind people who had claimed DLA. The Department is currently acting on certain findings arising from this work, in particular recommendations on improving evidence gathering on claims from deaf-blind people and on the need to increase the understanding of the problems arising from the combination of deafness and blindness amongst those responsible for administrating Disability Living Allowance and Attendance Allowance.

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many members of the Disability Living Allowance Advisory Board are *(a)* deaf and *(b)* have a professional specialism in hearing impairment. [92563]

Mr. Bayley: The Disability Living Allowance Advisory Board has one member who has a severe hearing impairment. She is consultant psychiatrist in mental health services for deaf people and has been a trustee of the Royal National Institute for Deaf People since 1996.

Benefits (Scotland)

Mr. Salmond: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if, for each state benefit, he will forecast the number of claimants and total cost by benefit for Scotland for the next three years together with forecasts for *(a)* Scotland's pro-rata share of the United Kingdom administration costs and *(b)* budgeted costs for the central and local administration and the branch network for facilities in Scotland. [92390]

Mr. Timms: I refer the hon. Member to the reply I gave the right hon. Friend the Member for Swansea, West (Mr. Williams) on 23 July 1999, *Official Report*, column *673*.

Mr. Salmond: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what was the level of spending on social security in Scotland in each of the last five years *(a)* in total and *(b)* as a percentage of the United Kingdom total broken down to show spending on (i) benefit payments, (ii) Scotland's pro-rata share of United Kingdom administration costs and (iii) actual spending on central and local administration and the branch network for facilities in Scotland. [92389]

Mr. Timms: DSS accounts for its administrative costs operationally (by Agency and Business Unit). It does not maintain accounting records by geographical territory and it is therefore not possible to provide reliable expenditure information covering all Departmental operations in the format requested. An estimate of Social Security Benefit Expenditure in Scotland in the past five years can be found in the table.

Estimated Social Security benefit expenditure in Scotland (and as a percentage of Great Britain expenditure)

Year	Expenditure (£ million)	Percentage
1994–95	7,970	10.0
1995–96	8,300	9.9
1996–97	8,680	9.9
1997–98	8,920	10.0
1998–99	9,120	10.0

Notes:
1. Expenditure excludes payments of certain benefits to people living overseas.
2. Expenditure figures have been rounded to nearest £10 million.

Source:
The above figures are consistent with those published in the Departmental Report 1999.

Pensions

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what the difference was in each year since 1980 between the amount by which pensions would have increased for married couples, with the spouse as a dependent adult, if they had been based on *(a)* the retail prices index and *(b)* average earnings. [92485]

Mr. Timms: The information is in the table. Information is also provided on what the rate would have been if the link uprating by the higher of earnings or prices had been retained.

Basic pension for married couples including dependency increase

£s per week

Uprating date	Actual rate paid increased by Retail Prices Index	Rate if increased by Average Earnings	Rate if increased by higher of earnings or prices
November 1980	43.45	43.45	43.45
November 1981	47.35	48.40	48.40
November 1982	52.55	52.45	53.75
November 1983	54.50	57.00	58.40
November 1984	57.30	59.85	61.35
November 1985	61.30	65.05	66.70
July 1986	61.95	68.00	69.75
April 1987	63.25	71.85	73.65
April 1988	65.90	77.45	79.40
April 1989	69.80	84.25	86.35
April 1990	75.10	92.40	94.75
April 1991	83.25	101.20	105.05
April 1992	86.70	108.90	113.05
April 1993	89.80	114.10	118.50
April 1994	92.10	117.65	122.15
April 1995	94.10	121.65	126.30
April 1996	97.75	125.05	131.25
April 1997	99.80	130.30	136.75
April 1998	103.40	135.65	142.35
April 1999	106.70	142.30	149.30

Notes:
1. The Retail Prices Index (all items) has been used as published by the Office for National Statistics
2. Average Earnings Index Whole Economy (Non Seasonally Adjusted) as published by the Office for National Statistics
3. Figures have been rounded to the nearest 5 pence at each uprating
4. Figures based on a man plus a dependent wife both aged under age 80 where the man has 100 per cent. entitlement

Occupational Pensions

Mr. Ian Stewart: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security when the Opinion of the Advocate General in the case of Preston and Others *v* Wolverhampton Healthcare NHS and Others (Case Number C78/98) will be published; and what is the reason for the delay. [92536]

Mr. Timms: The European Court of Justice has indicated that the Advocate General is due to issue his opinion on 14 September 1999 in the case of Preston and Others *v* Wolverhampton Healthcare NHS Trust and Others (case number C78/98).

The Advocate General had been expected to issue his opinion on the case on 6 July 1999. The date on which an opinion is issued is a matter for the Advocate General. We are unaware of the reason for the delay on this particular case.

Lone Parents

Dr. Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will make a statement on the impact of the New Deal on the incomes of lone parents who have been helped into work. [92473]

Angela Eagle: The New Deal for Lone Parents provides practical help and advice for lone parents on Income Support who want to make the move into work. Since it was launched, the service has helped over 16,500 lone parents into work.

In addition, a range of new measures will mean that lone parents will be even better off in work. Key initiatives include; the National Minimum Wage; the new 10p starting rate of income tax, from which people on low incomes gain up to £2.88 a week; and the Working Families Tax Credit which, from October, will guarantee a minimum income of £200 a week for every family in full-time work.

Analysis of benefit administration data for a sample of around 300 lone parents who moved into work and on to Family Credit following participation in the New Deal for Lone Parents as at [illegible]h 1998 showed that they were, on average, £40 a [illegible]tter off.

Incapacity Benefit

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many *(a)* new claims of invalidity benefit were made in each year since 1995, *(b)* exits from incapacity benefit to other work or benefits were made in each year since 1995 and *(c)* claimants of incapacity benefit were resident in each local authority in (i) Tyne and Wear, (ii) the counties of Northumberland and Durham, and (iii) the area covered by the former county of Cleveland in each year since 1995. [92225]

Mr. Bayley: The number of new claims which resulted in an award of Incapacity Benefit, and the number of people leaving Incapacity Benefit for each year since it was introduced in April 1995 are set out in the table.

The main reasons for leaving Incapacity Benefit are receipt of a medical certificate advising that the recipient can return to work, a decision by the adjudication officer that the person does not satisfy the medical test of incapacity (the all work test) and the award of State Retirement Pension. It is estimated that every year about 100,000 people who have been sick for 28 weeks or more

leave Incapacity Benefit voluntarily for work. However, detailed information on the destinations of Incapacity Benefit leavers is not routinely collected and it is not known how many actually return to work in any year.

Incapacity Benefit recipients

	Spells commencing	*Spells Terminating*
13 April 1995 to 31 March 1996	508,600	558,900
1 April 1996 to 31 March 1997	514,100	568,000
1 April 1997 to 31 March 1998	481,600	560,200

Notes:
1. Figures are from a 1 per cent. sample of claims to Incapacity Benefit made in Great Britain.
2. A person may commence or leave benefit more than once during a year.
3. Figures are for all rates of Incapacity Benefit (IB). Incapacity Benefit replaced Sickness Benefit and Invalidity Benefit from 13 April 1995.
4. Figures for IB spells terminating during the period includes recipients who automatically transfer to State Retirement Pension.

The table below gives the number of Incapacity Benefit recipients in local authority areas in Tyne and Wear, Durham, Northumberland and the former county of Cleveland as at the end of February each year from 1996 to 1998. Comparable figures are not available for 1995.

Incapacity Benefit Recipients by County, Metropolitan or Unitary Authority in the North-East

	29 February 1996	*28 February 1997*	*28 February 1998*
Tyne & Wear			
Gateshead	12,351	13,241	10,901
Newcastle upon Tyne	12,554	13,661	11,348
North Tyneside	9,487	9,729	8,511
South Tyneside	8,612	9,294	7,700
Sunderland	19,116	20,049	16,581
Durham			
Chester-le-Street	3,007	3,300	2,736
Darlington	3,860	4,185	3,323
Derwentside	5,363	6,138	4,944
Durham	4,307	4,600	3,629
Easington	11,234	12,169	9,913
Sedgefield	5,972	6,501	5,615
Teesdale	772	883	730
Wear Valley	3,859	4,202	3,690
Northumberland			
Alnwick	1,016	1,278	952
Berwick-upon-Tweed	995	859	709
Blyth Valley	3,982	4,416	3,365
Castle Morpeth	1,666	1,998	1,621
Tynedale	1,768	1,931	1,641
Wansbeck	3,901	4,418	3,427
Former County of Cleveland			
Hartlepool UA	6,095	6,294	5,391
Middlesborough UA	7,232	7,455	6,223
Redcar & Cleveland UA	8,309	9,031	7,036
Stockton-on-Tees UA	7,862	8,548	7,052

Notes:
1. Figures are from a 5 per cent. sample of the computer and exclude a small number of cases held clerically.
2. Figures are also subject to a rating factor to account for missing postcodes.

Winter Fuel Payments

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) how many winter fuel payments have been made in respect of last winter; how many of the payment cheques issued have not been cashed; and how many payments are still due to be paid; [92851]

(2) if he will list the number of winter fuel payments and their value made in each month in the current year. [92853]

Mr. Timms: The administration of Winter Fuel Payments is a matter for Peter Mathison, the Chief Executive of the Benefits Agency. He will write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Peter Mathison to Mr. David Willetts, dated 23 July 1999:

The Secretary of State for Social Security has asked me to reply to your recent parliamentary questions asking how many winter fuel payments (WFP) have been made in respect of last winter; how many of the payment cheques have not been cashed and how many payments are still due to be paid. You also asked if he would list the number of winter fuel payments (and their value) made in each month in the year.

I am unable to provide all of the information in the format requested, as this would only be available at disproportionate cost. The Benefits Agency (BA) does not collect statistics on the number of uncashed payments.

Delivery of the payments was broadly similar to the previous winter and about 10 million payments were automatically issued last winter to eligible customers. This figure does not include those customers who were identified as entitled to a WFP at a later date because of a retrospective award of a qualifying benefit or those whose benefits were maintained clerically.

Approximately 1.4 million £50 payments were issued automatically to pensioners receiving Income Support (IS) or income-based Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) by the end of November 1998. A further 8.6 million £20 or £10 payments were issued to other eligible pensioners by the end of January 1999. Around 3.4 million of the £20 or £10 payments were issued via Automated Credit Transfer to the customer's bank account, 5.2 million were

sent to Post Offices for issue along with the weekly pension payment and the remainder issued via girocheque or payable order directly to the customer's address.

BA records indicate that payments have been issued to all customers where the information held suggested entitlement. BA offices will investigate claims from customers who may have expected a payment, but did not receive one, if they contact the office which normally deals with their pension or benefit.

Approximately 113,000 of the payments issued to Post Offices were returned to BA offices without being cashed. Staff investigated the reason for non-collection (for example, death of the pensioner or prolonged hospitalisation); the vast majority of these have now been re-issued.

I hope this is helpful.

Pensioners

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what were the numbers of *(a)* single pensioners and *(b)* married couple pensioners in each year since 1980. [92486]

Mr. Timms: Information is not available in the format requested. State Retirement Pensions are paid to individuals. Category A pension is payable on a person's own contribution record and Category B pension is paid to a married woman (or a widow) on her husband's insurance record. It is not possible to identify someone's marital status from the category of pension. Such information as is available is in the table.

Retirement pensioners by gender November 1980 to March 1999

Millions

	Men and Women	*Men*	*Women*
November 1980	9.1	3.2	5.9
June 1981	9.2	3.2	6.0
May 1982	9.4	3.2	6.1
March 1983	9.4	3.2	6.2
March 1984	9.5	3.2	6.3
March 1985	9.6	3.2	6.4
March 1986	9.8	3.3	6.5
September 1987	9.9	3.4	6.6
March 1988	10.0	3.4	6.6
March 1989	10.0	3.4	6.6
September 1990	10.2	3.5	6.7
March 1991	10.2	3.5	6.7
March 1992	10.2	3.5	6.7
March 1993	10.2	3.5	6.7
March 1994	10.3	3.6	6.7
March 1995	10.3	3.6	6.7
March 1996	10.4	3.7	6.8
March 1997	10.6	3.8	6.8
March 1998	10.8	3.9	6.9
March 1999	10.9	4.0	6.9

Notes:

1. Figures have been rounded to the nearest hundred thousand and shown in millions.
2. Figures include pensioners resident in GB and overseas but exclude Northern Ireland.
3. Figures may not total due to rounding.

Source:

Pensions Strategy Computer System (PSCS), 5 per cent. sample of "live" cases. Prior to March 1996 the figures are based on a 10 per cent. sample.

Departmental Costs (Scotland)

Mr. Salmond: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will list the amounts his Department and its agencies spends on *(a)* running costs, *(b)* wage costs and *(c)* other administrative costs for those facilities and staff based in Scotland; indicating the headquarters administration costs and the total costs for the branch network. [92357]

Mr. Timms: DSS accounts for its administrative costs operationally (by Agency and Business Unit). It does not maintain accounting records by geographical territory and it is therefore not possible to provide reliable expenditure information in the format requested. For information on the Benefits Agency in Scotland, I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave the hon. Member for Angus (Mr. Welsh) on 16 July 1999, *Official Report*, columns *349–50*.

Public Appointments

Mr. Singh: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) how many appointments to quangos he made between *(a)* 1 June 1997 and 31 May 1998 and *(b)* 1 June 1998 and 31 May 1999; and in each case of those how many were members of Britain's (i) Asian and (ii) ethnic minority communities; [92142]

(2) how many appointments to public bodies were made by his Department in *(a)* 1997–98 and *(b)* 1998–99, broken down by (i) gender and (ii) ethnicity; and if he will make a statement. [92514]

Mr. Timms: The information is in the table.

Details of all [1] appointments made to this Department's Non-Departmental Public Bodies (NDPBs)

	1 June 1997 to 31 May 1998	*1 June 1998 to 31 May 1999*
Total	190	142
Male	119	88
Female	71	54
Asian	10	3
Other ethnic minorities	7	3

[1] Includes appointments to the Department's Tribunal NDPBs, made by the Lord Chancellor or President of the Independent Tribunal Service.

The overall reduction in the proportion of ethnic minority appointments made to this Department's public bodies has been caused by the fact that there have been no new non-judicial appointments to the Independent Tribunal Service (ITS). This is because ITS is to be replaced by The Appeals Service, which will only comprise of judicial appointees, on 1 April 1999. Non-judicial ITS appointments currently make up 69 per cent. of all this Department's public appointments. While effort is made to ensure social diversity on our remaining public bodies, the constitution of these bodies restricts the pool from which suitable candidates can be sought. For example, legislation governing war pensions committees stipulates that members should be drawn from ex-service organisations. We have two overall commitments for equal opportunities and public appointments:

the equal representation of women and men, pro-rata representation of members of ethnic minority groups, and increased participation of disabled people; and

the appointment on merit, using fair selection procedures, which recognise non-traditional career patterns as suitable qualifications for appointment.

This Department's plan on equal opportunities was published on 25 May 1999, in the document "Quangos: Opening Up Public Appointments", and was deposited in

the Library. This plan sets objectives and robust targets for improving the representation of women from 36 per cent. towards 50 per cent., from 5.8 per cent. towards 7.5 per cent. for people from ethnic minority groups, and that people with disabilities are appropriately represented.

Social Security (Scotland)

Mr. Salmond: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will list the additional (i) headquarters functions, (ii) buildings, (iii) computer systems and (iv) other administrative functions which would be required for a separate Scottish social security system on the basis that the system inherited his Department's staff, buildings and systems in Scotland. [92676]

Mr. Timms: No. Social security is a reserved matter handled on a GB-wide basis and there are no plans to change this. The information requested is therefore not available and could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

TREASURY

Low-paid Workers

Mr. MacShane: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will estimate the total cash value of *(a)* the extra money paid to low-paid workers as a result of the introduction of the minimum wage in 1999–2000 and *(b)* the increase in child benefit in 1999–2000. [91226]

Mr. Milburn *[holding answer 13 July 1999]:* It is not possible to give a cash value for the extra money paid to low-paid workers as a result of the introduction of the minimum wage. However, the Low Pay Commission estimated in its first report that the average increase in income for those affected by the minimum wage would be 30 per cent.

The estimated total cash value of the increase in child benefit between 1998–99 and 1999–2000 is £0.9 billion.

Tax Credits

Mr. Webb: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer when the Inland Revenue will begin to publicise the Working Families Tax Credit and the Disabled Person's Tax Credit. [91830]

Dawn Primarolo: Plans are already in hand to launch a high profile publicity campaign in early September. The campaign will consist of TV and national press advertising, leaflets and posters.

NIRS2

Mr. Rendel: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what plans he has to instruct the Inland Revenue to consult with pension providers in respect of the proposed NIRS2 compensation package. [92146]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 20 July 1999]:* The Government are considering the content of the Public Accounts Committee report, "Delays to the new National Insurance Recording System". A full response will be given to the Public Accounts Committee on all recommendations. Meanwhile, the Inland Revenue is in regular contact with the pensions industry.

Contributions Agency

Mr. Sarwar: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if staff at the Contributions Agency aged 60 years or over were allowed to continue in employment on a year-to-year basis until the age of 65, prior to the Agency's transfer from the Department of Social Security. [92202]

Dawn Primarolo: In July 1996, the Contributions Agency (CA) advised its staff that they were considering changing the normal retirement age because the Agency was faced with a need to reduce staff numbers. After lengthy consultation with Trade Union Side, the CA gave notice in August 1997 that with effect from 31 July 1998 the normal retirement age for all staff would be 60. As a transitional measure, people could be retained for up to 12 months, but not beyond age 62 for people at pay bands B2 and B3 (equivalent to Executive Officer level); and not beyond age 65 for people in pay bands up to and including B1 (equivalent to Administrative Officer level). No extensions of service were to be given beyond 31 July 1999.

Tobacco Products

Mr. Cox: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what was the tax revenue raised from tobacco products in 1998. [92240]

Dawn Primarolo: The amount of tax revenue (excise duty and VAT) raised from tobacco products in 1998 was £10,090 million.

Value Added Tax has been estimated from Office for National Statistics figures for household final consumption expenditure on tobacco.

Special Advisers

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will list the sums paid to the Exchequer by political parties reimbursing the Government for the cost of services supplied by special advisers to backbenchers of the governing party *(a)* from 1 May 1987 to 1 May 1997 and *(b)* since 1 May 1997. [92074]

Ms Hewitt *[holding answer 21 July 1999]:* I refer the hon. Gentleman to the answer which the Prime Minister gave him today.

National Assembly for Wales

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will publish, before the summer adjournment, the most recent draft of the concordat between the Treasury and the National Assembly for Wales. [92327]

Mr. Milburn: Work on the concordat is proceeding well. I hope to be in a position to put a draft concordat to the Assembly Cabinet shortly. I do not intend to publish the concordat in advance of that.

VAT (Labour-intensive Services)

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on the Commission's current proposals regarding the application of VAT on labour-intensive services. [92831]

Dawn Primarolo: The Commission's proposal, which provides for Member States to apply a reduced rate of VAT to certain local labour-intensive services on an experimental basis, is still under discussion in a Council working group. Member States have been asked to draw up a list of services which would be covered by the measure but no agreement has yet been reached.

Smuggling

Mrs. Lait: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what plans there are for Her Majesty's Customs and Excise to purchase x-ray machines capable of screening articulated lorries and containers to assist in combating illegal immigration and alcohol and tobacco smuggling; and if he will make a statement. [92768]

Dawn Primarolo: There are currently no plans for such purchases.

Mrs. Lait: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what funds have been allocated in *(a)* the present financial year and *(b)* in 2000–01 for Her Majesty's Customs and Excise to purchase x-ray machines capable of screening articulated lorries and containers to assist in combating alcohol and tobacco smuggling. [92769]

Dawn Primarolo: No such funds have been allocated in the present financial year. Funding plans for 2000–01 have not yet been finalised.

Mrs. Lait: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what has been the revenue value of detected alcohol and tobacco fraud and smuggling for each of the last three financial years from *(a)* sources within the EU, *(b)* sources outside the EU and *(c)* diversion fraud. [92765]

Dawn Primarolo: I regret that Customs do not hold records that differentiate between sources within and sources outside the EU.

The revenue value of smuggled tobacco and alcohol products detected by Customs for the last three financial years has been:

£ million

	1996–97	*1997–98*	*1998–99*
Smuggled	29	76	140
Diversion Fraud	No comparable figures	207	245

Mrs. Lait: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what are the target levels for the present financial year for the detection of alcohol and tobacco fraud and smuggling; and what progress has been made in achieving these target levels in the first three months of the current financial year. [92766]

Dawn Primarolo: Customs targets for the detection of alcohol and tobacco smuggling and fraud for the present financial year are:

to detect alcohol and tobacco fraud and smuggling to the revenue value of £307 million, and

to disrupt or dismantle 25 major excise smuggling organisations.

Data in respect of our performance against these targets during the first three months of the year (April-June) are still being collated and validated. However, the emerging results are encouraging and, if this pattern continues, Customs consider they are on course to achieve the targets by the end of 1999–2000.

Mrs. Lait: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what *(a)* fines, *(b)* charges and *(c)* convictions have resulted each year since 1 January 1990 from the (i) detection of fraud and (ii) detection of misdeclaration of goods on (1) cigarettes, (2) hand rolling tobacco, (3) cigars, (4) spirits, (5) cider, (6) fortified wines, (7) wine and (8) beer entering the United Kingdom. [92764]

Dawn Primarolo: I regret that central records are not kept in this format.

Excise Goods

Mrs. Lait: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what measures are *(a)* in place and *(b)* planned to prevent the purchase of non-duty paid excise goods through the internet. [92767]

Dawn Primarolo: HM Customs and Excise are aware of the risks from this form of smuggling. Staff at postal and courier depots have been alerted and Customs are looking separately at the wider issues involved.

Private Finance Initiative

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will list those proposals for private finance initiatives for each department of state made since 1 May 1997, stating for each the proposed *(a)* contribution from private finance and *(b)* date of commencement; and if he will list in each case whether the sums involved count against the ceilings for public investment set by the Treaty of Maastricht. [92771]

Mr. Milburn: *(a)* Table 1 gives the details underpinning Table B16 of 1999 FSBR covering PFI/PPP projects signed from 1 May 1997 to 1 April 1999. Under PFI, the public sector contracts for services not assets, and capital investment is only one of the activities undertaken by the private sector in order to supply these services. The figures in Table 1 therefore do not reflect the total value of these contracts, but do reflect Treasury estimates of capital expenditure by the private sector.

(b) Table 2 shows a list and start dates of those projects which the Treasury has been informed are operational.

Table 1: PFI/PPP projects signed since 1 May 1997 (as at 1 April 1999)

£ million

Department for the Environment, Transport and the Regions	
LB Islington (LA)	22
Kent IT (LA)	7
Harrow (IT) LA	1
Isle of Wight Waste Mgt (LA)	13
Kirklees Waste Mgt (LA)	33
LU Power	108
LU Prestige	222
Luton Airport Parkway	20
Brent Street Lighting (LA)	8
Hereford and Worcester Waste (LA)	57
NE Derbys Social Housing (LA) (0.4)	n/a
Berwick on Tweed Soc Housing (LA)	2
Lambeth Vehicles (LA)	10
Manchester Energy (LA)	4
Tower Hamlets HAT (LA)	23
Sheffield Offices (LA)	28
Total	558

Table 1: PFI/PPP projects signed since 1 May 1997 (as at 1 April 1999)

	£ million
Defence	
AFPAA (IT)	150
DFTS	70
Army Mail	11
MSHATF	100
Hawk Simulator	10
Tidworth Water and Sewage	6
Joint Service College	68
Attack Helicopter Training	165
Yeovilton (Family Quarters)	8
RAF Lossiemouth (Family Quarters)	24
RAF Lyneham Sewage	5
RAF Mail	12
RAF Fylingdales (Power Station)	7
RAF Basic Training (Bulldog Replacement)	30
RAF Cosford/RAF Shawbury (Family Quarters)	13
Fire Fighting Training Unit	35
Total	714
Scotland	
Mearnskirk Hospital (Geriatric Beds)	2
Dundee Hospital Energy Mgt System	3
Baldovie Waste/energy (LA)	43
HM Prison Kilmarnock	32
Dundee Teaching Hospital (Parking)	3
Highlands and Islands Airport	10
Hairmyres Hospital	68
Law Hospital	100
Highland Council (IT)	13
SCRA Integrated Info System	3
Falkirk (LA)	65
Edinburgh Royal Infirmary	180
Education IT (Moray Council)	6
Edinburgh 60 (Care of Elderly) Beds	2
Almond Valley Seafield Sewage	140
Cumnock Community Hospital	9
Inverness Psychiatric Unit	17
North Ayrshire College Kilwinning	9
Perth and Kinross Office Accommodation	15
West Lothian (Elderly) Beds	2
Other Scottish Health	10
Total	732
Department of Trade and Industry	
National Physical Laboratory	82
High Performance Computing Project (IT)	17
ELGAR	26
RA Strategic Partnership	14
Total	139
Wales	
Chepstow Community Hospital	8
A55	112
Total	120
Department for Social Security	
Prime	350
Total	350
Home Office	
Prisons Energy	36
Prisons Catering	5
2 Passport Agency Contracts	30
Wiltshire Police (LA)	3
Agecroft prison (Forest Bank)	55
Pucklechurch Prison	30
Rainsbrook (Onley) STC	5
Derby (Ilkeston) Police Station (LA)	4
Northumbria Police (LA)	2

Table 1: PFI/PPP projects signed since 1 May 1997 (as at 1 April 1999)

	£ million
Hassockfield (Medomsley) STC	10
Greater Manchester Fire Station (LA)	5
Thames Valley Police HQ (LA)	10
Derbyshire Police HQ	27
Mid Glamorgan Wales Probation (LA)	4
Total	226
Health	
Carlisle	65
Dartford and Gravesham	94
Norfolk and Norwich	144
South Bucks	45
North Durham	61
Greenwich	84
Oxleas	18
Calderdale	65
Oxfordshire Mental Health Trust	9
Bromley Healthcare	118
South Manchester University Hospital	66
Mayday Healthcare	8
Black Country Mental Health	6
Barnet General Hospital (Wellhouse)	54
Surrey CC residental homes (LA)	29
LB Westminster residential (LA)	4
Worcester Royal Infirmary NHS Trust	85
Harrow Health (LA)	4
Bay Community NHS Trust	7
Eastern Regional Office Fulborn	10
Thames Gateway NHS Trust	6
Leeds Community and Mental Health NHS Trust	5
Hereford Hospitals NHS Trust	62
Total	1,049
Department for Further Education and Employment	
Employment Service IT (IT)(ES)	116
University College London (HE)	28
Kings College London (HE)	142
University of Durham (HE)	0
Falmouth College of Arts (HE)	3
Hammersmith and West London College (FE)	2
Runshaw College (Adult Education) (FE)	2
Tynemouth College (FE)	0
Wyggeston and QE Sports Centre	2
Waltham Forest (LA)	1
Hull Primary School (LA)	2
Hillingdon School (LA)	18
Colfox School (LA)	15
Clarendon College (FE)	17
Dudley LEA (LA) IT	26
Portsmouth New School (LA)	12
Enfield New School (LA)	16
Lewisham Schools Catering (LA)	4
ES IT Partnership (IT) (ES)	6
South Thames College	3
Total	415
Inland Revenue	
Longbenton	120
Edinburgh	10
Glasgow	10
Stockport	6
Bootle	12
Total	158
Department for Culture, Media and Sport	
English Heritage/RCHME/HSIS	2
Total	2

Table 1: PFI/PPP projects signed since 1 May 1997 (as at 1 April 1999)

	£ million
Lord Chancellors Department (Including the Northern Ireland Court Service)	
ARAMIS	30
Northern Ireland Courts	30
Total	60
Foreign and Commonwealth Office	
Berlin Embassy	17
2 small vehicle service contracts	3
Total	20
Northern Ireland Departments	
PLANAPS IT System	1
Belfast Hospital Renal Unit	3
Royal Group of Hospitals Equipment	2
Contract Energy Services (Craigavon) (0.3)	0
Renal Dialysis Facilities (0.3)	0
Training and Employment	7
Clinical Waste Disposal	4
Laboratory IT System (0.8)	1
Accruals Accounting Payroll System IT	3
Kinnegar Sewage	13
Total	34
National Savings	
IT System	100
Total	100
Serious Fraud Office	
Document management IT	4
Total	4
Overall total	4,681

Note:
Local Government Figures-Projects shown are for additional Central Government revenue

There are no ceilings for public investment set by the Treaty of Maastricht.

Table 2: Operational PFI projects signed since 1 May 1997

Project name	*Department*	*Start date*
ES IT	DfEE/ES	May 1998
Agecroft Prison	Home Office	—
Hull Primary Schools	DfEE/LA	January 1999
Dudley Schools IT	DfEE/LA	January/February 1999
Lewisham Schools—catering contract	DfEE/LA	February 1999
Falmouth College of Arts—student housing	DfEE	September 1998
King's College London—UMDS	DfEE	July 1999
Stockport Accommodation	Inland Revenue	April 1999
Manchester Accommodation	Inland Revenue	August 1998
Edinburgh Accommodation	Inland Revenue	December 1998
Glasgow Accommodation	Inland Revenue	December 1998
PRIME	Department of Social Security	April 1998

Customs Duty

Mrs. Lait: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how much revenue has been collected each year since 1 January 1990 in *(a)* customs duty and *(b)* indirect tax from (i) cigarettes, (ii) hand rolling tobacco, (iii) cigars, (iv) spirits, (v) cider, (vi) fortified wines, (vii) wine and (viii) beer entering the United Kingdom by (1) post and (2) private carrier. [92770]

Dawn Primarolo: The table provides details of Excise Revenue for Post for the calendar years 1993–1998. Earlier information is not available. This does not include VAT and Customs Duty, which are not readily available. Excise duties are recorded as a global sum; the breakdown in the table is based on samples of goods imported.

Import duty schedule: net receipts

£000

Calendar year	*Tobacco*	*Spirit*	*Wine*	*Total*
1993	15	1	2	18
1994	44	2	6	52
1995	94	4	13	111
1996	131	6	18	155
1997	140	6	19	165
1998	144	6	20	170

It is assumed that private carrier means fast parcel operators, for which the revenue is not separately recorded.

Duty Free

Mr. Nigel Jones: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer, pursuant to his answer of 19 March 1999, *Official Report*, column *859–60*, if he is able to estimate the increased revenue to the Treasury as a result of the abolition of duty free shopping for this financial year and the next. [93160]

Dawn Primarolo: We have estimated that the abolition of duty free sales within Europe could yield £120 million in revenue receipts in a full year, but this does depend entirely on how the companies providing the services seize on the new commercial opportunities that are now open to them. This estimate will be kept under review as further information on the marketing strategies of the operators becomes available.

Duty Differentials

Mr. Nigel Jones: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what plans he has to reduce the duty differential on *(a)* beer, *(b)* spirits and *(c)* tobacco between the United Kingdom and the rest of the European Community. [93141]

Mrs. Roche: Any changes to the levels of UK alcohol and tobacco duties is a matter for the Chancellor's Budget deliberations.

VAT

Mr. Rogers: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will list the rates of VAT in each of the member states of the European Union for each of the main commodities and services. [93125]

Dawn Primarolo: The table details the standard and reduced rates of VAT in each member state and the main commodities and services subject to a reduced rate.

VAT rates in the European Community (standard rates and reduced rates; and main items subject to reduced rates [1])

Percentage

Member state	*Standard rate*	*Reduced rate*
Austria	20	10—Food; books; newspapers public transport
Belgium	21	12—Food (coal only); social housing
		6—Food; books; public transport; water supplies
		0—Newspapers
Denmark	25	0—Daily newspapers
Finland	22	17—Food
		8—Pharmaceuticals; public transport
		0—Newspapers
France	20.6	5.5—Food; public transport; pharmaceuticals; books
		2.1—Newspapers
Germany	16	7—Food; books and newspapers; local public transport
Greece	18	8—Food; public transport; pharmaceuticals
		4—Books and newspapers
Ireland	21	12.5—Domestic fuel and power; newspapers; new housing
		0—Food; books; pharmaceuticals
Italy	20	10—Certain foods; domestic fuel and power, public transport; pharmaceuticals
		4—Basic foodstuffs; books and newspapers; certain social housing
Luxembourg	15	12—Fuel (other than gas and electricity)
		6—Fuel (gas and electricity)
		3—Food; books and newspapers; pharmaceuticals
Netherlands	17.5	6—Food; books and newspapers; public transport; water supplies pharmaceuticals
Portugal	17	12—Certain foods
		5—Food; books and newspapers; public transport; water supplies; hotels; pharmaceuticals
Spain	16	7—Food; water supplies; public transport
		4—Basic foodstuffs; books and newspapers; pharmaceuticals
Sweden	25	12—Food
		6—Newspapers
United Kingdom	17.5	5—Domestic fuel and power
		0—Food; books and newspapers; public transport; children's clothing; new housing; water and sewerage services; pharmaceuticals; aids for the disabled; charities

[1] Taken from European Commission Document XXI/148/98—EN 'VAT rates applied in the Member States of the European Community'

Compliance Costs

Mr. Chidgey: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what reductions were achieved in the compliance costs of regulation administered by his Department, its public bodies and by other departments for which Treasury Ministers are responsible for the last year for which data is available; what mechanisms exist for monitoring the post-implementation compliance costs of such regulation; and if he has established targets for reduction in the compliance costs of regulation administered by his Department and its public bodies and by other Departments for which Treasury Ministers are responsible. [92316]

Mrs. Roche: Details of regulations that imposed compliance costs on business are published in the Chancellor's Departments' regulatory impact assessments and laid in both Houses. A summary of all the regulatory impact assessments published by the Chancellor's Departments and the other regulatory Departments in Whitehall is published every six months in a White Paper, and is available on a monthly basis on the Cabinet Office Regulatory Impact Unit's website.

There is no arbitrary target for reducing the compliance cost of regulation. However, all Departments are required to make an assessment of the risks, costs and benefits of any regulatory proposal that has an impact on businesses, charities and voluntary bodies before they decide to act. Without an assessment of this kind, there can be no collective agreement of a regulatory proposal.

Economic and Finance Council

Mr. Kenneth Clarke: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer which Minister from his Department has attended each of the meetings of the European Council of Finance Ministers held in 1999 to date. [93173]

Ms Hewitt: Attendance at the meetings of the Economic and Finance Council of Ministers held in 1999 to date, is set out as follows:

Date	
18 January	The Chancellor of the Exchequer
8 February	The Chancellor of the Exchequer
15 March	The Chancellor of the Exchequer and myself
10 May	Myself
25 May	The Chancellor of the Exchequer and the Paymaster General
12 July	The Chancellor of the Exchequer

Migration (North-East)

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will estimate the level of net migration from each local authority area in Tyne and Wear and the counties of Durham and Northumberland in each of the past five years, separately identifying net migration *(a)* within and *(b)* outside the North East. [92462]

Ms Hewitt: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the Director of the Office for National Statistics. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Tim Holt to Mr. Jim Cousins, dated 26 July 1999:

As Director of the Office for National Statistics (ONS), I have been asked to reply to your Parliamentary Question for an estimate of the level of net migration from each local authority area in Tyne and Wear and the counties of Durham and Northumberland.

The estimates of net migration are not sufficiently reliable to be published as a separate component of the total population estimate for each local authority. It is not, therefore, our policy to release them.

Unemployment

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how often and when the definition of unemployment used for measuring unemployment has been changed since 1979. [92556]

Ms Hewitt: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the Director of the Office for National Statistics. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Tim Holt to Mr. Austin Mitchell, dated 26 July 1999:

As Director of the Office for National Statistics (ONS), I have been asked to reply to your recent parliamentary question on the definition of unemployment.

The ONS measure of unemployment, derived from the Labour Force Survey (LFS), is defined on a consistent and internationally recognised basis set out by the International Labour Organisation (ILO) and counts as unemployed people who are: a) without a paid job; b) available to start work within the next two weeks and c) have either looked for work in the last four weeks or are waiting to start a job already obtained. The LFS has used the ILO definition since 1984. Prior to this a slightly different definition was used. This included people who were without a paid job who were looking for work in the reference week, or prevented from seeking work by temporary sickness or holiday, or were waiting to start a job they had already obtained or were waiting for the results of a job application. Full-time students who were seeking work but who were not available to start work in the next two weeks because they had to complete their education were excluded. The definition was used from spring 1979 to spring 1983.

The Labour Force Survey measure of unemployment has been compiled and published on the same definition since 1984 (annually 1984–1991; quarterly 1992 to March 1998) and a monthly moving average of each three month period from April 1998.

The ONS also published the monthly numbers of people who are claiming unemployment related benefits, also known as the Claimant Count. There have been nine changes affecting the coverage of the monthly claimant count since 1979 which have been significant enough to warrant a recasting of the consistent seasonally adjusted series. Further details of these discontinuities are given in the November 1995 edition of *Labour Market Trends*, a copy of which is available in the House of Commons Library.

Multinationals

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what proportion of United Kingdom gross domestic product is accounted for by multinational corporations. [92680]

Ms Hewitt: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the Director of the Office for National Statistics. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Tim Holt to Mr. Austin Mitchell, dated 26 July 1999:

As Director of the Office for National Statistics (ONS), I have been asked to reply to your recent parliamentary question on multi-national corporations.

The proportion of gross domestic product accounted for by multi-national corporations is not available.

Some limited information on the activity of foreign owned businesses was published in an article 'Globalisation: scope, issues and statistics' in the November 1997 edition of *Economic Trends*, a copy of which is available in the House of Commons Library. This article included:

information on the proportion of net output accounted for by foreign-owned manufacturing enterprises derived from the Annual Census of Production;

estimates of the proportion of turnover and persons employed accounted for by foreign owned businesses involved in certain service industries.

Foreign Investment

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what proportion of total investment in *(a)* the United Kingdom, *(b)* the Australian and *(c)* the New Zealand economy was accounted for by gross foreign direct investments in each year since 1970. [92682]

Ms Hewitt: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the Director of the Office for National Statistics. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Tim Holt to Mr. Austin Mitchell, date 26 July 1999:

As Director of the Office for National Statistics (ONS), I have been asked to reply to your recent parliamentary question on foreign direct investment.

The proportion of foreign direct investment in the UK of total investment over the last ten years, expressed as a percentage is:

1989: 16.7
1990: 16.2
1991: 8.7
1992: 9.2
1993: 10.2
1994: 5.7
1995: 11.1
1996: 13.2
1997: 16.9
1998: 26.2

More information can be found on the ONS databank available through the House of Commons library. The ONS does not publish information for Australia and New Zealand, although data are published in the OECD publication *International Direct Investment Yearbook 1998*, a copy of which is available in the House of Commons Library.

Money Trading

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how much money was traded on a daily basis on average *(a)* on the UK foreign exchanges and *(b)* in the rest of the world in each year since 1979. [92565]

Ms Hewitt: Average daily turnover during April in foreign exchange spot, forwards, and swaps is set out in the table:

$ billions

	1989	*1992*	*1995*	*1998*
UK	184	291	464	637
Rest of World	534	785	1,108	1,345

These are estimates derived from triennial surveys coordinated by the Bank for International Settlements since 1989.

Population Statistics

Mr. O'Hara: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what proportion and number of people in each of the regions to be covered by the new regional development agencies are in the age range *(a)* 50 to 65 years, *(b)* 65 to 85 years, *(c)* 85 and over, *(d)* above pensionable age and *(e)* above 50 years; what proportion of the population as a whole in each region these figures represent; and if he will provide figures on the same basis showing the estimated population figures for (i) 2004, (ii) 2009, (iii) 2014, (iv) 2019 and (v) 2024. [93438]

Ms Hewitt: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the Director of the Office for National Statistics. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from John Fox to Mr. Eddie O'Hara, dated 26 July 1999:

The Director of the Office for National Statistics has been asked to reply to your recent question asking for population statistics for the new Regional Development Agencies. I am replying in Dr. Holt's absence.

The population estimates and projections for the age-groups you have requested are given in the attached tables.

Mid-1997 population estimates for English Regional Development Agency areas

	Population (000)	*Percentage of population*
1997		
North East		
50–64	426.3	16.4
65–84	372.9	14.4
85+	42.6	1.6
Pensionable age	482.4	18.6
Age 50+	841.8	32.4
North West and Merseyside		
50–64	1,129.6	16.4
65–84	956.7	13.9
85+	124.9	1.8
Pensionable age	1,250.6	18.2
Age 50+	2,211.3	32.1

Mid-1997 population estimates for English Regional Development Agency areas

	Population (000)	*Percentage of population*
Yorkshire and Humberside		
50–64	816.5	16.2
65–84	704.8	14.0
85+	93.5	1.9
Pensionable age	922.5	18.3
Age 50+	1,614.8	32.1
East Midlands		
50–64	689.2	16.6
65–84	587.5	14.1
85+	74.0	1.8
Pensionable age	761.3	18.3
Age 50+	1,350.8	32.5
West Midlands		
50–64	885.8	16.6
65–84	742.9	14.0
85+	88.8	1.7
Pensionable age	961.3	18.1
Age 50+	1,717.6	32.3
South West		
50–64	823.4	16.9
65–84	785.4	16.1
85+	118.2	2.4
Pensionable age	1,027.5	21.1
Age 50+	1,727.1	35.4
Eastern		
50–64	883.9	16.6
65–84	754.9	14.2
85+	99.9	1.9
Pensionable age	983.4	18.4
Age 50+	1,738.9	32.6
Greater London		
50–64	1,002.7	14.1
65–84	807.4	11.3
85+	121.1	1.7
Pensionable age	1,072.6	15.1
Age 50+	1,931.3	27.1
South East		
50–64	1,307.1	16.4
65–84	1,121.0	14.1
85+	167.6	2.1
Pensionable age	1,476.5	18.6
Age 50+	2,595.8	32.6

1996-based subnational population projections for English Regional Development Agency areas

	Population (000)	*Percentage of population*
2004		
North East		
50–64	464.3	18.1
65–84	372.4	14.5
85+	43.0	1.7
Pensionable age	481.5	18.8
Age 50+	879.7	34.3
North West and Merseyside		
50–64	1,229.6	17.9
65–84	950.9	13.9
85+	122.1	1.8
Pensionable age	1,251.7	18.3
Age 50+	2,302.6	33.6

1996-based subnational population projections for English Regional Development Agency areas

	Population (000)	Percentage of population
Yorkshire and Humberside		
50–64	901.4	17.7
65–84	708.3	13.9
85+	93.7	1.8
Pensionable age	930.1	18.3
Age 50+	1,703.4	33.5
East Midlands		
50–64	785.9	18.4
65–84	607.5	14.2
85+	77.1	1.8
Pensionable age	796.8	18.6
Age 50+	1,470.5	34.3
West Midlands		
50–64	970.3	18.1
65–84	755.7	14.1
85+	93.4	1.7
Pensionable age	992.1	18.5
Age 50+	1,819.4	34.0
South West		
50–64	963.1	19.1
65–84	813.1	16.1
85+	123.3	2.4
Pensionable age	1,079.5	21.4
Age 50+	1,899.4	37.6
Eastern		
50–64	1,012.3	18.3
65–84	800.2	14.5
85+	106.8	1.9
Pensionable age	1,051.4	19.0
Age 50+	1,919.3	34.7
Greater London		
50–64	1,098.5	15.1
65–84	764.9	10.5
85+	108.2	1.5
Pensionable age	1,025.4	14.1
Age 50+	1,971.6	27.1
South East		
50–64	1,499.3	18.1
65–84	1,169.1	14.1
85+	172.2	2.1
Pensionable age	1,554.6	18.8
Age 50+	2,840.6	34.4

	Population (000)	Percentage of population
2009		
North East		
50–64	497.8	19.6
65–84	367.1	14.4
85+	50.3	2.0
Pensionable age	499.5	19.6
Age 50+	915.1	36.0
North West and Merseyside		
50–64	1,285.5	18.8
65–84	957.8	14.0
85+	138.7	2
Pensionable age	1,312.0	19.2
Age 50+	2,382.0	34.9
Yorkshire and Humberside		
50–64	960.3	18.8
65–84	713.3	13.9
85+	107.0	2.1
Pensionable age	981.8	19.2
Age 50+	1,780.6	34.8
East Midlands		
50–64	833.2	19.1
65–84	630.6	14.5
85+	91.7	2.1
Pensionable age	863.5	19.8
Age 50+	1,555.5	35.7
West Midlands		
50–64	1,005.7	18.7
65–84	777.7	14.5
85+	109.5	2.0
Pensionable age	1,055.8	19.7
Age 50+	1,892.9	35.3
South West		
50–64	1,031.8	20.0
65–84	847.1	16.4
85+	144.5	2.8
Pensionable age	1,175.3	22.8
Age 50+	2,023.4	39.2
Eastern		
50–64	1,078.0	19.1
65–84	836.1	14.8
85+	127.5	2.3
Pensionable age	1,152.2	20.4
Age 50+	2,041.6	36.1
Greater London		
50–64	1,206.5	16.3
65–84	754.8	10.2
85+	113.9	1.5
Pensionable age	1,053.3	14.2
Age 50+	2,075.1	28.0
South East		
50–64	1,602.9	18.9
65–84	1,219.2	14.4
85+	198.0	2.3
Pensionable age	1,692.0	20.0
Age 50+	3,020.0	35.7

	Population (000)	Percentage of population
2014		
North East		
50–64	518.5	20.5
65–84	400.5	15.9
85+	52.9	2.1
Pensionable age	532.2	21.1
Age 50+	972.0	38.5
North West and Merseyside		
50–64	1,341.0	19.7
65–84	1,056.7	15.5
85+	142.7	2.1
Pensionable age	1,398.1	20.5
Age 50+	2,540.4	37.3
Yorkshire and Humberside		
50–64	1,011.9	19.6
65–84	794.7	15.4
85+	110.5	2.2
Pensionable age	1,054.2	20.5
Age 50+	1,917.1	37.2

	Population (000)	Percentage of population
East Midlands		
50–64	871.2	19.7
65–84	716.9	16.2
85+	97.6	2.2
Pensionable age	946.5	21.4
Age 50+	1,685.8	38.1
West Midlands		
50–64	1,047.4	19.5
65–84	859.9	16.0
85+	115.5	2.1
Pensionable age	1,132.7	21.0
Age 50+	2,022.7	37.6
South West		
50–64	1,075.6	20.4
65–84	971.9	18.4
85+	151.9	2.9
Pensionable age	1,297.1	24.6
Age 50+	2,199.3	41.6
Eastern		
50–64	1,115.6	19.3
65–84	963.1	16.7
85+	136.3	2.4
Pensionable age	1,271.1	22.0
Age 50+	2,215.0	38.4
Greater London		
50–64	1,365.4	18.1
65–84	824.3	10.9
85+	110.8	1.5
Pensionable age	1,112.6	14.7
Age 50+	2,300.4	30.5
South East		
50–64	1,683.0	19.5
65–84	1,400.1	16.2
85+	207.2	2.4
Pensionable age	1,859.0	21.5
Age 50+	3,290.3	38.1

	Population (000)	Percentage of population
2019		
North East		
50–64	540.5	21.5
65–84	426.0	16.9
85+	56.0	2.2
Pensionable age	565.3	22.5
Age 50+	1,022.5	40.7
North West and Merseyside		
50–64	1,425.3	20.9
65–84	1,120.6	16.5
85+	148.7	2.2
Pensionable age	1,476.8	21.7
Age 50+	2,694.6	39.6
Yorkshire and Humberside		
50–64	1,086.2	20.9
65–84	850.1	16.4
85+	116.0	2.2
Pensionable age	1,123.1	21.7
Age 50+	2,052.3	39.6
East Midlands		
50–64	938.8	20.9
65–84	778.3	17.3
85+	104.5	2.3
Pensionable age	1,019.5	22.7
Age 50+	1,821.6	40.5
West Midlands		
50–64	1,123.0	20.8
65–84	915.2	16.9
85+	122.7	2.3
Pensionable age	1,199.1	22.2
Age 50+	2,160.9	40.0
South West		
50–64	1,161.0	21.5
65–84	1,065.4	19.7
85+	161.8	3.0
Pensionable age	1,406.6	26.0
Age 50+	2,388.2	44.2
Eastern		
50–64	1,210.5	20.5
65–84	1,046.2	17.7
85+	147.7	2.5
Pensionable age	1,373.3	23.3
Age 50+	2,404.3	40.8
Greater London		
50–64	1,520.2	19.8
65–84	880.9	11.5
85+	112.4	1.5
Pensionable age	1,193.1	15.5
Age 50+	2,513.4	32.7
South East		
50–64	1,837.4	20.8
65–84	1,521.5	17.2
85+	221.8	2.5
Pensionable age	2,007.9	22.7
Age 50+	3,580.8	40.5

Public Appointments

Joan Ruddock: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many appointments to public bodies were made by his Department in *(a)* 1997–98 and *(b)* 1998–99, broken down by (i) gender and (ii) ethnicity; and if he will make a statement. [92513]

Ms Hewitt: The Government announced in their publication "Quangos—Opening up Public Appointments 1999–2002" (copies deposited in the Libraries of both Houses) their commitment to the equal representation of women and men in public appointments and a pro rata representation of members of ethnic minority groups. In moving towards achieving these commitments, the Chancellor's departments have set an ambitious overall goal that women should form a minimum of 40 per cent. of appointments to Chancellor's Departments' Public Bodies by 2003 (or for small bodies that at least one appointment should be held by a woman). There is also a goal that each of the Chancellor's Departments' Public Bodies should include at least one appointment from a member of the ethnic minorities by 2003 and that ethnic minorities should account for a minimum of 4 per cent. of appointments to larger bodies. The following table gives details of appointments made to NDPB's of the Chancellor's departments and agencies over the periods requested. Information on the number of appointments by both gender and ethnic origin cannot be provided since the number of new appointments in each category is less than five.

NDPB	Appointments 1997–98	Appointments 1998–99
Policy Holders Protection Board	4	1
Royal Mint Advisory Committee	3	2
Statistics Advisory Committee	2	0

Social Security Contributions

Mr. Salmond: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what are the forecast levels of social security contributions for *(a)* the United Kingdom and *(b)* Scotland for each of the next three years. [92391]

Dawn Primarolo: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave my right hon. Friend the Member for Swansea, West (Mr. Williams) on 23 July 1999, *Official Report*, column *699*.

Social Security Contributions (Scotland)

Mr. Salmond: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will list the level of social security contributions in Scotland over each of the last five years *(a)* in total and *(b)* as a percentage of the United Kingdom total. [92388]

Dawn Primarolo: The available estimates of the share of National Insurance contributions made by Scottish residents are based on a 1 per cent. sample of National Insurance records in respect of employees. The latest information available is given in the table:

	Estimated Scottish share of UK total Percentage	Scottish estimate £ billion
1994–95	8.7	3.7
1995–96	8.6	3.8
1996–97	9.0	4.2

WALES

Primary School Funding

Mr. Rogers: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will make a statement on primary school funding in Wales. [93146]

Mr. Hain: This is a matter for the National Assembly for Wales.

CABINET OFFICE

Office of Public Service

Mr. Shepherd: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office when the Government propose to make an order in council to place the former functions of the Office of Public Service within the remit of the Parliamentary Commissioner for Administration and the Code of Practice on Open Government. [92645]

Mr. Kilfoyle: An order-in-council restoring the Parliamentary Ombudsman's jurisdiction over the part of the Cabinet Office whose functions were formerly carried out by the Office of Public Service was approved at Her Majesty's Privy Council Meeting on 21 July. The Order, which will also bring that part of the Cabinet Office within the remit of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information, will be laid before the Parliamentary Ombudsman.

Ministerial Meetings

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office how many times ministers in his Department met members and officials in the United States Government between 1 May 1997 and 1 December 1997; and if he will list the dates and locations of each meeting, the ministers involved and the names of the US ministers and officials at each meeting. [90424]

Mr. Kilfoyle: Cabinet Office Ministers had the following meetings with the following members and officials in the United States Government between 1 May and 1 December 1997.

Date/Minister	*Location*	*Meetings*
12 July-16 July 1997 Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster	Washington	Janet Caldow, Institute of Electronic Government Larry Haas, Office of Management and Budget Dr. Harold C. Relyea, Library of Congress Dr. Thomas, Brookings Bob Stone, National Performance Review John Kamensky, National Performance Review Patrick Kennedy, President's Management Council David Barram, US General Services Admin Senator Sam Brownback, Chairman of the Senate Oversight of Gov. Sub-Committee

Smartcards

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what assessment he has made of the benefits of requiring the carrying of smartcards by persons seeking access to Government services. [91718]

Mr. Kilfoyle: There is no intention that people should be obliged to carry smartcards to obtain general access to public services. However, the experience of the private sector shows that smartcards can be popular and effective. The Government is interested in the benefits which smartcards can offer both for secure authentication and the enhancement of privacy.

The Central Information Technology Unit (CITU) in the Cabinet Office is currently chairing an Interdepartmental Steering Group on Smartcard Technology, which is developing a framework for their possible use in service delivery.

Civil Servants

Joan Ruddock: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office how many civil servants are in post in each department and grade broken down by *(a)* gender and *(b)* ethnicity. [92512]

Mr. Kilfoyle: Civil Service Statistics personnel statistics are collated and published annually by the Cabinet Office. The latest information shown in the tables, is for staff in post at 1 April 1998.

Civil servants by Department, responsibility level[1] and gender, 1 April 1998

Department	*SCS*		*G6/G7*		*SEO/HEO*		*EO*		*AO*		*AA*		*Total*	
	M	*W*	*M*	*W*	*M*	*W*	*M*	*W*	*M*	*W*	*M*	*W*	*M*	*W*
Advisory, Conciliation & Arbitration Service	[2]—	[2]—	25	[2]—	225	143	39	73	30	97	6	11	330	328
Agriculture	101	15	568	119	1,753	826	1,515	885	891	1,562	615	1,076	5,443	4,483
Cabinet Office	103	28	212	78	334	137	204	215	179	318	88	102	1,120	878
Charity Commission	8	[2]—	19	13	73	64	65	105	46	78	27	28	238	290
Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal	29	5	137	147	24	25	47	110	60	193	83	313	380	793
Crown Prosecution Service	42	5	1,081	864	187	228	348	936	331	994	137	633	2,126	3,660
Culture, Media & Sport	13	8	48	24	94	45	157	81	56	53	13	19	381	230
Customs and Excise	65	8	363	91	4,912	1,559	5,051	3,147	2,376	3,448	1,244	1,848	14,011	10,101
Defence	358	26	4,090	351	17,816	3,104	12,923	4,479	8,993	12,119	5,153	7,785	49,333	27,864
Education and Employment	115	35	467	209	1,769	1,431	3,918	9,044	4,204	13,229	530	1,006	11,003	24,954
Environment, Transport & the Regions	206	47	1,089	217	2,123	767	2,912	1,148	1,638	3,049	821	1,824	8,789	7,052
Export Credits Guarantee Department	16	[2]—	47	11	85	27	57	36	31	41	16	23	252	140
FCO: Diplomatic Service	413	30	519	140	1,151	319	774	622	512	770	146	98	3,515	1,979
Friendly Societies, Registry of	10	[2]—	14	5	31	7	18	18	13	24	9	[2]—	95	57

Civil servants by Department, responsibility level [1] and gender, 1 April 1998

Department	SCS		G6/G7		SEO/HEO		EO		AO		AA		Total	
	M	W	M	W	M	W	M	W	M	W	M	W	M	W
General Register Office—Scotland	[2]—	[2]—	8	[2]—	34	7	22	23	14	49	22	30	100	109
Health	279	140	498	315	615	536	344	586	233	751	140	250	2,109	2,578
Health and Safety Commission/Executive	66	12	615	75	1,097	454	153	226	311	836	[2]—	[2]—	2,240	1,600
HM Prison Service	71	9	475	85	1,454	537	2,486	1,309	19,975	4,920	3,971	2,079	28,432	8,939
Home Office	85	24	426	152	1,554	775	2,047	1,720	868	1,753	607	1,165	5,587	5,589
Information, Central Office of	5	[2]—	22	14	97	87	23	15	14	26	10	7	171	150
Inland Revenue	226	21	2,401	567	5,564	2,505	5,800	6,886	5,001	13,968	3,725	10,238	22,717	34,185
International Development	41	5	142	35	147	87	114	95	111	216	41	53	596	491
Intervention Board	5	[2]—	26	6	120	71	124	145	186	337	43	68	504	630
Land Registry	23	6	132	56	650	264	1,026	1,518	988	2,520	277	952	3,096	5,316
Lord Chancellor's Department	45	16	177	118	643	668	853	1,394	1,572	3,083	656	1,386	3,946	6,665
National Savings	9	[2]—	42	9	311	219	159	252	515	1,494	410	982	1,446	2,960
National Statistics, Office for	25	5	122	67	347	306	337	391	309	793	134	317	1,274	1,879
Northern Ireland Office	19	[2]—	17	6	19	19	12	42	15	26	13	21	95	120
Office for Standards in Education	15	[2]—	134	63	29	17	31	23	23	66	6	49	238	220
Office of Electricity Regulation	9	[2]—	24	16	41	24	17	32	9	49	[2]—	25	100	150
Office of Fair Trading	8	5	45	14	62	42	57	43	25	70	16	22	213	196
Office of Telecommunications	[2]—	[2]—	38	18	33	14	10	20	[2]—	8	5	6	92	70
Office of Water Services	6	[2]—	9	7	23	23	26	26	10	32	[2]—	11	80	100
Ordnance Survey	5	[2]—	40	[2]—	342	75	869	206	144	174	21	18	1,421	477
Public Record Office	[2]—	[2]—	15	11	52	39	59	31	57	64	66	46	250	190
Registers of Scotland	[2]—	[2]—	16	6	127	104	197	221	137	133	62	109	540	570
Royal Mint	[2]—	[2]—	21	[2]—	108	11	50	45	29	74	9	14	220	146
Scottish Courts Service	[2]—	[2]—	17	[2]—	109	22	102	117	63	190	135	132	430	464
Scottish Office	136	23	426	125	809	305	527	383	348	697	397	622	2,643	2,155
Scottish Prison Service	14	[2]—	102	32	771	104	2,050	269	965	262	114	123	4,016	790
Security and Intelligence Services	30	[2]—	208	19	1,242	259	1,475	515	350	481	105	250	3,410	1,530
Serious Fraud Office	7	[2]—	24	8	25	12	13	16	8	22	5	9	82	70
Social Security	88	36	605	277	2,714	1,971	8,562	13,668	12,990	36,684	5,220	10,666	30,179	63,302
Trade and Industry	197	37	781	194	1,623	700	906	666	966	1,573	362	796	4,835	3,966
Treasury	67	12	168	49	154	71	81	64	59	150	16	42	545	388
Treasury Solicitor	39	8	92	73	36	31	35	56	31	51	13	14	246	233
Welsh Office (including OHMCIS)	53	20	149	49	264	137	218	270	163	366	190	253	1,037	1,095
Departments with less than 150 staff	69	8	82	38	120	71	93	69	79	136	67	73	510	395
Total	3,139	617	16,778	4,785	51,913	19,249	56,906	52,241	65,930	108,029	25,754	45,597	220,420	230,518

[1] Responsibility levels are an approximate assignment of staff to a level of seniority broadly equivalent to the former service wide grades.
[2] In order to preserve confidentiality number withheld and the total rounded to the nearest 10 as there are less than 5 staff at this level.
Note:
M = Men W = Women
Source:
Mandate and Quarterly Staff Returns

Civil Servants by Department, responsibility level [1] and ethnic origin [3]—1 April 1998

Department	SCS		G6/G7		SEO/HEO		EO		AO		AA		Total	
	W	EM	W	EM	W	EM	W	EM	W	EM	W	EM	W	EM
Advisory, Conciliation & Arbitration Service	[2]—	[2]—	30	[2]—	324	9	54	8	81	18	14	5	510	40
Agriculture, Fisheries & Food	104	[2]—	573	11	1,717	50	1,376	53	1,832	144	1,378	140	6,980	400
Cabinet Office	84	[2]—	204	[2]—	314	7	271	27	302	46	96	15	1,271	98
Charity Commission	12	[2]—	26	[2]—	137	7	155	20	98	23	55	19	483	71
Crown Prosecution Service	45	[2]—	1,581	118	328	16	1,098	88	976	139	494	49	4,522	410
Culture, Media & Sport	17	[2]—	49	[2]—	83	[2]—	59	5	75	16	18	7	301	33
Customs & Excise	70	[2]—	421	12	6,020	158	7,022	486	4,691	570	2,173	258	20,397	1,490
Defence	333	8	3,717	61	17,476	275	13,784	224	18,059	378	10,878	366	64,247	1,312
Education & Employment	105	[2]—	492	9	2,049	64	6,707	646	8,507	1,426	698	109	18,558	2,250
Environment, Transport & the Regions	260	[2]—	1,145	37	2,182	121	3,068	180	3,237	392	1,424	127	11,316	860
Export Credits Guarantee Department	10	[2]—	36	[2]—	79	8	54	10	47	18	19	11	245	49
Foreign & Commonwealth Office	387	[2]—	544	[2]—	1,195	23	1,071	38	856	96	134	29	4,187	191
Health	367	14	760	36	1,036	85	674	167	892	289	5	[2]—	3,734	600
Health & Safety Executive	73	[2]—	635	7	1,400	45	324	26	980	99	[2]—	[2]—	3,410	178
HM Prison Service	61	11	521	45	1,493	31	3,227	140	22,437	664	5,039	204	32,778	1,095
Home Office	79	[2]—	495	8	1,804	62	2,702	278	1,680	503	1,261	286	8,021	1,140
Information, Central Office of	[2]—	[2]—	34	[2]—	142	6	22	9	29	9	14	[2]—	250	25
Inland Revenue	244	[2]—	2,904	39	7,737	228	12,019	585	17,367	1,274	11,286	1,149	51,557	3,280
International Development	25	[2]—	78	[2]—	138	[2]—	185	14	237	39	51	10	714	68
Intervention Board	[2]—	[2]—	23	[2]—	130	[2]—	174	12	371	42	73	11	770	67
Land Registry	26	[2]—	172	[2]—	833	16	2,294	66	3,083	210	1,092	89	7,500	384

Civil Servants by Department, responsibility level [1] and ethnic origin [3]—1 April 1998

Department	SCS		G6/G7		SEO/HEO		EO		AO		AA		Total	
	W	EM	W	EM	W	EM	W	EM	W	EM	W	EM	W	EM
Lord Chancellors Department	50	[2]—	274	[2]—	1,192	36	1,890	196	3,812	536	1,704	161	8,922	933
National Savings	6	[2]—	43	[2]—	505	[2]—	402	[2]—	2,076	14	1,185	7	4,217	26
National Statistics, Office for	32	[2]—	177	7	590	24	641	49	954	77	404	11	2,798	170
Office for Standards in Education	11	[2]—	82	[2]—	10	[2]—	22	[2]—	18	7	18	[2]—	161	18
Office of Electricity Regulation	9	[2]—	37	[2]—	58	[2]—	36	8	44	8	19	6	203	26
Office of Fair Trading	8	[2]—	37	[2]—	60	[2]—	43	26	41	25	9	13	198	66
Ordnance Survey	5	[2]—	40	[2]—	363	[2]—	893	12	231	[2]—	19	[2]—	1,551	20
Royal Mint	[2]—	[2]—	22	[2]—	117	[2]—	95	[2]—	102	[2]—	23	[2]—	360	[2]—
Scottish Office	139	[2]—	436	[2]—	769	[2]—	592	[2]—	716	5	466	[2]—	3,118	14
Other Scottish Departments	64	[2]—	348	[2]—	762	[2]—	976	6	1,044	5	915	6	4,109	18
Security & Intelligence Services	29	[2]—	219	[2]—	1,480	[2]—	1,760	6	773	[2]—	440	[2]—	4,701	14
Serious Fraud Office	7	[2]—	33	[2]—	31	[2]—	22	10	18	11	9	6	120	32
Social Security	99	[2]—	627	21	4,075	65	18,596	855	39,217	3,134	11,214	1,029	73,828	5,110
Trade & Industry	196	[2]—	857	22	1,861	131	1,188	157	1,678	414	764	155	6,544	880
Treasury	66	[2]—	165	7	171	6	106	22	145	47	33	20	686	100
Treasury Solicitors Department	32	[2]—	88	6	38	6	41	16	41	15	16	[2]—	256	45
Welsh Office (including OHCMI)	73	[2]—	195	[2]—	396	[2]—	477	[2]—	522	6	438	[2]—	2,101	14
Departments less than 100 with known ethnic origin	41	[2]—	106	6	162	11	107	28	83	38	33	17	532	100
Total	3,181	53	18,226	478	59,257	1,527	84,227	4,482	137,352	10,744	53,910	4,331	356,156	21,620

[1] Responsibility levels are an approximate assignment of staff to a level of seniority broadly equivalent to the former service wide grades.
[2] In order to preserve confidentiality number withheld and the total rounded to the nearest 10 as there are less than 5 staff at this level.
[3] Number of non-industrial staff who responded to departmental surveys on ethnic origin.
Note:
W = White, EM = Ethnic Minority
Source:
Mandate and Departmental Returns

Minister without Portfolio

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what meetings the former Minister without Portfolio held with members and officials of the United States Government during his visit in January 1998 to Florida and Washington; and if he will list the date and location of each meeting and the names of the United States officials who took part in each meeting. [92285]

Mr. Kilfoyle: The itinerary of the former Minister without Portfolio shows the following meetings with United States Government officials during his visit to Florida and Washington in January 1998:

Official	Date	Location
Capricia Marshall, Executive Assistant to the First Lady	5 January 1998	The White House, Washington
Melanne Verveer, Deputy Chief of Staff to the First Lady	5 January 1998	The White House, Washington
Mark Penn, White House, pollster	5 January 1998	The White House, Washington
Ellen McCullough Lovell, Director of the White House Millennium Programme	5 January 1998	The White House, Washington

Gender Impact Assessment

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office if he will list the subject of each gender impact assessment drawn up by his Department since June 1997, stating in each case whether the outcome has been *(a)* put out to consultation and *(b)* published. [91677]

Mr. Kilfoyle: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given by my right hon. Friend the Minister for Women on 14 July 1999, *Official Report, House of Lords*, column *636*.

Anti-drugs Co-ordinator

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office how many times the United Kingdom Anti-Drugs Co-ordinator has met Ministers and officials of the Irish Government since 1 January 1998, indicating the dates and locations of each meeting and the names of the Irish Ministers and officials at each meeting. [92271]

Dr. Jack Cunningham: The UK Anti-Drugs Co-ordinator has not had any meetings with either Ministers or officials of the Irish Government.

Age Discrimination

Mr. Sarwar: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what action the Government are taking to tackle age discrimination within Government departments. [92204]

Dr. Jack Cunningham: The Cabinet Office has this week issued "Age Diversity in the Civil Service: Guidance for Departments and Agencies".

This Guidance is designed to help Departments and agencies to implement the Code of Practice published by the Department for Education and Employment in June. It includes advice on avoiding age and age-related criteria, such as age limits, for recruitment, selection, training and development.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Meat Inspection Charges

Mr. Gill: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will list the organisations which he has met to discuss meat inspection charges. [R] [90386]

Mr. Rooker: Since the beginning of this year, my right hon. Friend the Minister and I have separately met representatives of the Federation of Fresh Meat Wholesalers (now the British Meat Federation) and jointly met a delegation of small plant operators led by an all-party group of hon. Members. I have also had meetings with a representative of turkey producers, the National Farmers Union, Dr. Richard North, and a further meeting with representatives of the all-party parliamentary group. With the Parliamentary Secretary, I have recently met with representatives of the Small Abattoir Federation (SAFe) and the Country Landowners Association (CLA), and with my right hon. Friend the Minister I have met with the Meat and Livestock Commission. These meetings included discussions on charging, but, with the exception of that with SAFe, they were not set up specifically for that purpose.

In addition, all Ministers in the Department have had issues of charging raised with them when attending functions around the country.

Common Fisheries Policy

Mr. Gill: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, pursuant to his answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) of 17 June 1999, *Official Report*, columns *216–18*, on the Common Fisheries Policy, if alternative management measures include *(a)* the amendment of the existing quota and *(b)* the introduction of a permit system. [91767]

Mr. Morley: I have placed in the Library of the House copies of the research objectives of the study to which he refers. These include evaluation of possible adjustment of the operation of the quota system. This is not intended to affect quota share. It does not include a permit system.

Gender Impact Assessment

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will list the subject of each gender impact assessment drawn up by his Department since June 1997, stating in each case whether the outcome has been *(a)* put out to consultation and *(b)* published. [91678]

Mr. Morley: The Government is committed to making sure that its policies are fair and inclusive and take full account of the needs and experiences of all those affected by them.

Although the nature of the Ministry's responsibilities means that much of its activity does not have a gender-specific impact, the Ministry has guidance in place which requires, among other things, the preparation of an impact analysis during policy development in cases where there is the possibility of differential impact on differing groups such as men and women. No formal impact assessments have been drawn up since June 1997. The women's organisations listed in the answer given by my hon. Friend the Minister of State on 23 June 1999, *Official Report*, column *418*, have been contacted for views on a wide range of policies, and on legislative proposals.

Beef Premiums

Sir Richard Body: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will pay 80 per cent. of the beef premium on the first instalment. [92431]

Mr. Rooker: The EC legislation currently specifies that the advance of the beef special premium is at 60 per cent. of the total payment. Although increases in the advance have been authorised in the past there has been no proposal to date from the Commission to increase the rate this year.

Pigmeat

Sir Richard Body: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what powers he has to invoke Article 36 of the Treaty of Rome to restrict the importation of pigmeat; and if he will make a statement. [92429]

Mr. Rooker: In certain circumstances, Article 30 (*ex* Article 36) of the Treaty allows the maintenance of restrictions on the free movement of goods where these can be justified for the protection of the health and life of humans or animals or on the grounds of public morality or policy. However, it is clear from Rulings by the European Court of Justice that we cannot use Article 30 to impose higher UK standards on imports where EU law has been harmonised as it has been in the case of both pigmeat and farm animal welfare.

Lay Holdings

Sir Richard Body: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make it his policy not to increase the number of lay holdings over 10 hectares owned by corporate bodies. [92430]

Mr. Morley: The Wash Fishery Order 1992 restricts all lay holders to a maximum holding of 10 hectares. The Eastern Sea Fisheries Committee are grantees of the Order and can allocate larger areas to lay holders only if they have obtained ministerial permission. To date, the Committee has not made a formal request to do so.

Climate Change Levy

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what estimate his Department has made of the effect of the proposed climate change levy on protected horticulture; and if he will make a statement. [92298]

Mr. Rooker: I refer the hon. Member to the reply given to the hon. Member for South-East Cambridgeshire (Mr. Paice) on 15 June 1999 *Official Report*, column *118*.

Defensive Labelling

Dan Norris: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what plans he has to minimise defensive labelling by food producers in respect of nut content. [92491]

Mr. Rooker: We are urging industry to take action on so-called defensive labelling, such as "may contain nuts", so that it is restricted to cases where it is really necessary

and not used as an alternative to improving production procedures. The UK Food and Drink Federation (FDF) and the British Retail Consortium (BRC) have both recently produced guidance notes for their members on this. Discussions with industry are continuing.

Public Appointments

Joan Ruddock: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many appointments to public bodies were made by his Department in *(a)* 1997–98 and *(b)* 1998–99, broken down by (i) gender and (ii) ethnicity; and if he will list the chairmen appointed to those bodies in those years, similarly broken down. [92519]

Mr. Morley: The appointments made to public bodies are:

	Chairmen	*Total*
(a) 1997–98		
Total	30	223
Male	27	190
Female	3	33
White	30	221
Ethnic	—	2
(b) 1998–99		
Total	4	85
Male	3	67
Female	1	18
White	4	83
Ethnic	—	2

Departmental Plans on equal opportunities setting objectives and targets for improving the representation of women, people from ethnic minority groups and from people with disabilities were published by the Government on 25 May 1999 and deposited in the Libraries of both Houses.

Veterinary Laboratory Agency

Mr. Stephen Twigg: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food when he will publish the 1998–99 Annual Report and Accounts for the Veterinary Laboratory Agency. [93601]

Mr. Nick Brown: I am pleased to announce that the 1998–99 Annual Report and Accounts for the Veterinary Laboratory Agency were laid before Parliament today. Copies are available in the Library of the House.

I should like to congratulate all staff on their achievements during the year.

TB (Badgers)

Mr. Stephen Twigg: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what response the Government have received to the submission on recommendation 69 on TB and badgers, which they made to the Standing Committee to the Bern Convention. [93603]

Mr. Nick Brown: Following submission of the document in April, the UK Government has responded to a number of subsequent questions from the Secretariat to the Bern Convention and has supplied additional technical information. At the request of the Secretariat, the information has been consolidated into a single document, which has been forwarded to the Secretariat and is now being sent to delegates of the Standing Committee. A copy of this latest document, which supersedes the earlier one, has been placed in the Library of the House.

Easter 1998 Floods

Mr. Stephen Twigg: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, pursuant to his answer to the hon. Member for Broxtowe (Dr. Palmer) of 31 March 1999, *Official Report*, column *744*, on floods, what further progress the Environment Agency has made in implementing its Action Plan in response to the Independent report on the Easter 1998 floods. [93605]

Mr. Morley: The Chairman of the Agency has provided me with a report of progress up to the end of June 1999. Copies are being placed in the House Libraries.

I am pleased to note that the Agency remains on course for completing the substantial work programme set out in the Action Plan. In line with the priorities that I set out last October, the Agency has received an independent report on its management structures and skills base and the recommendations will be implemented by next April. An elaboration of the Environment Agency's flood defence supervisory duty was published in May, along with interim high level targets for the Agency and other flood and coastal defence operating authorities. The Agency is now working with others to ensure that flood and coastal defences are identified and inspected; the results recorded and assessed; and appropriate action to remedy defects put in hand. Consultation on further development of high level targets and the supervisory duty is in hand.

The Agency has reported that indicative maps of floodplains have been produced ahead of the September target, and are currently being distributed to local authorities for use in both development control and emergency planning. These maps are being used to review the Agency's database of properties at risk of flooding. Further work has been done on flood warning, with an extension to the number of properties now able to receive direct Automatic Voice Messages through the telephone system. Flood warning messages have been reviewed and a new system to replace the present colour-coded warnings is planned from September 2000. The Agency is embarking on a significant programme of work, both internally and with partners such as local authorities and the emergency services, to ensure that the necessary preparations are made. I have agreed with the Agency that it is important to ensure that these arrangements are introduced successfully and are coupled with a campaign to increase public awareness.

The programme of improvements to the Agency's telemetry network is starting following MAFF agreement to grant aid work in England. The National Assembly for Wales is separately considering the telemetry programme in Wales.

The Agency continues to make good progress in implementing the Easter Floods Report and I will ensure that the House is updated on future progress.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Gender Impact Assessment

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list the subject of each gender impact assessment drawn up by his Department since June 1997, stating in each case whether the outcome has been *(a)* put out to consultation and *(b)* published. [91679]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given to her on 22 July 1999, *Official Report*, column *609*, by my right hon. friend the Minister for Women.

As part of the Government's commitment to ensuring that its policies are relevant to the lives that people live today, my Department is working closely with the Women's Unit to develop good practices for carrying out gender impact appraisal.

My Department has not carried out any gender impact assessments since June 1997.

Palestine National Authority

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what steps he is taking to support the Palestine National Authority in developing its economy. [92239]

Mr. Hoon: Our support for the Palestine National Authority in the development of its economy includes our aid assistance of £8 million each year to the Authority, our support for the Interim Economic Issues (for which £2 million has been set aside by the Department for International Development) and technical assistance to the Ministry of Economy and Trade and Negotiations Affairs Department. The UK also contributes 16 per cent. of EC aid to the Palestinians. We expect this to amount to over £50 million over the next five years.

Concordat (Wales)

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will publish, before the summer adjournment, the most recent draft of the concordats between his Department and the National Assembly Wales. [92326]

Mr. Robin Cook: Work on the international relations and European Union concordats, in which my Department has a considerable interest, is preceding well. We hope to put the draft concordats to the Assembly Cabinet shortly. The concordats will not be published in advance of that.

Minurso Mission

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what plans he has to provide a contingent of personnel to the United Nations Minurso mission organising the referendum in the Western Sahara. [92636]

Mr. Hoon: We have no plans at present to reintroduce a contingent to Minurso due to heavy commitments elsewhere.

Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs which states which are parties to the Partial Test Ban Treaty have not *(a)* signed and *(b)* ratified the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty. [92754]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: Those states which are parties to the Partial Test Ban Treaty but have neither signed nor ratified the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty are: Afghanistan, Botswana, Bahamas, Central African Republic, Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, Gambia, India, Iraq, Lebanon, Libya, Mauritius, Nigeria, Pakistan, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Sudan, Syria, Tanzania, Tonga and Trinidad and Tobago.

Those states which are parties to the Partial Test Ban Treaty but have signed but not ratified the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty are: Antigua and Barbuda, Bangladesh, Benin, Bolivia, Bulgaria, Burma, Chile, Colombia, Cyprus, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Egypt, Gabon, Ghana, Honduras, Iceland, Indonesia, Iran, Israel, Kenya, Kuwait, Laos, Liberia, Malawi, Malaysia, Malta, Mauritania, Mexico, Morocco, Nepal, Nicaragua, Niger, Papua New Guinea, Philippines, Republic of Korea, Romania, Russia, San Marino, Seychelles, Singapore, Slovenia, Sri Lanka, Suriname, Swaziland, Switzerland, Thailand, Tunisia, Turkey, Uganda, Uruguay, USA, Venezuela, Western Samoa and Zambia.

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what steps Her Majesty's Government have taken to encourage the entry into force of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty. [92758]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: We continue to urge those states which have not yet ratified the treaty to do so as soon as possible—in particular those whose ratification is essential for it to enter into force.

Britain has played a leading role in preparing for a Special Conference of states that have ratified the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty this October in Vienna, to consider ways of accelerating the process of bringing the treaty into force.

General Affairs Council

Mr. Hood: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what was the outcome of the General Affairs Council held in Brussels on 19 and 20 July; and if he will make a statement. [92707]

Ms Quin: 1. The General Affairs Council in Brussels on 19 July 1999 adopted the A points listed in document 10103/99. Copies of the documents listing the A points will be placed in the Library as soon as they become available.

Open Debate

2. The GAC had a wide-ranging exchange of views in public session on lessons from Kosovo for the EU's external relations. They agreed that more needed to be done to improve the effectiveness and consistency of EU responses to international crises. An important first step should be to make sure the new CFSP structures introduced by the Amsterdam Treaty worked.

Presidency Presentation on Procedure

3. The Council noted the Presidency's plans for taking forward preparatory discussions for the Inter-Governmental Conference.

Middle East Peace Process

4. The GAC agreed conclusions welcoming the new government in Israel and looking forward to further developments in the Middle East Peace Process. The GAC hoped that the forthcoming visit to the region by the Presidency, Commission and EU special envoy would further enhance ties with the region.

CFSP

5. The GAC was joined over lunch by Javier Solana, appointed Secretary-General of the Council and High Representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy by the European Council at Vienna. He looked forward to starting his new post in late October or November, and outlined key areas for immediate work, including ways of strengthening CFSP and implementing the Common Strategy on Russia.

WTO/New Round: Commission Communication

6. The Commission presented a Communication on the proposed new trade Round. The General Affairs Council will return to the subject in October.

Western Balkans

7. The GAC welcomed the appointment of Mr. Bernard Kouchner as Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General. It stressed the urgency of setting up an international civilian presence in Kosovo. It gave political agreement to a Regulation setting up a European Agency for Reconstruction.

8. The GAC examined the EU sanctions regime and agreed that measures affecting the Serb people rather than the Belgrade regime would be the first to be lifted. They agreed to examine ways to alleviate the situation of democratic bodies in the FRY. They affirmed that parties competing in elections in the FRY should not have anyone convicted or indicted by the International Criminal Tribunal for Yugoslavia as candidates.

9. The GAC welcomed plans for the Stability Pact summit in Sarajevo on 30 July and heard a presentation by Mr. Bodo Hombach, EU Special Representative and Co-ordinator of the Pact.

10. The GAC welcomed the informal political dialogues to be held on 20 July with Bosnia-Herzegovina and Croatia, and decided to consider the creation of EU/Croatia consultative task force. It agreed with the Commission that it would be feasible to envisage opening negotiations for a Stabilisation and Association Agreement with Macedonia.

East Timor

11. The GAC discussed East Timor and reiterated its strong support for the UN-organised consultation process which enables the East Timorese people to express their views as to the future of the territory.

Twinning

12. The GAC discussed ways of improving procedures for the financing of twinning projects.

Nomination of the Commission

13. The GAC approved Member States' formal nomination for the new Commission.

European Conference

14. The third meeting of the European Conference took place on 19 July, attended by Foreign Ministers of EU Member States, Central and Eastern European candidate countries, Cyprus, Malta and Switzerland. Discussion focused on the Western Balkans, looking at the way forward and lessons to be learned from the Kosovo crisis. The Conference also agreed conclusions on combating transnational organised crime.

Co-operation Councils with Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan

The first Co-operation Councils with Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan were held on 20 July, following the entry into force of their Partnership and Co-operation Agreements with the EU on 1 July.

GCHQ (Pension Rights)

Mr. Maples: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, pursuant to his answer of 8 June 1999, *Official Report*, columns *307–08*, if he is now able to estimate the cost of compensation for loss of pension rights which have been incurred in respect of the 14 former employees of GCHQ. [92459]

Mr. Robin Cook *[holding answer 22 July 1999]:* GCHQ officials are close to reaching agreement with the CCSU on the basis for calculating the amount of compensation in each of the 14 individual cases; there remain issues relating to tax and to the precise method of payment which may have implementations for the overall cost. It is expected these will all be resolved soon. The Government Actuaries department will then be asked to calculate the precise cost of the scheme.

Sudan

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the current IGAD negotiations concerning the civil war in Sudan. [92822]

Mr. Hoon: In the run up to the current IGAD peace negotiations in Nairobi, we have been pressing the case for a comprehensive ceasefire and for the IGAD Partners Forum proposal of a secretariat which would support a sustained and accelerated negotiation.

We are following the course of the talks closely, but it is too early to confirm how successful the talks have been.

International Criminal Court Treaty

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when he plans to put forward detailed proposals for the ratification of the International Criminal Court Treaty. [92810]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: The Government will bring forward legislation to enable ratification of the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court as soon as the Parliamentary timetable permits. We are strongly committed to the Court and want to be among the first sixty States to ratify.

Burma

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations he has made to the State Peace and Development Council in Burma concerning dialogue with the Committee Representing the People's Parliament. [92811]

Mr. Hoon: Our policy is to press the SPDC to enter into substantive dialogue with democracy leaders, including Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and ethnic minority leaders. We do so regularly.

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations he has received concerning the introduction of sanctions on Burma. [92812]

Mr. Hoon: Our leading role in international action on Burma is supported by the interest shown by the public, non-governmental organisations and pressure groups in the UK in bringing pressure to bear on the regime. Representations received include calls both for and against sanctions.

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations he has made to the Burmese Government concerning the re-opening of universities and colleges. [92813]

Mr. Hoon: Since universities and colleges closed in 1996, we have raised the issue with the Burmese regime on a number of occasions. We shall continue to do so. The question has also been covered in UN resolutions, most recently that of the UN Commission on Human Rights adopted in April 1999.

Child Soldiers

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what discussions he has had with the Governments of *(a)* Liberia, *(b)* Colombia, *(c)* Nigeria, *(d)* Sri Lanka, *(e)* Sudan, *(f)* the Democratic Republic of Congo, *(g)* Sierra Leone and *(h)* Ethiopia concerning the rehabilitation of child soldiers. [92809]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: We believe that the use of children as soldiers, in contravention of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, is one of the worst violations of children's rights. We are working to encourage and assist the demobilisation and rehabilitation of child soldiers around the world.

The majority of child soldiers today are fighting in guerilla organisations, not for governments. We therefore need to take a broad approach to the issue.

Our approach is based on a combination of support for international efforts in this field, in particular the work of the UN Special Representative for Children in Armed Conflict, Olara Otunnu, whose recent visits have included Sri Lanka, Colombia and Sudan; discussions with governments, such as the Governments of Sudan, Democratic Republic of Congo and Sierra Leone; ensuring that the needs of former child soldiers are effectively addressed in any post-conflict reconstruction, eg in Sierra Leone; and, with the Department for International Development, support for practical measures to address this issue, eg in Liberia, Democratic Republic of Congo, Uganda and Sierra Leone.

We have heard allegations that Ethiopia may have used child soldiers in its war with Eritrea, but we have seen no evidence to confirm this. We continue to monitor the situation. We are not aware of any reports of the use of child soldiers in Nigeria.

Balkans

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the *(a)* mandate and *(b)* composition of the 13 July High Level Group for Kosovo and the Western Balkans. [92828]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: At the Cologne Summit of 20 June, the Heads of State of Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Russia, the UK and the US directed that the economic reconstruction process be guided by the High Level Steering Group. The first meeting of this group took place on 13 July under the joint chairmanship of Yves Thibault de Silguy of the European Commission and James Wolfensohn of the World Bank, and was attended by Finance Ministers of Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the UK, the US and Finland, the Managing Director of the IMF, the President of the EIB and the President of the EBRD, the Special Co-ordinator of the Stability Pact for South Eastern Europe, and the Deputy Secretary-General to the UN.

Ministerial Travel

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs on what date he last used a train in the course of his official duties. [92753]

Mr. Robin Cook *[holding answer 23 July 1999]:* In accordance with the terms of the Ministerial Code, Ministers are required always to make efficient and cost-effective travel arrangements. The last time I used a train in the course of my official duties was on Saturday 26 June to travel to Gatwick Airport to board a commercial flight to Rio de Janeiro to attend the EU Latin America and Caribbean Summit.

Botswana

Mr. Nigel Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on relations with Botswana. [93161]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: Relations between the UK and Botswana are excellent, and several thousand British citizens live and work in Botswana. British exports to Botswana amounted to around £20 million last year, while imports from Botswana amounted to about £77 million. The Department for International Development maintains an aid programme in-country aimed at poverty reduction, education, HIV/AIDS awareness and public sector reform. The British Council is engaged by the Government of Botswana to recruit teachers from the UK, and to place trainees in UK institutions.

Public Interest Immunity Certificates

Mr. Maples: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list with dates and

details all public interest immunity certificates he has issued since 1 May 1997. [92733]

Mr. Tony Lloyd *[holding answer 23 July 1999]:* Details of the two public interest immunity certificates signed by the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs since 1 May 1997 are as follows:

Date	*Case*
30 October 1998	R *v.* Mullen
10 April 1999	Paul and John Grecian *v.* HM Customs and Excise

In both cases, disclosure of the documents referred to in the certificates would have caused real harm to the work of the security and intelligence agencies.

In addition, one certificate was signed by another Foreign Office Minister, Baroness Symons of Vernham Dean, on 26 September 1997 in the case of Rowland and Norgen *v.* Bock and Gouden Akker Properties. Disclosure of the document referred to in the certificate would have caused serious harm to the UK's foreign relations and could have revealed the identity of an informant.

Postal Services (Yugoslavia)

Mr. Syms: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when the postal services between the United Kingdom and Yugoslavia will be returned to the level applying before the recent military operation. [92638]

Mr. Tony Lloyd *[holding answer 23 July 1999]:* The United Nations civilian presence in Kosovo has identified 10 key areas which are priorities for rehabilitation. The postal service is one of these.

The Royal Mail have informed us that they hope to re-establish a surface mail service between the UK and the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY) within the next fortnight, but that no alternative route for air mail services has yet been identified given the flight ban between the territory of the EU and that of the FRY.

Sanctions and Arms Embargoes

Mr. Anthony D. Wright: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list the sanctions and arms embargoes currently implemented by the United Kingdom. [93581]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: As of today's date, the United Kingdom implements Security Council resolutions which impose arms embargoes or wider sanctions regimes in relation to Angola, Iraq, Liberia, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Sudan and the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. The Government have also implemented an arms embargo on Ethiopia and Eritrea, called for in non-binding SCR 1227 (1998).

The United Kingdom implements additional sanctions imposed by the European Union of Afghanistan, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Burma, China, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Croatia, the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, the Gambia, Libya and Sudan.

The UK currently implements two arms embargoes as a result of decisions by the OSCE—on Armenia and Azerbaijan.

There is also a national arms embargo on Iran.

I shall keep the House informed of current sanctions regimes and arms embargoes and their scope on a yearly basis. All new sanctions or arms embargoes and any amendments to existing sanctions or arms embargoes will be announced at the time. We shall be laying a list of sanctions regimes and arms embargoes implemented by the UK in the Libraries of the Houses. A "Summary of Additional UK Restrictions on the Export of Strategic Goods" which includes details of additional national controls, will be annexed to this list. Both documents will shortly be available on the FCO website. These documents replace the "Summary of Government Commitments Regarding the Application of Strategic Export Controls", copies of which are currently in the Libraries of the Houses and on the FCO website. An updated version of the sanctions list will be laid in the Library annually or more frequently if policy changes require a revision.

Westminster Foundation for Democracy

Mr. Anthony D. Wright: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when the annual report of the Westminster Foundation for Democracy will be available. [93582]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: Copies of the Westminster Foundation for Democracy's annual report for 1998–99 will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses this week.

The foundation makes a valuable contribution to the promotion of democracy overseas. Its activities include providing assistance to political parties, parliaments, the independent media, trade unions, human rights groups, women's groups and other non-governmental organisations involved in political development.

In 1998–99, the foundation received £3,168,815 from the FCO, along with £211,256 from corporate and charity sources. With these funds it supported 274 new projects and managed another 223. It directed most of its funds to supporting democratic institutions in its priority areas, which are: Central and Eastern Europe, the Commonwealth of Independent States and Anglophone Africa. It also supported worthwhile projects in other parts of the world, such as South East Asia and the Middle-East.

In particular, the foundation initiated three important technical assistance projects in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Nigeria and Indonesia, all of which are undergoing crucial transition processes towards fair and free democracy. The foundation can also pride itself on groundbreaking work in Qatar in the lead up to their Central Municipal Council elections, where women were given the vote and allowed to stand as candidates for the first time ever in the Gulf states. Most recently, the foundation has been preparing the ground to initiate projects in Kosovo, if and when this is appropriate.

Export Restrictions (Balkans)

Mr. Tony Clarke: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what United

Kingdom specific export restrictions currently apply to Bosnia-Herzegovina and Croatia; for what reasons; and what proposals the Government have to lift them. [93583]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: UK national export controls in general apply to all countries.

The only UK specific export control currently in place on Bosnia-Herzegovina and Croatia is Group 3, Part 1, Schedule 1 of the Export of Goods (Control) Order 1994, which prohibits the export without an export licence of certain all-wheel drive utility vehicles capable of off-road use, heavy-duty recovery vehicles and drop-sided trucks.

This control was introduced to address concerns that such vehicles might be used by paramilitary groups against British troops deployed on peacekeeping duties in the former Yugoslavia.

We are currently taking steps to remove this control in respect of Bosnia-Herzegovina and Croatia, as we no longer perceive the uncontrolled export of these vehicles as a threat to British troops.

EU Arms Embargo

Mr. Tony Clarke: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent changes there have been to the EU arms embargo against Bosnia-Herzegovina; and if he will make a statement. [93584]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: The Council of the European Union adopted on 19 July a Council Decision amending Common Position 96/184/CFSP to allow transfers of small arms to the police forces in Bosnia-Herzegovina. This decision was taken in order to promote peace and stability in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Member States are required to inform the Council of any transfers made under this exemption. The export of small arms to the police forces in Bosnia-Herzegovina remains licenseable under the terms of the Export of Goods (Control) Order 1994, as amended.

Diplomatic Immunity

Mr. Anthony D. Wright: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many serious offences were alleged to have been committed in 1998 by persons entitled to immunity. [93585]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: From a community of over 17,500 persons entitled to immunity, 21 alleged serious offences by such persons were drawn to the attention of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office in 1998. "Serious offences" are defined in accordance with the 1985 White Paper on Diplomatic Immunities and Privileges, i.e., as any offence that would in certain circumstances carry a maximum penalty of 6 months or more imprisonment. The majority of alleged serious offences in 1998 involved driving under the influence of drink and shoplifting.

Lord Levy

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the nature of the briefings provided to Lord Levy prior to his recent visit to Syria and Jordan. [93054]

Mr. Robin Cook: The Foreign and Commonwealth Office provided Lord Levy with background briefing on Syria and Jordan before his visit.

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, pursuant to his oral answer of 20 July 1999, *Official Report*, column 962, on the middle-east, if he will place in the Library the full texts of telegrams from British posts in Jordan and Syria concerning the diplomatic missions carried out by Lord Levy. [92941]

Mr. Robin Cook: Under the Code of Practice on access to government information, exemption 2, internal telegrams are not made public. This is in line with previous government practice.

However, I can inform the hon. Member that our Ambassador in Amman reported that Lord Levy's was

> "a highly successful visit which has given a valuable fillip to bilateral relations".

Our Ambassador in Damascus said he was "most grateful" to Lord Levy for undertaking a programme of "notably warm and substantive meetings".

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, pursuant to his answer to the hon. Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Mr. Maples) of 13 July 1999, *Official Report*, column *140*, on the Prime Minister's personal representative, if he will list Lord Levy's official engagements in Jordan and Syria. [92942]

Mr. Hoon: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave to the hon. Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Mr. Maples) on 13 July 1999, *Official Report*, column *140*.

Ministerial Visits

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, pursuant to his answer of 6 July 1999, *Official Report*, column *464*, on ministerial visits, if he will list the dates on which he and his ministers plan to be absent from the office during the summer adjournment for reasons other than departmental business. [93089]

Mr. Robin Cook: Ministers' holiday plans during the summer adjournment are personal and it is not the normal practice to disclose such information.

UN Commission on Human Rights

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, pursuant to his answer of 8 July 1999, *Official Report*, column 597, on the 55th Session of the UN Commission on Human Rights, what are the terms of reference of the Special Rapporteur study; and what measures he will take to promote public awareness of the study. [92931]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: The sub-Commission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities recommended the appointment of a Special Rapporteur in August 1998. The mandate has to be endorsed by the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), currently under way in Geneva. Subject to ECOSOC's approval, the Special Rapporteur will carry out a study on the concept practice of Affirmative Action to be presented to the Sub-Commission. The Special Rapporteur will invite comments from governments and NGOs preparing his study.

Public Appointments

Joan Ruddock: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many appointments to public bodies were made by his Department in *(a)* 1997–98 and *(b)* 1998–99, broken down by (i) gender and (ii) ethnicity; and if he will list the chairmen appointed to those bodies in those years, similarly broken down. [92521]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: The following appointments or reappointments were made to FCO non-departmental public bodies in 1997, 1998 and 1999.

	1997	*1998*	*1999*
Total number of appointments	33	54	21
Male	24	35	14
Female	9	19	7
Of White origin	33	47	18
Of Black origin	—	3	—
Of Asian origin	—	3	3
Other	—	1	—

1997

Mr. D. A. Thompson

Baroness Shirley Williams

1998

Sir R. Braithwaite

Baroness Kennedy

1999

Sir Keith Morris; of White origin

Ernie Ross MP[1]; of White origin.

Information on the ethnic origin of individuals appointed before 1 April 1999 was given in confidence. We cannot therefore disclose it.

[1] Mr. Ross was appointed by the Secretary of State as one of 13 governors of the Westminster Foundation for Democracy. The governors in turn elect one of their number, in this case Mr. Ross, to act as chair.

Written Answers to Questions

Tuesday 27 July 1999

CABINET OFFICE

European Communities Working Groups

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office if he will make a statement on the *(a)* purpose and *(b)* activities over the past 12 months of the (i) Horizontal Questions Working Group, (ii) General Affairs Working Group and (iii) Quality of Legislation Working Group, meeting at European Communities level. [91877]

Mr. Kilfoyle: The Horizontal Questions Working Group reports to the Internal Market Council, and deals with cross-cutting issues concerning the internal market. Cabinet Office interest in the Working Group is confined to discussions on better regulation and simplification of legislation at the European level.

The General Affairs Working Group reports primarily to the General Affairs Council (i.e. Foreign Ministers) and deals with a very wide range of general EU internal (co-ordination, institutions, etc.) and external (foreign relations) matters. Cabinet Office interest is via the Civil Service Corporate Management (CSCM) in discussing terms and conditions of employment of European civil servants (i.e. those employed in the Commission, Council Secretariat, European Parliament Secretariat, etc.) and in terms and conditions for MEPs.

The Quality of Legislation Working Group, a time-limited group is working on the negotiation of an Inter-Institutional Agreement (i.e. between the European Parliament, the Commission and the Council) on the quality of drafting of Community legislation. Cabinet Office interest is via the Cabinet Office Legal Advisors (COLA), the Regulatory Impact Unit (RIU) and its legal advisers.

My right hon. Friend the Minister for the Cabinet Office will not be making a statement at this stage.

Public Appointments

Joan Ruddock: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office how many appointments to public bodies were made by his Department in *(a)* 1997–98 and *(b)* 1998–99, broken down by (i) gender and (ii) ethnicity; and if he will list the chairmen appointed to those bodies in those years, similarly broken down. [92518]

Mr. Kilfoyle: For the purposes of this answer it includes appointments made by my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Cabinet Office and Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and those made by the Prime Minister to public bodies for which the Cabinet Office is responsible.

The public bodies for which my right hon. Friend is responsible as Minister for the Cabinet Office and Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster are: the Advisory Committee on Advertising; the Advisory Committee on Justices of the Peace in Lancashire, Greater Manchester and Merseyside; the Better Regulation Task Force; the Civil Service Appeal Board and the People's Panel Advisory Group.

The Prime Minister appoints members to: the Advisory Committee on Business Appointments; the Committee on Standards in Public Life; the Security Commission and Security Vetting Appeals Panel; the Political Honours Scrutiny Committee; the British Government Panel on Sustainable Development and the Senior Salaries Review Body. There are no ministerial appointments to positions in the Women's National Commission.

The details of appointments made are given in the table. However, while appointments have been made to women and members of ethnic minority groups I am unable, with the exception of gender information for the Advisory Committee on JPs, to disclose the numbers as to do so would risk identifying individuals without their consent.

	April 1997 to March 1998		*April 1998 to March 1999*	
	Members	*Chair*	*Members*	*Chair*
Advisory Committee on Business Appointments	3	1	4	0
Advisory Committee on Advertising	0	1	6	0
Advisory Committee on JPs	18 Male 19 Female	0	10 Male 7 Female	0
Better Regulation Task Force	15	1	2	0
Civil Service Appeal Board	9	1	11	0
Committee on Standards in Public Life	8	1	1	0
Security Commission	0	0	2	0
Security Vetting Appeals Panel	5	1	0	0
Political Honours Scrutiny Committee	1	0	0	0
British Government Panel on Sustainable Development	0	0	5	1
Senior Salaries Review Body	0	0	4	1
People's Panel Advisory Group	5	1	0	0

The Government have made some progress in increasing representation of women, members of ethnic minority groups and of people with disabilities. Full departmental plans on equal opportunities were published by the Government on 25 May 1999 and deposited in the Libraries of both Houses. The plans set objectives and targets for improving representation of women, people from ethnic minority groups and from people with disabilities.

Anti-drugs Strategy

Mr. Field: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what funding programmes local drug rehabilitation and prevention organisations can apply for under the Government's anti-drugs strategy. [93202]

Dr. Jack Cunningham: Local drug service providers can bid to provide services under the prison service drugs strategy programme and the health and social services programmes and for contracts to provide services for the probation service.

It is the role of Drug Action Teams and local commissioning agencies to ensure that individual services work coherently within a local strategic framework. Local service providers may seek guidance from the Drug Action Team on making bids for funding. Bids should be made to the relevant statutory agencies.

Equal Treatment

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office if he has established a baseline for policy appraisal against which to measure progress on equal treatment. [93464]

Mr. Kilfoyle: As part of the Government's commitment to ensuring that their policies are relevant to the lives that people live today my Department is working with the Women's Unit, Home Office, and DfEE to develop good practices for ensuring that our policies meet the changing needs of all members of society.

"Policy Appraisal for Equal Treatment", published by the Cabinet Office, Home Office, DfEE and the Women's Unit in November 1998, has been circulated to staff within my Department to ensure that the effects of any policy changes on all sections of the population are considered at the earliest stage of policy development.

As part of the Modernising Government White Paper, we have made a commitment to increasing the number of female senior civil servants from 18 per cent. to 35 per cent. and those from ethnic minorities from 1.6 per cent. to 3.2 per cent. by 2004–05. We will be setting targets for people with disabilities later in the year.

Modernising Government White Paper

Mr. Browne: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office when he will publish the milestones for meeting the commitments set out in the Modernising Government White Paper. [93279]

Dr. Jack Cunningham: The Modernising Government White Paper was published on 30 March 1999 (CM3981). It set out key policies and principles underpinning the Government's long-term programme of reform to modernise public service. The programme involves everyone working in public services and everyone who uses them.

I have today published a document setting out the milestones that need to be reached in order to meet the commitments we made in the White Paper. As we make clear in the document, our approach to ensuring that these commitments are taken forward means identifying key strategic drivers for change as well as the achievement of specific targets. We will be doing more work to develop measurable outcomes and will include them within the work on the next round of public service agreements.

The document describes progress to date in Modernising Government and work that will lead to further changes over coming months. The table of milestones names officials able to provide more detail on specific aspects. It is also being published electronically on the Cabinet Office website which we intend updating regularly to show progress. Copies of the document will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

PRESIDENT OF THE COUNCIL

Millennium Compliance

Mr. McWalter: To ask the President of the Council, pursuant to her oral answer of 26 July 1999, *Official Report*, column 15, to the hon. Member for South Staffordshire (Sir P. Cormack) when the July monthly Statement on millennium compliance in the public sector will be made. [93807]

Mrs. Beckett: The Statement was made by way of written question on 23 July 1999, *Official Report*, column *665*.

Parliamentary Questions

Mr. Brady: To ask the President of the Council how many parliamentary questions have been tabled to her Department for written answer on a named day since 15 April; and what percentage of them received a substantive response on that day. [87316]

Mrs. Beckett: Of the 12 written questions tabled to my Department for a named day since 15 April, 85 per cent. (11) received an answer on that day.

Mr. Brady: To ask the President of the Council how many parliamentary questions were tabled to his Department for written answer on a named day between May 1997 and 14 April 1999; and what percentage of them received a substantive response on that named day. [91062]

Mrs. Beckett: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave him on 15 April 1999, *Official Report*, column *302*.

HOUSE OF COMMONS

Organic Waste

Mr. Brake: To ask the Chairman of the Administration Committee if the House of Commons composts organic waste produced on the Parliamentary Estate. [93328]

Mrs. Roe: The Palace of Westminster contract for waste disposal does not specify that organic waste should be composted.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Sure Start

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how much money from the Sure Start

Programme has been granted to projects in the parliamentary constituencies of *(a)* Birkenhead, *(b)* Wallasey, *(c)* Wirral, West and *(d)* Wirral, South. [91248]

Ms Jowell: No money from the Sure Start programme has been granted to projects in the parliamentary constituencies of Birkenhead, Wallasey, Wirral, West and Wirral, South. These parliamentary constituencies were not included within the 60 areas of the country invited to develop a local Sure Start programme in the first round. The 60 areas were chosen as trailblazers because they were areas which scored highly on an index of local deprivation and were areas where there was existing local capacity, so that they could set up quickly and therefore play a mentoring role to future programmes.

We aim to set up 250 programmes in England by 2001–02 and are planning to invite a second round of applications in the autumn.

Laboratory Teaching

Dr. Gibson: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment with what scientific professional and academic organisations he has had discussions on *(a)* the improvement of the school scientific laboratory infrastructure and *(b)* the laboratory teaching of (i) physics, (ii) chemistry, (iii) biology, (iv) environmental sciences and (v) other sciences. [91279]

Mr. Charles Clarke: I, my ministerial colleagues and officials have regular meetings with a number of academic and professional organisations, notably the Association for Science Education, to discuss various aspects of science teaching. We have had no meetings specifically to discuss school scientific laboratory infrastructure and teaching, but we are considering how best to work together with relevant organisations on this and other areas. We are committed to developing partnerships with such organisations to improve standards in all subjects, including science, and I will be working to improve and expand such partnerships in the coming months.

Gender Impact Assessment

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list the subject of each gender impact assessment drawn up by his Department since June 1997, stating in each case whether the outcome has been *(a)* put out to consultation and *(b)* published. [91685]

Ms Hodge: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given to her by my right hon. Friend the Minister for Public Health on 22 July 1999, *Official Report*, column *636*.

As part of the Government's commitment to ensuring that their policies are relevant to the lives that people live today, the Department for Education and Employment is working closely with the Women's Unit to develop good practices for carrying out gender impact appraisal.

Higher Education

Mr. Alan Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many students enrolled in full-time higher education courses in England and Wales in each of the years from 1993 to 1998; and how many such students failed to complete their courses in each of those years. [91930]

Mr. Mudie: The number of entrants to higher education courses, in each of these years, is given in the table.

Home Domiciled Entrants to Higher Education Courses [1]
England and Wales

	1993 [2]	*1994*	*1995*	*1996*	*1997*	*1998*
Undergraduate						
Under 21	194,656	199,151	200,754	204,118	216,936	217,365
21 and over	203,210	210,317	228,552	226,085	220,906	218,494
Postgraduate	99,083	122,974	126,254	118,876	123,841	129,373
Total entrants	496,949	532,442	555,560	549,079	561,683	565,232

Note:
1. Full-time and part-time courses. Excluding HE students in FE colleges.
2. Figures for 1993 were collected on a different basis to those in later years. Includes a small number of HE students in FE colleges in Wales.

The available information on non-completion consists of UK level full-time and sandwich first degree non-completion rates published in the Departmental Annual Report. The table shows these non-completion rates for the same period:

UK [1] *Full-time and sandwich first degree non-completion rates*

	Percentage
Year	*Non-completion* [2]
1993–94	[3]17–18
1994–95	[3]17–18
1995–96	[3]18–19
1996–97	[4]n/a
1997–98	[4]n/a
1998–99	[4]n/a

[1] The institutional coverage of the non-completion rates is restricted to the former UFC-funded universities in the UK and former polytechnics in England.
[2] "Non-completion" covers all those leaving degree courses because of exam failure, ill health, personal and other reasons. It includes those switching to a lower level course but it excludes students transferring between degree courses or subjects.
[3] Ranges are given, because the introduction of a new data source in 1994–95 made it difficult to measure non-completion, under existing definitions, accurately.
[4] n/a = not available.

"Non-completion" covers those who leave full-time and sandwich first degree courses for various reasons including exam failure, but students who failed their final examinations are not separately identified. The non-completion rates relate to a narrower range of courses and have a different institutional coverage than the entrant

figures shown. Therefore, it would be inappropriate to use the non-completion rates shown to estimate the number of entrants each year who did not complete.

The Department is currently working with the higher education funding bodies in the UK to develop a method of calculating non-completion rates which can be applied to all UK higher education institutions and which takes into account the non-traditional routes that some students follow. These routes may include changing courses or institutions, repeating years or leaving higher education for a year or more before continuing their studies.

It is intended to publish the results of this work in the next Departmental Annual Report.

Departmental Vehicles

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list for *(a)* his Department and *(b)* associated bodies listed in the National Asset Register, how many vehicles are currently (i) owned and (ii) leased; if he will indicate their (1) fuel types and (2) engine cubic capacities; how many of the vehicles due for replacement by (A) his Department and (B) associated bodies listed in the National Asset Register will be replaced in (x) 1999–2000, (y) 2000–1 and (z) 2001–2 by vehicles using (a1) petrol, (b2) diesel, (c3) natural gas, (d4) electric batteries and (e5) other; and how much his Department plans to spend in each year on vehicle replacements. [90689]

Mr. Mudie *[holding answer 19 July 1999]:* The information provided in the following table is in respect of vehicles owned and leased by the DfEE, its non departmental public bodies (NDPBs), the Employment Service Agency (ES) and the Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED).

Currently 977 vehicles owned and 536 leased; 1,005 of which are petrol, 506 diesel and 2 LPG.

Engine cc	*Petrol*	*Diesel*	*Petrol/Gas*	*Owned*	*Leased*
Up to 1600	344	42	—	359	27
1600–1799	192	222	—	328	86
1800–2000	418	151	2	197	374
2001–2200	39	22	—	14	47
Over 2200	12	69	—	79	2
Total	1,005	506	2	977	536

DfEE does not use a replacement cycle as the basis for replacing vehicles. Vehicles are replaced only when a new business case from a user is approved. The DfEE and the Employment Service continue to be "on target" to reduce their fleet size.

In ES, there are now 284 vehicles less than in 1998 with the number continuing to fall. In DfEE, only 1 (one) replacement vehicle has been applied for under the Private User Scheme following the tightening of these rules.

Teachers (State Schools)

Mr. Crausby: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many teachers joined the profession in state schools in each of the last five years; how many left; and if he will make a statement. [92288]

Ms Estelle Morris: The number of teachers entering and leaving full-time service in the maintained nursery primary and secondary sector in England and Wales, 1991–92 to 1995–96 were as follows:

	Financial year				
	1991–92	*1992–93*	*1993–94*	*1994–95*	*1995–96*
(a) Entrants to full-time teaching in the maintained nursery, primary and secondary sector					
New entrants	15,900	16,900	18,100	19,300	19,500
Those who in previous March were:					
In full-time service in another sector	1,200	1,200	1,000	1,000	900
In part-time service in any sector	5,500	5,100	5,000	5,300	4,800
In other service (mainly occasional)	1,000	900	900	900	800
Out of service	8,200	7,800	6,300	6,600	6,100
Previously retired	100	100	200	200	100
Total	16,000	15,100	13,300	13,900	12,800
Total entrants	32,000	32,000	31,300	33,200	32,300
(b) Movement from full-time teaching in the maintained nursery, primary and secondary sector					
Those who moved to:					
Full-time service in another sector	2,500	1,800	1,700	2,000	2,000
Part-time service in any sector	5,200	4,900	5,700	5,500	5,900
Other Service (mainly occasional)	1,000	1,000	900	700	800
Out of service	12,900	11,700	10,800	11,400	9,800
Retirement	11,200	11,600	12,900	12,400	13,100
Other [1]	100	200	400	400	300
Total	32,900	31,200	32,300	32,300	32,000

[1] The 'other' category includes those whose position is not known.

Notes:

1. The period 1995–96 is the latest for which full records of teacher movements are available.
2. The latest teacher retirement data shows that early retirements from the maintained nursery, primary and secondary sector, England and Wales fell from 15,500 in financial year 1997–98 to 4,600 in 1998–99.
3. The full-time equivalent teachers in service in the maintained nursery, primary and secondary sector in England rose by 4,100 (1 per cent.) between January 1998 and 1999.

New Deal (Disabled People)

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many disabled people have found work as a result of *(a)* the New Deal for 18 to 24 year olds, *(b)* the New Deal for lone parents and *(c)* the New Deal for over 50 year olds in each claimant area to date. [92266]

Mr. Andrew Smith: Latest statistics to the end of April 1999 show the following job outcomes for people with disabilities under the New Deal for Young People:

Unit of delivery	*Total job outcomes*
Tayside	128
Ayrshire	122
Borders	36
Dumfries and Galloway	41
Dunbarton	51
Edinburgh, East and Mid Lothian	137
Fife	114
Forth Valley	57
Glasgow	143
Grampian	53
Moray, Strathspay and Badenoch	19
Lanarkshire	147
Renfrewshire	112
West Lothian	51
Argyll and The Islands	19
Caithness and Sutherland	10
Inverness and Nairn	13
Lochaber	5
Western Isles	18
Orkney	3
Ross and Cromarty	15
Shetland	5
Skye and Lochalsh	3
Newcastle, Gateshead and South Tyneside	245
Northumberland	53
Tyneside North	51
Durham North and Durham South	209
City of Sunderland formerly Wearside	86
Tees North and Tees South	158
Cumbria	167
Wirral	137
Blackpool, Fylde and Wyre	60
Bolton	52
Bury	28
Central Lancashire	94
Cheshire	108
City Pride Manchester	299
East Lancashire	124
Halton and Warrington	75
Knowsley	44
Liverpool	166
North Lancashire	38
Oldham	35
Rochdale	64
Sefton	84
St. Helens	58
Stockport	45
West Lancashire	31
Wigan	86
Sheffield	164
Rotherham	122
South Humber	165
Calderdale and Kirklees	175
Barnsley and The Dearne	92
Bradford	144
Hull and East Coast formerly Hull	230
Leeds	178
North Yorkshire	121
Wakefield and Doncaster	207
West Wales	150
Swansea	201
North West Wales	103
Powys	20
Ceredigion	32
North East Wales formerly Flintshire and Wrexham	64
North Wales Coast	35
Cardiff and Vale	113
Bridgend and Glamorgan Valleys	96
Heads of the Valley and Caerphilly	153
Newport, Torfaen and Monmouth	129
Black Country	426
Birmingham	230
Solihull	18
Staffordshire	229
Hereford and Worcester	112
Coventry	72
Warwickshire	56
Shropshire	91
Southern Derbyshire	172
Cambridge TTWA	64
North Derbyshire	113
Leicestershire	124
Lincolnshire	113
Norfolk	121
West Norfolk	44
Northamptonshire	67
Greater Nottingham	130
North Nottinghamshire	118
Peterborough	68
Suffolk	79
Waveney	51
Cornwall	365
Bath and North East Somerset and North Somerset	83
Bristol and South Gloucestershire formerly Central Bristol	110
Dorset	170
Exeter and East Devon	61
Torbay and South Devon formerly South Devon	82
North Devon	46
Gloucestershire	83
Plymouth	137
Somerset	126
Wiltshire and Swindon formerly Wiltshire	120
Eastbourne and Hastings formerly Eastbourne	113
Lambeth	41
Harlow	19
Hackney and City	39
Hertfordshire	164
Brighton	74
Canterbury	91
Channel	70
Chatham	143
Crawley	20
Croydon and Bromley	133
Guildford	51
Lewisham	62
Maidstone, Dartford and West Kent	98
Southwark	65
Greenwich	70
Bexley	33
Sutton, Merton Esher, Kingston, Epsom	109
Wandsworth	43
West Sussex Coastal Plain	49
South Essex	192
North Essex formerly North and Mid Essex	146
Edgware and Leaside	85
North East London	58
Havering, Barking and Dagenham	73
Newham	63
Tower Hamlets	15
Camden and North Islington	42
Ealing and Hillingdon formerly Ealing	48

Unit of delivery	Total job outcomes
Bedfordshire and Luton	76
Milton Keynes and North Buckinghamshire	43
Mid Hants	21
Oxfordshire	56
Portsmouth and South East Hampshire	89
Isle of Wight	39
Reading	42
Slough	72
Southampton and South West Hampshire	58
Wembley	53
Westminster	14
Hounslow and Richmond	44
Hammersmith, Fulham, Kensington, Chelsea	39
Total	13,329

Latest statistics to the end of April 1999 show the following job outcomes for people with disabilities under the NDLP:

Employment service regional office	Total job outcomes
Scotland	38
London and the South East	70
South West	23
East Midlands and Eastern	32
West Midlands	48
Wales	28
Yorkshire and the Humber	29
North West	63
Northern	28
Great Britain total	359

Notes:
1. These figures relate to lone parents receiving in-work support while on NDLP and those who have left NDLP for employment.
2. Statistics are not broken down below regional level.

The initial pilots for New Deal for those over the age of 50 are not due to start until October 1999 followed by the main rollout in April 2000.

Parliamentary Studies

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what steps his Department is taking to promote knowledge of, and interest in, parliamentary government through schools; and if he will make a statement. [92635]

Mr. Charles Clarke: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Employment announced his proposals for the review of the National Curriculum in England in May 1999. This includes for the first time a proposed framework for citizenship in schools as a distinct statutory entitlement at Key Stages 3 and 4. Pupils will learn about key aspects of parliamentary government, elections and voting, and local and central government.

Nursery Education

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment, pursuant to his answer of 6 July 1999, *Official Report*, column *526*, on nursery education, what is the number of three-year-olds in each of the relevant local education authorities that *(a)* currently have free full-time early education places and *(b)* will have free full-time early education places when the promised additional places are provided, defining full-time as five or more sessions of early education per week. [92218]

Ms Hodge *[holding answer 22 July 1999]:* The Government are committed to almost doubling the proportion of three-year-olds with free nursery education. As the first stage in that process, we are creating 48,000 places in 1999–2000. The available information is shown in the following table.

Numbers of free early years places provided for three-year-olds in the relevant local education authority areas in England

	Number of free, three-year-old places provided by LEAs in maintained nursery and primary schools [1]	Estimated additional places to be created in 1999–2000
Barking and Dagenham	1,329	262
Barnsley	1,406	885
Birmingham	7,420	6,059
Blackburn with Darwen	1,024	600
Blackpool	316	1,058
Bolton	2,104	748
Bradford	4,694	1,220
Brent	1,708	1,017
Camden	928	831
County Durham	3,786	301
Coventry	1,968	1,229
Doncaster	2,249	593
Ealing	2,686	410
Gateshead	1,313	625
Greenwich	1,889	821
Hackney	1,624	1,444
Halton	663	544
Hammersmith and Fulham	1,061	595
Haringey	1,949	704
Hartlepool	1,193	34
Hounslow	1,505	250
Islington	1,283	1,043
Kingston upon Hull	2,252	460
Knowsley	2,032	65
Lambeth	1,911	1,646
Leeds	6,231	1,247
Leicester	2,343	1,412
Lewisham	1,877	1,566
Liverpool	3,920	1,167
Manchester	4,229	563
Middlesbrough	1,840	57
Newcastle upon Tyne	1,789	762
Newham	3,189	1,618
North East Lincolnshire	1,010	629
North Tyneside	1,816	68
Nottingham	2,573	1,016
Oldham	1,594	1,086
Redcar and Cleveland	1,784	54
Rochdale	1,374	900
Rotherham	1,443	1,186
Salford	2,113	154
Sandwell	3,106	466
Sheffield	2,837	2,565
South Tyneside	1,476	73
Southwark	2,278	958
St. Helens	1,113	282
Stockton-on-Tees	2,001	66
Stoke-on-Trent	1,950	439
Sunderland	2,342	469
Tameside	1,620	593
Tower Hamlets	2,405	275
Wakefield	2,625	581
Walsall	2,951	102
Waltham Forest	1,281	1,562

Numbers of free early years places provided for three-year-olds in the relevant local education authority areas in England

	Number of free, three-year-old places provided by LEAs in maintained nursery and primary schools [1]	*Estimated additional places to be created in 1999–2000*
Wandsworth	1,584	1,601
Wirral	1,714	1,437
Wolverhampton	2,654	100
Total	123,355	43,498

[1] Position as at January 1999

New Deal Jobs (Bolton)

Mr. Crausby: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many jobs have been created in Bolton as a result of the introduction of the Government's New Deal. [92700]

Mr. Andrew Smith: New Deal is not a job creation scheme. However, in the Bolton Unit of Delivery for the period ending April 1999, 298 people have found sustained work through the New Deal for 18 to 24-year-olds and New Deal for those aged 25-plus.

Nursery Places (Leicestershire)

Mr. David Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many nursery places are available in *(a)* North West Leicestershire and *(b)* Leicestershire with Leicester; what proportion this represents of the numbers of children in the appropriate age groups; and what proportions of children of nursery age nationally have access to nursery places. [92076]

Ms Hodge *[holding answer 22 July 1999]:* The information is not available in the form requested. The available information is shown.

Number of pupils aged under five in maintained nursery and primary schools by Local Education Authority area in England, January 1999 (provisional)

	City of Leicester and Leicestershire	*Rutland*	*England*
Pupils in nursery schools and nursery classes in primary schools	4,750	101	366,914
Percentage of under 5 population at 31 December 1998	21	12	30
Pupils in infant classes in primary schools	5,368	208	355,090
Percentage of under 5 population at 31 December 1998	24	26	29
All pupils under 5 in nursery and primary schools	10,118	309	722,004
Percentage of under 5 population at 31 December 1998	44	38	58

Ministerial Travel

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment on what date he last used a train in the course of his official duties. [92648]

Mr. Mudie *[holding answer 23 July 1999]:* In accordance with the terms of the Ministerial Code, Ministers are required always to make efficient and cost-effective travel arrangements. Trips in and around London, which account for the majority of my working week, will normally be made by Government Car. The last time I used a train in the course of my official duties was earlier this month when visiting Birmingham.

Pupil Exclusions

Ms Buck: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many children were permanently excluded from school *(a)* per 1,000 of the school age population and *(b)* as a percentage of children from each ethnic group, in each local authority area in London. [93068]

Ms Estelle Morris: The information requested is shown in the tables.

Numbers and proportion of permanent exclusions in schools in the Greater London local education authority areas January 1999 (provisional)

	Primary [1]		*Secondary* [1]		*Special* [2]	
	Number of permanent exclusions	*Per 1000 of the school population* [3]	*Number of permanent exclusions*	*Per 1000 of the school population* [3]	*Number of permanent exclusions*	*Per 1000 of the school population* [3]
City of London	0	0.0	[4]—	[4]—	[4]—	[4]—
Camden	11	1.0	34	3.1	5	16.2
Hackney	22	1.2	21	2.9	3	6.9
Hammersmith & Fulham	12	1.3	39	6.3	1	3.3
Haringey	5	0.2	38	3.7	3	7.8
Islington	8	0.5	38	5.0	1	3.7
Kensington & Chelsea	5	0.7	33	9.7	0	0.0
Lambeth	15	0.8	40	5.9	7	10.9
Lewisham	22	1.0	50	4.5	5	9.3
Newham	12	0.4	42	2.6	0	0.0
Southwark	15	0.6	76	8.1	5	10.9
Tower Hamlets	5	0.2	39	2.9	5	10.0
Wandsworth	10	0.6	59	6.3	7	9.1
Westminster	3	0.3	60	7.8	0	0.0

Numbers and proportion of permanent exclusions in schools in the Greater London local education authority areas January 1999 (provisional)

	Primary [1]		Secondary [1]		Special [2]	
	Number of permanent exclusions	Per 1000 of the school population [3]	Number of permanent exclusions	Per 1000 of the school population [3]	Number of permanent exclusions	Per 1000 of the school population [3]
Barking	9	0.5	38	3.7	0	0.0
Barnet	8	0.3	65	3.2	4	10.3
Bexley	11	0.5	59	3.8	2	5.5
Brent	7	0.3	90	6.5	0	0.0
Bromley	10	0.4	83	4.4	0	0.0
Croydon	17	0.5	85	5.4	6	10.9
Ealing	11	0.4	71	5.0	0	0.0
Enfield	10	0.4	74	3.9	3	5.9
Greenwich	8	0.4	48	3.5	5	6.9
Harrow	5	0.2	50	6.1	5	24.6
Havering	4	0.2	66	4.5	0	0.0
Hillingdon	3	0.1	52	3.4	3	4.8
Hounslow	8	0.4	61	4.0	2	5.4
Kingston upon Thames	0	0.0	27	3.3	2	8.9
Merton	4	0.2	32	4.1	0	0.0
Redbridge	5	0.2	29	1.7	1	2.4
Richmond upon Thames	1	0.1	53	7.0	0	0.0
Sutton	6	0.4	37	2.9	2	7.1
Waltham Forest	10	0.5	76	6.3	3	4.1

[1] Includes middle schools as deemed
[2] Includes maintained and non-maintained special schools
[3] Numbers of permanent exclusions expressed as a proportion (per 1000) of the number of full-time and part-time pupils of all ages in primary, secondary and special schools, excluding dually registered pupils in special schools in January 1998
[4] Not applicable (no schools of this type)

Percentages [1] of permanent exclusions of pupils of compulsory school age by ethnic group in the Greater London education authority areas January 1999 (provisional)

	White	Black Caribbean	Black African	Black other	Indian	Pakistani	Bangladeshi	Chinese	Any other
City of London	0.0	0.0	0.0	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—
Camden	0.2	1.9	0.1	0.4	0.0	0.6	0.0	0.0	0.3
Greenwich	0.2	0.5	0.3	0.4	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.3	0.2
Hackney	0.2	0.5	0.2	0.4	0.1	0.4	0.0	0.0	0.2
Hammersmith & Fulham	0.3	0.8	0.5	0.9	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.5
Islington	0.4	0.6	0.3	0.2	0.0	0.0	0.1	0.0	0.1
Kensington & Chelsea	0.7	0.7	1.0	0.8	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.3
Lambeth	0.2	0.7	0.1	0.2	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	1.0
Lewisham	0.1	0.6	0.3	0.3	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.4
Southwark	0.2	1.0	0.2	1.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.2	0.1
Tower Hamlets	0.2	0.4	0.1	0.6	0.0	0.0	0.1	0.0	0.7
Wandsworth	0.3	0.8	0.3	0.6	0.0	0.1	0.0	0.4	0.2
Westminster	0.3	1.1	0.2	0.7	0.0	0.0	0.1	0.0	0.3
Barking	0.2	0.2	0.2	1.8	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.5
Barnet	0.1	1.2	0.2	0.5	0.1	0.2	0.0	0.0	0.1
Bexley	0.2	0.6	0.5	1.2	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Brent	0.2	1.1	0.4	0.5	0.0	0.1	0.0	0.0	0.1
Bromley	0.2	0.7	0.9	1.1	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.4	0.1
Croydon	0.2	0.8	0.3	0.3	0.0	0.2	0.0	0.5	0.1
Ealing	0.2	0.6	0.7	0.1	0.2	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.2
Enfield	0.2	0.8	0.5	0.2	0.0	0.4	0.2	0.0	0.2
Haringey	0.1	0.4	0.2	0.5	0.1	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.1
Harrow	0.2	1.5	0.5	0.9	0.1	0.4	0.0	0.0	0.2
Havering	0.2	0.5	2.1	1.5	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Hillingdon	0.2	0.5	0.4	1.5	0.1	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Hounslow	0.3	0.5	0.2	0.2	0.1	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.1
Kingston upon Thames	0.2	2.6	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.5	0.0
Merton	0.2	0.7	0.4	0.4	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.1
Newham	0.2	0.4	0.2	0.2	0.0	0.1	0.0	0.0	0.1
Redbridge	0.1	0.3	0.2	0.3	0.0	0.1	0.0	0.0	0.2
Richmond upon Thames	0.3	3.8	0.0	0.9	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Sutton	0.2	0.8	0.4	0.6	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.2
Waltham Forest	0.3	1.1	0.4	0.3	0.0	0.1	0.2	0.0	0.2

[1] The number of permanent exclusions of compulsory school age expressed as a percentage of the number (headcount) of pupils of compulsory school age in each ethnic group, in primary, secondary and special schools (excluding dually registered pupils in special schools) in January 1998
[2] Not applicable (no schools of this type)

National Homework Guidelines

Mr. Rogers: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what recent representations he has received regarding arrangements for children's homework. [93113]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Since my response to the right hon. Member for Penrith and The Border (Mr. Maclean), 4 March 1999, *Official Report*, column *837*, we have received a further 36 letters from schools and members of the public. These have raised no new issues.

Minimum Wage

Mr. Rogers: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what representations he has received on the acceptance by job centres of advertisements for jobs paying less than the national minimum wage. [93124]

Mr. Andrew Smith: Responsibility for the subject of the question has been delegated to the Employment Service agency under its Chief Executive. I have asked him to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from Leigh Lewis to Mr. Allan Rogers, dated 27 July 1999:

As the Employment Service is an Executive Agency, the Secretary of State has asked me to reply to your question concerning the acceptance by Jobcentres of advertisements for jobs paying less than the national minimum wage. This is something which falls within the responsibilities delegated to me as Chief Executive of the Agency.

In answer to your specific question, I am aware of one representation - to which I have replied - regarding whether Jobcentres would accept advertisements for jobs paying less than the national minimum wage.

It may be helpful if I explain our arrangements for dealing with this matter. All Jobcentres have detailed instructions explaining that they must only take job vacancies that meet the requirements of the National Minimum Wage Act. When taking details of a job vacancy, if no wage rate is stated, the Jobcentre will ask the employer for an assurance that they are meeting the requirements of the Act. If employers remain unsure of their responsibilities under the Act the Jobcentre will advise them to contact the National Minimum Wage Advice Line for more detailed help.

I hope this is helpful.

National Grid for Learning

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many schools *(a)* have produced and *(b)* are preparing development plans in connection with the National Grid for Learning. [93163]

Mr. Charles Clarke: All schools seeking grant in relation to the National Grid for Learning are expected to agree with their local education authority a development plan for the use of Information and Communications Technology. Information about the number of schools which have already done so is not held by the Department.

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what part BT is playing in the establishment of the National Grid for Learning; and how it is otherwise providing information technology for schools. [93164]

Mr. Charles Clarke: BT, in common with other companies operating in the telecommunications and ICT industries, has a role to play in making a range of services available to schools and other organisations in order to enable those institutions to make optimum use of the Information Age.

The products and services that BT makes available to schools are a commercial decision and a matter for the company.

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list the sums allocated by each local authority in respect of the National Grid for Learning; and how much the sums amount to in each authority on *(a)* a per-pupil and *(b)* a per-school basis. [92746]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Information on the NGfL funding devolved to each school is not held centrally by the Department. However, the total amount of grant allocated to each authority from the National Grid for Learning Standards Fund programme in 1998–99 and 1999–2000 is set out in the tables. LEAs are required to devolve 95 per cent. of their allocation to schools.

£

LEA name	*1998–99 allocation*	*1999–2000 allocation*	*Total allocation*
Barking and Dagenham	622,000	484,638	1,106,638
Barnet	483,989	562,500	1,046,489
Barnsley	660,000	429,757	1,089,757
Bath and NE Somerset	350,000	227,901	577,901
Bedfordshire	920,000	830,250	1,750,250
Bexley	406,430	488,360	894,790
Birmingham	4,000,000	4,000,000	8,000,000
Blackburn	293,573	449,871	743,444
Blackpool	233,891	376,443	610,334
Bolton	750,000	607,500	1,357,500
Bournemouth	183,098	187,500	370,598
Bracknell Forest	196,886	260,459	457,345
Bradford	1,002,000	1,600,000	2,602,000
Brent	305,886	358,131	664,017
Brighton and Hove	769,000	502,500	1,271,500
Bromley	196,000	536,027	732,027
Buckinghamshire	1,250,000	1,125,000	2,375,000
Bury	393,713	359,433	753,146
Calderdale	179,278	509,857	689,135

£

LEA name	1998–99 allocation	1999–2000 allocation	Total allocation
Cambridgeshire	968,886	911,606	1,880,492
Camden	500,000	383,667	883,667
Cheshire	1,272,149	982,500	2,254,649
City of Bristol	763,657	1,229,091	1,992,748
City of Kingston-upon-Hull	540,171	750,000	1,290,171
City of London	0	10,000	10,000
Cornwall	978,576	651,147	1,629,723
Coventry	629,591	1,013,313	1,642,904
Croydon	480,000	343,968	823,968
Cumbria	1,500,000	1,500,000	3,000,000
Darlington	226,541	185,947	412,488
Derby City	417,900	468,667	886,567
Derbyshire	800,000	637,500	1,437,500
Devon	978,576	1,212,754	2,191,330
Doncaster	489,288	338,596	827,884
Dorset	800,000	675,000	1,475,000
Dudley	2,000,000	2,000,000	4,000,000
Durham	1,300,000	2,032,695	3,332,695
Ealing	300,000	371,250	671,250
East Riding of Yorkshire	800,000	637,500	1,437,500
East Sussex	782,861	675,000	1,457,861
Enfield	220,000	273,482	493,482
Essex	1,713,684	1,723,500	3,437,184
Gateshead	431,215	337,500	768,715
Gloucestershire	750,000	586,032	1,336,032
Greenwich	500,000	520,000	1,020,000
Hackney	346,955	444,000	790,955
Halton	311,121	358,131	669,252
Hammersmith and Fulham	300,000	300,000	600,000
Hampshire	2,201,797	1,562,752	3,764,549
Haringey	429,615	358,131	787,746
Harrow	348,208	448,152	796,360
Hartlepool	123,301	195,344	318,645
Havering	424,980	285,202	710,182
Herefordshire	234,858	195,000	429,858
Hertfordshire	1,957,153	1,717,500	3,674,653
Hillingdon	284,766	325,573	610,339
Hounslow	375,000	364,642	739,642
Isle of Wight	219,104	399,921	619,025
Isles of Scilly	10,412	17,400	27,812
Islington	500,000	381,000	881,000
Kensington and Chelsea	351,802	221,883	573,685
Kent	2,240,000	4,200,000	6,440,000
Kingston upon Thames	262,376	206,250	468,626
Kirklees	1,000,000	787,500	1,787,500
Knowsley	1,450,000	612,789	2,062,789
Lambeth	650,000	520,766	1,170,766
Lancashire	2,500,000	1,627,867	4,127,867
Leeds	1,700,000	1,350,000	3,050,000
Leicester City	600,000	455,803	1,055,803
Leicestershire	997,900	900,000	1,897,900
Lewisham	435,377	450,000	885,377
Lincolnshire	978,576	1,887,402	2,865,978
Liverpool	978,576	1,050,000	2,028,576
Luton	374,087	325,573	699,660
Manchester	983,605	1,410,000	2,393,605
Medway Towns	456,300	750,000	1,206,300
Merton	294,293	325,573	619,866
Middlesbrough	300,000	325,573	625,573
Milton Keynes	396,465	325,573	722,038
Newcastle upon Tyne	1,016,000	885,204	1,901,204
Newham	501,347	806,909	1,308,256
Norfolk	1,615,739	1,500,000	3,115,739
North East Lincolnshire	520,000	390,000	910,000
North Lincolnshire	200,000	150,000	350,000
North Somerset	293,573	213,305	506,878
North Tyneside	563,533	669,000	1,232,533
North Yorkshire	969,671	681,230	1,650,901
Northamptonshire	1,500,000	1,125,000	2,625,000
Northumberland	489,288	525,000	1,014,288
Nottingham City	564,834	403,208	968,042
Nottinghamshire	1,406,000	1,302,294	2,708,294

£

LEA name	1998–99 allocation	1999–2000 allocation	Total allocation
Oldham	570,322	651,147	1,221,469
Oxfordshire	1,200,000	1,050,000	2,250,000
Peterborough	305,240	264,691	569,931
Plymouth	489,288	830,450	1,319,738
Poole	186,987	179,065	366,052
Portsmouth	346,000	357,480	703,480
Reading	210,368	338,585	548,953
Redbridge	493,733	582,470	1,076,203
Redcar and Cleveland	507,395	545,733	1,053,128
Richmond upon Thames	160,792	259,800	420,592
Rochdale	442,813	354,000	796,813
Rotherham	587,146	390,688	977,834
Rutland	56,412	74,095	130,507
Salford	547,274	520,917	1,068,191
Sandwell	405,882	366,270	772,152
Sefton	587,146	813,934	1,401,080
Sheffield	1,200,000	900,000	2,100,000
Shropshire	672,000	622,035	1,294,035
Slough	176,454	284,000	460,454
Solihull	460,000	299,528	759,528
Somerset	978,576	2,200,000	3,178,576
South Gloucestershire	533,455	453,849	987,304
South Tyneside	364,477	488,360	852,837
Southampton	500,000	292,500	792,500
Southend-on-Sea	0	300,161	300,161
Southwark	600,020	624,981	1,225,001
St. Helens	700,000	546,536	1,246,536
Staffordshire	2,500,000	3,300,000	5,500,000
Stockport	1,000,000	851,651	1,851,651
Stockton-on-Tees	500,000	1,000,000	1,500,000
Stoke-on-Trent	500,000	1,000,000	1,500,000
Suffolk	1,454,693	975,000	2,429,693
Sunderland	587,146	390,688	977,834
Surrey	2,000,000	2,250,000	4,250,000
Sutton	241,484	337,437	578,921
Tameside	400,000	300,000	700,000
Telford and Wrekin	341,942	1,950,000	2,291,942
Thamesdown (Swindon)	322,792	227,901	550,693
Thurrock	224,640	205,111	429,751
Torbay	214,987	262,500	477,487
Tower Hamlets	400,000	450,000	850,000
Trafford	500,000	525,000	1,025,000
Wakefield	1,000,000	750,000	1,750,000
Walsall	559,690	511,801	1,071,491
Waltham Forest	391,431	450,000	841,431
Wandsworth	291,558	454,553	746,111
Warrington	401,364	465,000	866,364
Warwickshire	1,016,252	1,122,141	2,138,393
West Berkshire	307,488	260,459	567,947
West Sussex	1,000,000	750,000	1,750,000
Westminster	241,604	258,750	500,354
Wigan	685,947	675,000	1,360,947
Wiltshire	489,288	716,262	1,205,550
Windsor and Maidenhead	268,168	300,000	568,168
Wirral	671,532	468,826	1,140,358
Wokingham	316,656	212,925	529,581
Wolverhampton	556,915	432,245	980,160
Worcestershire	1,125,048	900,000	2,025,048
York	300,000	260,459	560,549
Total	102,009,845	105,000,002	207,009,847

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many teachers have submitted comments to the Standards Site of the National Grid for Learning. [92742]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Feedback forms on the Standards Site have been available since March 1999. To date, 237 forms have been returned. The site also has a discussion forum, within which teachers can, from day to day, debate issues raised by the standards agenda.

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment (1) how many visits have been paid to *(a)* the Standards Site, *(b)* the Virtual Teacher Centre, *(c)* the Governor Centre, *(d)* the Parent Centre,

(e) the Special Educational Needs Centre, *(f)* the National Year of Reading, *(g)* the Northern Ireland Network for Education, *(h)* the Scottish Virtual Teachers Centre and *(i)* the VTC Cymru of the schools section of the National Grid for Learning; [92743]

(2) how many visits have been paid to *(a)* the further education section, *(b)* the higher education section, *(c)* the lifelong learning section, *(d)* the career development section, *(e)* the libraries section, *(f)* the museums and galleries section, *(g)* the community grids section, *(h)* the international networks section, *(i)* the Government and Agencies section and *(j)* the learning resource index of the National Grid for Learning. [92744]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Not all of this information is held centrally by the Department. Many of the sites are hosted remotely, by a wide range of public sector bodies and commercial companies, both in this country and internationally. Total hits between November 1998 and July 1999 on the NGfL server are 43,067,816. Around 13,000 pages are hosted locally, with about 240,000 pages being indexed as part of the NGfL across all of the sites.

Figures which are available are as follows:

Site	*Number of hits*
Standards site	13,379,688
Virtual Teacher Centre	16,060,495
Governor Centre	89,366
Parents Centre	236,844
Special Educational Needs Centre	145,747
The National Year of Reading	533,000
Scottish VTC	[1]2,700
VTC Cymru	564,330
Further Education hub	679,331
Career Development	652,216
Learning Resource Index	3,083,163

[1] Page views per day

Notes:

Unless otherwise indicated, figures are for hits, between November 1998 and July 1999

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many comments have been received from teachers via e-mail to the Web Keeper of the Virtual Teacher Centre. [92741]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Around 25 messages a week are received by the Virtual Teacher Centre (VTC) Web Keeper.

In addition to this, conferencing activity on the VTC sees around 80,000 hits per month, with an average of 1,000 contributions made.

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many *(a)* primary schools, *(b)* secondary schools, *(c)* universities, *(d)* colleges and *(e)* libraries are connected to the National Grid for Learning; and how many he estimates will be connected by the end of 1999. [92739]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Latest estimates indicate that 51 per cent. of primary schools and 90 per cent. of secondary schools and 100 per cent. of universities are connected to the Internet. An April 1999 survey suggested that 100 per cent. of colleges of further education had internet access.

Statistics collected late in 1997 found that 5 per cent. of public library service points offered public Internet access. The Library and Information Commission is currently compiling updated statistics, as part of the development of the Public Library ICT Network which will link all public libraries, where practicable, to the NGfl by 2002.

While targets for connection by the end of 1999 have not been set, our aim is that all schools, colleges, universities, libraries and as many community centres as possible should be online and able to benefit from access the National Grid for Learning by 2002. To achieve this target we are supporting over £700 million of ICT-related expenditure in UK schools over this period.

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what assessment he has made of the impact made by the National Grid for Learning on equipment purchasing by *(a)* primary schools and *(b)* secondary schools. [93181]

Mr. Charles Clarke: This information is not yet available from this year's survey of ICT in schools. The Government anticipate that the impact of its £657 million Standards Fund programme for the NGfL up to 2002 will be substantial, as will arrangements which they have announced this month for the availability of higher quality managed ICT services to schools at competitive prices.

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what research he has *(a)* commissioned and *(b)* evaluated into the views of teachers on the National Grid for Learning. [92740]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The overall implementation of the National Grid for Learning, including school's purchasing strategies, is subject to a rigorous programme of independent evaluation. This also focuses on the Grid's impact on classroom practice and on students' achievements. Interim findings form these studies should be available early in 2000.

The British Educational Communications and Technology agency, on behalf of the DfEE, is also carrying out evaluation of the classroom application of the Grid via the Multimedia Portables for Teachers project. Teachers are currently participating in curriculum groups, which provide feedback on the Grid's curriculum materials and identify any gaps in that provision.

These activities are in addition to Ofsted's evaluation of the impact of ICT on teaching and learning.

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what estimate he has made of the cost of the National Grid for Learning; and what projections he has made of future costs. [92745]

Mr. Charles Clarke: A total figure encompassing investment by the Government, Local Authorities, commercial companies, education institutions, libraries, community and other NGfL-related projects is not held centrally by the Department. However, over £700 million will be allocated for schools' purchase of ICT networking and infrastructure by the year 2002. Additional funding for teacher and librarian training, content development and the equipping of libraries and related projects takes investment in this initiative to £1.6 billion. This funding

will enable all schools to be connected to the Grid by 2002, and will provide them with online access to a wide range of educational and managerial resources.

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what is the timetable for the development of the National Grid for Learning. [92738]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The timetable for the development of the National Grid for Learning is as follows:

Autumn 1998—opening of NGfL content framework, call for content and NGfL Challenge.

January 1999—deadline for initial expressions of interest in managed services.

Early 1999—major NGfL content upgrade for education and lifelong learning professionals.

April 1999—deadline for proposals for Managed Services.

Spring 1999—New Opportunities Fund support for teacher and librarian training begins.

Summer 1999—approval of managed services for schools, libraries and other bodies.

1999–2000—launch of interactive learning facilities for school age learners.

end 2002—achievement of targets as set out in the National Grid for Learning Challenge.

All targets to date have been fully met and on time.

Mathematics and Science Teachers

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many graduates in *(a)* maths, *(b)* physics and *(c)* chemistry are expected to commence teacher training in the current year; and how many commenced teacher training in each of the preceding five years. [92750]

Ms Estelle Morris: The numbers of entrants to PGCE initial teacher training in maths and science in England and Wales for the five years 1994–95 to 1998–99 are given in the following table.

Intake to PGCE initial teacher training (ITT) in England and Wales to train in maths and science, 1994–95 to 1998–99

Year	Maths	Science
1994–95	1,651	2,714
1995–96	1,575	2,686
1996–97	1,443	2,705
1997–98	1,233	2,590
1998–99[1]	981	2,195

[1] Provisional mid-year data

Sources:

England: Higher Education Students Early Statistics Survey 1994–95; TTA Survey of ITT Providers 1995–96 to 1998–99

Wales: Welsh Office 1994–95; Higher Education Students Early Statistics Survey 1995–96 to 1998–99

It is too early to predict recruitment to PGCE courses in 1999–2000. However, following the introduction of £5,000 incentives in maths and science, applications have gone up substantially, by 37 per cent. for maths to 1,306 and 24 per cent. for science to 2,784. Within the figure for science there have been increases of 33 per cent. for physics and 27 per cent. for chemistry. We are therefore confident that the decline in recruitment since 1995 will be reversed this year.The following table taken from the Higher Education Statistics Agency's Student Record Survey shows the percentage of those commencing PGCE teacher training who were graduates in maths, physics and chemistry in the years 1995–96 and 1997–98. These are the subjects of first degree and not necessarily the subjects or phase in which the student is undertaking teacher training. Information for the current year and 1998–99 is not yet available. There are a significant proportion of students for whom the first degree subject is unknown. The subjects of first degree do not include combined courses, or closely related courses such as engineering.

Percentage of those commencing PGCE initial teacher training (ITT) in England and Wales with first degrees in maths, physics or chemistry, 1995–96 to 1997–98

Year	Maths	Physics	Chemistry
1995–96	4	1	2
1996–97	3	1	2
1997–98	3	1	2

Note:

Statistics has been included with maths

Source:

Higher Education Statistics Agency's Student Record Survey

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many trainees have been placed in schools or are to be placed in schools under his scheme to train 600 new maths and science teachers on the job; and how many of the trainees are graduates in *(a)* maths and *(b)* science. [92749]

Ms Estelle Morris: The Teacher Training Agency (TTA) awarded a contract for the administration of the Maths and Science Placement Scheme in April. Over the next year, the programme will recruit 600 mature graduates in maths and science and match them to suitable vacancies in schools on the Graduate Teacher Programme. Approximately 300 will train as maths teachers and 300 as science teachers. We are still at an early stage of the scheme, but the TTA have already received 436 applications.

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what estimate he has made of the number of *(a)* maths and *(b)* science teachers returning to teaching following his initiative to encourage returners to teaching. [92751]

Ms Estelle Morris: We do not at present have figures in the form requested. Information on those returning to teaching after the package of measures announced in October 1998 will be produced in due course, but the latest data available now relate to 1996–97.

Information Technology

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what was the planned timetable for the issuing of an information technology needs assessment CD ROM to teachers by the Teacher Training Agency. [93179]

Mr. Charles Clarke: All schools have now been invited to apply for the ICT needs identification assessment CD-ROM. It is available free of charge to UK schools. The latest estimates indicate that over 30,000 packs have been distributed by the Teacher Training Agency. This is an overwhelming response, which fully endorses the decision to produce the CD-ROM.

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what steps he is taking to improve the teaching of information technology in schools following the annual report of the Chief Inspector of Schools; and if he will make a statement. [92748]

Mr. Charles Clarke: We are taking significant and unprecedented steps to improve the teaching of information technology in schools. We were appalled at the completely inadequate state of such preparation that had been made both in ITT and for serving teachers before May 1997.

We have made available through the New Opportunities Fund (NOF) £230 million to provide serving teachers and school library staff in the UK with training in the effective use of ICT in schools. There will be strong pedagogical content in the training to ensure that ICT is used effectively to enhance the learning experience. This will bring serving teachers up to the same standard as teachers emerging into the profession whose training will have followed, in part, the Initial Teacher Training Curriculum for ICT in Subject Teaching which was introduced in September 1998.

To underpin the training we are making available over £300 million to increase the number of computers in schools, so teachers can have access to them. The availability of computers must go hand in hand with the training. In addition we recently made £23 million available for the purchase of 9,500 multimedia portables for teachers so that they can learn about IT in their own time.

Finally, teachers will be able to access the virtual teachers centre (www.vtc.ngfl.gov.uk) being developed by the Government and schools will have the benefit of being able to get better value for the purchase of computers and equipment following our managed services programme launched on 21 July.

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many *(a)* primary schools and *(b)* secondary schools have appointed National Lottery-approved training providers for IT training in each local authority area expressed as a proportion of schools in that area. [93182]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Training has already begun in 20 LEAs. The New Opportunities Fund is agreeing budget schedules with other LEAs and we expect training to begin nationally in September. This is the first time many serving teachers will have access to such training, which is being supported by £230 million.

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what estimate he has made of the number of teachers in *(a)* primary schools and *(b)* secondary schools who have received information technology training through National Lottery-approved training providers; and how many he expects to receive such training in the academic year 1999–2000. [93180]

Mr. Charles Clarke: During the Summer Term 1999, training within the New Opportunities Fund (NOF) ICT teacher training programme has begun in approximately 20 education authorities. NOF is actively engaged in collecting data on this training from Approved Providers, and it is too early to give firm information on the number of teachers trained. These data will be available from NOF in September.

Training was initiated during this term to meet the needs of those schools which are particularly advanced in the provision of ICT hardware. However, the majority of the approved training providers are not proposing to start training teachers before the next school year (1999–2000). The NOF programme will last three years, and is integrated with Government initiatives to roll out the necessary hardware in schools, for example via the Standards Fund. NOF thus expects demand to build steadily during the next school year. The programme is designed to reach all serving teachers over its lifetime.

Bullying

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many children are currently being educated at home as a result of bullying at school; and if he will make a statement. [93325]

Mr. Charles Clarke: This information is not collected centrally. The Department has recently issued guidance which will ensure that local authorities arrange education for children out of school for any reason, including post-traumatic stress as a result of bullying. It also sets out a legal duty on headteachers, from September of this year, to take measures to prevent all forms of bullying among pupils.

Student Funding

Mr. Pike: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many student loan accounts exist on which payments are suspended; what are the amounts involved; and what is the amount owing on each account. [93596]

Mr. Mudie: At 30 June 1999, 516,592 student loan accounts were in deferment with a value of £26.1 million. Listing amounts involved on each account would involve disproportionate cost.

Mr. Pike: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many student loan accounts have been written off; what are the amounts involved on each account; and if he will make a statement. [93597]

Mr. Mudie: At 30 June 1999, 110,816 student loan accounts had been written off with a total value of £4.6 million. Listing the amounts written off on each of these accounts would involve disproportionate cost.

Mr. Plaskitt: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on the future of the competition to sell a third portfolio of student loan debt. [93824]

Mr. Mudie: We have successfully completed two sales of student loan debt in the financial years 1997–98 and 1998–99.

A decision on the future timing of the third sale will be taken following the implementation of the new student support arrangements later this year, the 2000 Review and the outcome of the Review of Administration of Student Support, which is also due to report in 2000.

The postponement of the third sale will have no impact on borrowers. Sold loans will remain in the hands of the private sector owners and the remainder will stay in public ownership. The Student Loans Company continues to administer all loans as before.

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what representations he has received over the past 12 months from *(a)* vice-chancellors and *(b)* others concerning top-up fees. [93379]

Mr. Mudie: We have received a number of representations about tuition fees in higher education institutions. Prohibiting the charging of additional fees enables all students to have equal access to the courses on offer.

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what evidence he has of delays among local authorities in the assessment process of means for student loans and tuition fees. [93380]

Mr. Sayeed: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment (1) how many LEAs he estimates will meet his Department's timetable for having the student grant assessments completed; [92821]

(2) what assessment he has made of the reasons for delays in processing applications for student grants; [92866]

(3) for what reasons a greater amount of information is required by the Student Loans Company in respect of grant applications than was formerly required by LEAs; [92867]

(4) what the average period of time taken to assess grant applications and make payment *(a)* was under LEAs and *(b)* is currently under the Student Loans Company; and what reasons underlie any differences; [92868]

(5) how many LEAs have carried out grant assessments and passed information to the Student Loans Company; and how many of these were using their own computer systems; [92869]

Mr. Mudie: Under the new arrangements LEAs, and not the Student Loans Company (SLC), are responsible for assessing eligibility for, and financial entitlement to, student support. The SLC is responsible for making payments to students based on these assessments. The information applicants are required to provide to LEAs is set out in the Education (Student Support) Regulations 1999.

The Department is monitoring closely and regularly the progress being made by LEAs. This monitoring shows that they are currently at different stages in assessing applications. We expect virtually all applicants to be notified of their eligibility for support within the next fortnight. Also, a number of LEAs, including some with their own in-house software provision, are passing notifications of applicants' financial entitlement to support to the Student Loans Company. The position is changing daily and a significant number of other LEAs are expected to begin issuing financial notifications within the next couple of weeks. We expect that all LEAs will complete processing applications from students who submitted their forms by the required timetable, and that cheques will be issued to those students at the start of their courses.

School Computers

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what estimate he has made of the expenditure on computers for schools by each local education authority on a per school basis in the last year. [92747]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Information on expenditure on ICT on a per school basis in each LEA is not held centrally by the Department. Figures on expenditure on ICT on a per school basis in England will be published later this year.

Teachers (Early Leavers)

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many teachers of *(a)* mathematics, *(b)* science and *(c)* other subjects with (i) up to two years' experience, (ii) between two and 10 years' experience and (iii) more than 10 years' experience have left the teaching profession before reaching the age of 50 years in each of the last 20 years. [93183]

Ms Estelle Morris: The information is not available.

Football Study Support Centres

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment, pursuant to his answer of 6 July 1999, *Official Report*, columns *523–25*, regarding football study support centres, when he expects to be able to make an estimate of the number of pupils attending centres at *(a)* Birmingham City, *(b)* Bristol City, *(c)* Liverpool, *(d)* Manchester United, *(e)* Stockport County, *(f)* Southampton and *(g)* West Bromwich Albion clubs in the current year. [92752]

Mr. Charles Clarke: These seven clubs will open their "Playing for Success" study support centres during the 1999–2000 football season. The number of pupils to attend each centre will be agreed between the centre's manager, the local schools, and the Local Education Authority. Bristol City, Liverpool, Manchester United, Stockport County and Southampton have appointed centre managers to take up post in September of this year; their estimates of pupil numbers will be available in October 1999. Birmingham City and West Bromwich Albion expect to have centre managers in post in January 2000; estimates of their pupil numbers will be available in February 2000.

Class Sizes (Gloucestershire)

Mr. Nigel Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what progress has been made since 1 May 1997 in reducing the size of infant classes in Gloucestershire. [93138]

Ms Estelle Morris: There are no figures available for May 1997.

The number of five, six and seven-year olds in infant classes of more than 30 pupils in Gloucestershire fell from 5,001 in January 1998 to 4,418 in 1999; a reduction from 26.7 per cent. to 23.2 per cent. The average class size at Key Stage 1 also fell from 26.8 to 26.6 during the same period.

A further substantial fall is expected in September 1999 following the allocation of £804,000 revenue funding and £629,000 capital investment in 1999–2000.

Mr. Nigel Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list those Gloucestershire schools where infant classes contain more than 30 pupils. [93151]

Ms Estelle Morris: Information on class sizes for individual schools is not published centrally.

Information for Gloucestershire local education authority as a whole is shown in the table.

Key stage 1 classes with 31 or more pupils taught by one teacher in maintained primary schools

	January 1998	*January 1999*[1]
Number of classes	154	136
Number of pupils	5,001	4,418

[1] Provisional

Departmental Expenditure (Leeds)

Mr. Hilary Benn: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list the programmes funded directly by his Department, relating to social exclusion, regeneration, community development, employment or education, currently operating in *(a)* the City of Leeds and *(b)* the Leeds, Central parliamentary constituency, listing for each programme the amount of such funding for each of the last three years and the amount planned to be spent in each of the next three financial years. [92909]

Mr. Mudie: The information requested is not held by the Department centrally. The Government Office for Yorkshire and the Humber (GOYH) have provided details which have been placed in the Library; separate figures for the Leeds, Central Parliamentary constituency are not available.

New Deal (Injuries)

Mr. Healey: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many injuries have been reported of New Deal clients, since 1 April 1998. [93439]

Mr. Andrew Smith: There have been 12 cases of fractures or an injury requiring a visit to a hospital. There have been 68 minor injuries not requiring any hospital treatment. This is in the context of 395,000 starts for young people and 25-plus in this period and is a much lower level of injury than the normal average level of industrial injuries in the work force.

Class Sizes

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment (1) how many classes taught by one teacher in maintained secondary schools contained *(a)* 31 or more pupils and *(b)* 36 or more pupils in (i) May 1997 and (ii) of the most recent date for which figures are available broken down by (A) local education authority and (B) parliamentary constituency; [93239]

(2) how many classes taught by one teacher at Key Stage 2 contained *(a)* 31 or more pupils and *(b)* 36 or more pupils in (i) May 1997 and (ii) at the most recent date for which figures are available in each (A) local education authority and (B) parliamentary constituency; [93236]

(3) what was the average class size for classes taught by one teacher in *(a)* May 1997 and *(b)* at the most recent date for which figures are available for (i) pupils in Key Stage 1, (ii) pupils in Key Stage 2, (iii) primary schools and (iv) secondary schools in (A) England and Wales and (B) each parliamentary constituency. [93237]

Ms Estelle Morris: I will write to the hon. Member as soon as possible and place a copy of the letter in the Library.

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what was the average class size in maintained secondary schools in England in *(a)* January 1998 and *(b)* January 1999. [93238]

Ms Estelle Morris: The information requested is as follows:

Average size of classes taught by one teacher in maintained secondary schools in England

Position as at January each year	*Average size of classes*
1999 (provisional)	21.8
1998	21.7

The overall average class size in schools has fallen from 24.9 to 24.8 in the same period and the average primary class size has fallen from 27.7 to 27.5.

School Sixth Forms

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list the process and timetable under which a decision on any application to set up a new sixth form in a school will be taken pending the outcome of the review of the funding of sixth forms in schools, indicating the differences in approach dependent on the arrangements for funding any capital works required. [93374]

Ms Estelle Morris: Under both current arrangements and those to be brought into force on 1 September, those proposing to set up a new sixth form at a school must consult in the area and then publish statutory proposals for the change. Under current arrangements, the proposals would fall to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State to decide if there were any statutory objections. From September, proposals might fall to the local School Organisation Committee to decide or, if the Committee could not agree, to an Adjudicator. The current target for a decision is five months from the date of publication. No decisions have been made on changes in the system for

funding capital work necessary in order to implement proposals, and it is not expected that any changes would affect the statutory proposal system.

Further Education

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will define the responsibilities for inspection in general further education colleges between the (i) Further Education Inspectorate and (ii) OFSTED, respectively, in connection with educational provision for persons aged 16 to 19 years in such colleges. [93377]

Mr. Mudie: Under current inspection arrangements, the Further Education and Funding Council are responsible for inspecting provision in further education colleges.

Under the proposals in our "Learning to Succeed" White Paper (Cm 4392), OFSTED will take responsibility for the inspection of 16–19 provision in schools and colleges. For post-19 provision in colleges, and for work-based provision for all age groups, there will be a new independent inspectorate.

Educational Bodies

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what is the current number of *(a)* local education authorities, *(b)* TECs and *(c)* local lifelong learning partnerships; and how many local learning and skills councils are planned. [93378]

Mr. Mudie: There are currently 150 local education authorities, 72 Training and Enterprise Councils and 103 local learning partnerships in England. We have asked the Regional Development Agencies and the London Development Partnership for advice on the boundaries in their region for up to 50 local Learning and Skills Councils across England.

"Learning to Succeed"

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will provide a breakdown of the forecast administrative cost savings to be achieved under his proposals in "Learning to Succeed" (Cm 4392). [93381]

Mr. Mudie: We expect to secure at least £50 million in savings per annum in steady state as a result of the changes set out in the White Paper "Learning to Succeed". These will flow from cutting out unnecessary bureaucracy, simpler funding and administrative systems, and streamlining contracting arrangements. Detailed estimates of administrative cost savings to be achieved will be determined once we have considered, and taken decisions on, responses to the consultation, particularly on the precise functions to be carried out by the Learning and Skills Council at local and national levels.

Numeracy Strategy

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what estimate of the number of primary school teachers was used to determine the print run of the numeracy strategy documents. [93373]

Ms Estelle Morris: The number of primary school teachers in England is estimated at 190,000. An initial print run of 300,000 copies of the Framework for teaching mathematics was commissioned for publication in March.

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what were the criteria used in allocating the tender to print the numeracy strategy file for teachers to a company in Italy. [93376]

Ms Estelle Morris: We commissioned Cambridge University Press (CUP) to prepare the Framework for publication. CUP were selected because of its record in mathematical publications, its understanding of the pilot National Numeracy Project and the English National Curriculum. The selection of the printer was a matter entirely for CUP.

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many copies of the numeracy strategy document for teachers were ordered from the printers; how many have been printed; how many schools have not received their full allocation to date; and when further copies will be made available. [93375]

Ms Estelle Morris: 300,000 copies of the National Numeracy Strategy Framework for teaching mathematics were ordered and printed. Arrangements were made for all schools to receive three copies of the strategy's Framework on 16 March with over 200,000 copies available on request. A reprint of 200,000 copies was commissioned and all schools requesting additional copies received them before the end of summer term.

Truancy and School Exclusions

Ms Buck: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what progress there has been on tackling truancy and school exclusion since the Social Exclusion Unit's report on Truancy and School Exclusion was published in May 1998. [93825]

Ms Estelle Morris: The Ministerial Task Force on Truancy and School Exclusion, which I chair, has today sent its first annual report on truancy and school exclusion to the Prime Minister. The report sets out the action we have taken to implement the recommendations in the Social Exclusion Unit's report, including examples of good practice, and sets out our priorities for 1999–2000.

We are pleased to report that permanent exclusions have fallen by 3 per cent. (from 12,700 in the 1996–97 school year to 12,300 in 1997–98). This is particularly good news because it is the first time that permanent exclusions have fallen since my Department began collecting information on exclusions in 1994–95.

Since the "Truancy and School Exclusion" report was published, we have:

made available through the "Social Inclusion: Pupil Support" grant some £500 million over the next three years to tackle truancy and exclusion from school. As part of the Government's commitment to ensuring that all pupils who are excluded for more than three weeks have access to a full-time and appropriate

timetable by 2002, this includes £22 million made available to local education authorities in 1999–2000 to extend out of school provision;

required local education authorities to set targets for reducing unauthorised absence and permanent exclusions within their Education Development Plans—in order to meet the national target of a one third reduction in levels of unauthorised absence and school exclusion by 2002;

given the police, under the "Crime and Disorder Act 1998", a new power to pick up truants and return them to designated premises.

issued new guidance on "Social inclusion: Pupil Support", which brings together advice on attendance, discipline, the use of exclusion, education outside school and re-integration, with a focus on early intervention. The document emphasises the importance of multi-agency support.

Our priorities for 1999–2000 include:

new local education authority targets for reducing the level of fixed period exclusions;

continued work to secure more joined up working at local level to support pupils who are at risk of truancy or disaffection;

following recommendations in the Macpherson report, a consultation on how to increase the amount of exclusions information which is published down to school level, including information about the ethnicity of excluded pupils;

generating more innovative ideas for tackling truancy and exclusion from school (from 2000–01);

as part of the "Excellence in Cities" initiative, the introduction of learning mentors and learning support units to tackle disaffection and barriers to learning.

Career Development Loans

Ms Kelly: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has to *(a)* review and *(b)* evaluate the impact of the Career Development Loan Scheme on educational training. [93628]

Mr. Mudie: The effectiveness of the Career Development Loan (CDL) Scheme is subject to an annual review against targets and objectives. the Department has also started a fundamental review of the application processes and associated literature in partnership with the participating High Street banks.

In addition, there is a rolling programme of evaluation undertaken by external specialists. The most recent evaluations have been:

In 1997, research into the impact the loans had on individuals and their ability to undertake vocational training or continue in education had the loan not been available;

In 1998, research into the views of training providers, both those who actively promote CDLs and those who have not had any trainees use the scheme;

In 1999, research into the reasons why people do not take up a loan after showing initial interest and asking for the application pack.

The first two reports are available from the DfEE Publications Unit and copies have been placed in the Library. The third will also be available in due course.

Standards and Effectiveness Unit

Mr. Hawkins: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what has been the increase in the *(a)* staff and *(b)* expenditure of the Standards and Effectiveness Unit since its inception; and what assessment he has made of the impact of this increase on (i) the bureaucratic burdens on schools and (ii) the number of circulars issued by his Department. [93312]

Ms Estelle Morris: At its inception in May 1997 the number of staff in the Unit was 44, this rose to 107 in May 1998 and at the end of June 1999 stood at 152. The budget for the Unit in 1997–98 was £2.4 million; for 1998–99, £4.8 million; and for 1999–2000 it is £5.9 million. The numbers of staff in the Unit must be viewed against the numbers of staff and budget for the Department as a whole, both of which have remained stable over the last two years. The increase of staff in the Unit, therefore, reflects a refocusing of resources towards our top priority of raising standards in schools.

The increased resources devoted to the Standards and Effectiveness Unit have led to a clearer focus on raising standards in schools, not to increased bureaucracy. The work of the Unit has not led to any significant increase in the number of circulars issued by the Department over the last three years. We draw a clear distinction between unnecessary bureaucratic activity, which hinders teachers' efforts to raise standards, and those activities that are integral to achieving higher standards. We have provided training and support materials as part of the strategies to improve standards in key areas such as literacy and numeracy and this has been welcomed by teachers.

Following a systematic review of bureaucracy, the Department has initiated firm action to reduce the burden on schools.

Employment Service

Mr. Derek Twigg: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment when the Employment Service's Annual Report and Accounts for 1998–99 will be laid before Parliament. [93823]

Mr. Blunkett: I have today laid before the House the Employment Service's Annual Report and Accounts for 1998–99 which gives full details of the Agency's performance and expenditure for that year.

The Annual Report notes the very significant achievements of the Employment Service in 1998–99. In particular, the Employment Service successfully launched the New Deals for 18–24-year-olds, for those aged 25 and over and for Lone Parents through ground-breaking local partnerships of private, voluntary and public sector organisations.

At the same time, the Report notes that during 1998–99 the Employment Service:

handled 2.5 million job vacancies;

placed directly into work over 1.2 million unemployed people including some 180,000 people who had been unemployed for more than six months and almost 100,000 people with disabilities;

helped nearly a quarter of a million young people through the New Deal for 18–24-year-olds and directly placed 70,000 of them into jobs.

Although the Employment Service did not succeed in meeting its main targets for the number of unemployed people placed into jobs, its performance needs to be seen against the background of further falls in unemployment over the year with numbers of long-term unemployed people at their lowest level for 20 years, a continuing emphasis on ensuring that all job placings were properly and accurately recorded and validated and the successful delivery of a very substantial agenda of other major developments, including New Deal implementation, by and within the Agency.

I am particularly pleased that the Employment Service is changing rapidly. People are noticing the difference. I am particularly pleased that standards of customer service in Jobcentres exceeded the target set and reached their highest recorded level ever.

The Agency has also continued to play a key role in implementing our Modernising Government agenda including the introduction, on a pilot basis, of its new telephone job finding service, Employment Service Direct; the opening of its Peterlee Call Centre to improve services to employers throughout the Northern Region; and the introduction of Webvacs, its first internet jobs database.

As the Chief Executive points out in his Report, none of this would have been possible without the quite remarkable effort and commitment of people throughout the Employment Service. I, too, am very grateful to them and wish them every success in 1999–2000.

New Deal Leavers

Mr. Maclean: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many people who responded to the Survey of New Deal Leavers with Unknown Destinations stated that they had left for *(a)* unsubsidised work, *(b)* incapacity benefit, *(c)* income support and *(d)* another destination; and if he will list the other destinations. [93466]

Mr. Andrew Smith: A recently published survey of the destination of New Deal leavers with unknown destinations established that 43 per cent had left for paid employment. The other destinations are listed here:

gone abroad
claimed other benefit
claimant deceased
Full-Time education (other than as a New Deal Option)
approved training
starting non-New Deal Government Supported Training
in prison/custody
attending court
on the witness protection programme
partner working
partner claiming
signed off voluntarily due to a fraud investigation
client signed off when a JSA disallowance applied
the client is over the maximum savings limit
on JSA but not on New Deal.

Equal Treatment

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he has established a baseline for policy appraisal against which to measure progress on equal treatment. [93457]

Ms Hodge: As part of the Government's commitment to ensuring that their policies are relevant to the lives that people live today, my Department is working closely with the Women's Unit and the Home Office to develop good practices for ensuring that our policies meet the changing needs of all members of society.

"Policy Appraisal for Equal Treatment guidelines", published by the Home Office, Women's Unit, and DfEE in November, has been circulated to all Departments to ensure that the effects of any policy changes on all sections of the population are considered at the earliest stage of policy development. My Department has underpinned the guidelines with more specific advice to all policy makers on how to consider the needs and requirements of different groups.

International Labour Organisation Conventions

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list those International Labour Organisation conventions which the United Kingdom has stated it does not plan to ratify. [92826]

Mr. Andrew Smith: We have made no such statement. When I attended the ILO Conference on 8 June I delivered the instrument of ratification for ILO Convention 111 on discrimination in employment to the ILO's Director General. We are currently considering ratification of both Convention 138 on the minimum age for employment and the new ILO Convention 182 on the Worst Forms of Child Labour. I will make an announcement on these Conventions shortly.

Asbestos

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will commission a study of the Norwegian experience in respect of the non-employment of smokers in asbestos-related work; and if he will make a statement. [93027]

Mr. Meale: I have been asked to reply.

As far as I am aware, there is no policy in Norway on the non-employment of smokers in asbestos-related work. Because smoking increases the absolute lung cancer risk from asbestos, UK Government policy is to discourage those who work with asbestos from smoking. The Government have no further plans to commission research in this area.

DEFENCE

Royal Hospital, Haslar

Mr. Viggers: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what estimates he has made of the costs of *(a)* building new military hospital facilities to replace Royal Hospital, Haslar and *(b)* implementing improved security arrangements in the new establishment. [70872]

Mr. Doug Henderson: I will write to the hon. Member and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

Departmental Expenditure

Mr. Maclean: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what reviews, task forces and advisory groups have been established by his Department since 1 May 1997; what costs they have incurred to date; and what reports they have published. [71521]

Mr. Spellar: I will write to the right hon. Member and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence, pursuant to his answer of 4 February 1999, *Official Report*, column *732*, if he will list the expenditure not included in his answer incurred by *(a)* his agencies and non-departmental public bodies and *(b)* the Central Office of Information for relevant work carried out for his Department. [71016]

Mr. Doug Henderson *[holding answer 15 February 1999]:* I will write to the hon. Member and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence, pursuant to his answer of 4 February 1999, *Official Report*, column *732*, if he will list the expenditure not included in his answer incurred *(a)* by task forces and review bodies, *(b)* by focus groups, *(c)* on market research and *(d)* for publications and publicity; and if he will list the bodies which incurred the expenditure. [71017]

Mr. Doug Henderson *[holding answer 15 February 1999]:* I will write to the hon. Member and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

Task Forces

Dr. Tony Wright: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) if he will publish a list of (1) task forces and (2) policy reviews established by his Department since May 1997 which *(a)* had external members recruited by way of public advertisement, and details of any person so appointed and *(b)* engaged in public consultation exercises, and the form that these took; [74457]

(2) if he will list for all task forces and policy reviews with external members established by his Department since May 1997 *(a)* their dates of establishment, *(b)* those which have issued final reports and their dates of publication, *(c)* those which have been terminated and their dates of termination and *(d)* for those bodies still in existence, expected reporting and termination dates; [79282]

(3) if he will list all those task forces and policy reviews with external members established by his Department since May 1997 which have set up *(a)* sub-groups, *(b)* working parties and *(c)* other subsidiary committees. [79259]

Mr. Spellar: I will write to my hon. Friend and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

Nuclear Test Veterans

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will fund studies using radiological techniques proposed by Dundee and St. Andrew's Universities on the state of the health of UK nuclear veterans and their families. [74728]

Mr. Spellar: We are aware of the techniques that researchers at Dundee plan to use should their research proposals be adopted but we have serious doubts about their general applicability to nuclear test veterans. One of the techniques, the detection of chromosome aberrations, has already been the subject of a pilot study by the National Radiological Protection Board (NRPB) involving test veterans and was found to lack resolution since the level of such aberrations is naturally elevated in people of this age group.

Of the other techniques, the magnitude of the dose required to produce long-term effects in the organs to be studied is very high. It is extremely unlikely that veterans could have received radiation doses sufficient to produce such effects 40 years after the alleged exposure. This is borne out by the fact that two robust epidemiological studies have shown no increase in leukaemia rates and no overall increase in mortality, either in cancer or non-cancer diagnoses. It would therefore be inappropriate to allocate public funds to this work.

Chiefs of Staff

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will place in the Library a list of items discussed at each of the meetings of the Chiefs of Staff since 21 December 1998. [84351]

Mr. Spellar: I will write to the hon. Member and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

Building and Property Group

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will publish the rules relating to the employment of sub-contractors at his Department's establishments under contracts with Building and Property Group Ltd. [80094]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 13 April 1999]:* The Contractor shall not sub-let any or part of the Contract without the prior consent of the Project Manager. The Contractor is required to include in the sub-contractor's contract statutory obligations imposed on him by the Authority, relating, for example, to Corruption, Secrecy and any other provisions as may be necessary to enable the Contractor to fulfil his obligations under the Contract.

Within the MOD Works Services Manager (WSM) and Establishment Works Consultant (EWC) contracts, there is a requirement on the contractor to provide a list of Companies/Consultants whom they intend to invite to tender, for any works in excess of £5,000. If he intends to invite a subsidiary or associated firm then this must be in addition to three other companies. Acceptance and award of contract should be to the lowest compliant tender.

Nimrod

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1), pursuant to his answer of 17 March 1999, *Official Report*, column *685*, on the Nimrod MRA4 programme, what was the nature of the technical difficulties experienced by BAe; and what extra costs will be placed on his Department because of the slippage in the in-service date from April 2003 to early 2005; [82528]

(2) if he will make a statement on the procurement process for the maritime patrol aircraft requirement; and what were the in-service dates proposed by each of the bidders. [82529]

Mr. Spellar: I will write to the hon. Member and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

Armed Forces (Manning Levels)

Mr. Blunt: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what would be the additional annual full capitation costs to his Department if the services were manned up to establishment levels as at 31 March; and what is the breakdown of this figure between the *(a)* Royal Navy (excluding the Royal Marines), *(b)* Army, *(c)* Royal Air Force and *(d)* Royal Marines. [85911]

Mr. Doug Henderson: I will write to the hon. Member and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

Depleted Uranium

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will respond to the request by Iraq's Foreign Minister on 21 November 1991 for a survey of the levels of depleted uranium contamination used in Operation Granby and Desert Storm. [86948]

Mr. Doug Henderson: I will write to my hon. Friend and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

Reserve Forces

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many *(a)* peers, *(b)* hon. Members and *(c)* hon. Members' staff, broken down by political party, are eligible for call up as *(a)* reservists and *(b)* members of the Territorial Army. [87339]

Mr. Doug Henderson: I will write to the hon. Member and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many regular and reserve forces are *(a)* in theatre, *(b)* in support at home and *(c)* in training. [91592]

Mr. Doug Henderson *[holding answer 19 July 1999]:* I will write to the hon. Member and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

UK Manufacturers

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what steps his Department takes to consider first *(a)* United Kingdom companies and *(b)* companies operating in the United Kingdom when placing orders; and what further plans he has to support United Kingdom manufacturers. [88403]

Mr. Spellar: I will write to the hon. Member and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

Special Advisers

Mr. Tyrie: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) when he will reply to the question from the hon. Member for Chichester of 22 April Ref (82417) on special advisers; [89064]

(2) pursuant to his answer to the hon. Member for Mid-Norfolk (Mr. Simpson) of 31 March 1999, *Official Report*, column *674*, on special advisers, if he will give the average cost per head for each official and adviser for the trips listed. [82417]

Mr. George Robertson: I will write to the hon. Member and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

Saville Inquiry

Mr. Gerald Howarth: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence who provided to the Saville Inquiry the series of documents released in October 1998 to lawyers acting for those killed or wounded in Londonderry on 30 January 1972, with particular reference to the document which identified the names, rank, number and appointment of individual soldiers; and by the authority of which Government Department they were handed to the Saville Inquiry. [88812]

Mr. Ingram: I have been asked to reply.

I will write to the hon. Member as soon as possible.

Chemical Weapons

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list each location where the United Kingdom has tested *(a)* chemical weapons, *(b)* biological weapons and *(c)* bacteriological weapons; and what steps have been taken to monitor and clean the locations after the tests. [89734]

Mr. Doug Henderson: I will write to my hon. Friend and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

British Forces (Germany)

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many British forces personnel are currently stationed in Germany; and at what annual cost. [90173]

Mr. Doug Henderson: I will write to my hon. Friend and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

Service Families (Support)

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is his policy on the provision of briefing, communications and military welfare services for the families of Territorial Army personnel and reservists from all three services on tours of duty abroad. [90261]

Mr. Doug Henderson: I will write to the hon. Member and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

Sea Wolf

Mr. Chidgey: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what plans he has for the early release of the contract to purchase the second tranche (block 2) of the Sea Wolf missile fusing system. [90167]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 13 July 1999]:* The contract for the Sea Wolf missile fuse was placed in 1997 and there is no requirement for further purchases at this time. Turning to the Sea Wolf missile itself, we are

currently engaged in pre-contractual negotiations with the Prime Contractor, Matra BAe Dynamics (MBD), on the final tranche of the missile requirement, which is known as Block 2. Subject to the outcome of these discussions, we plan to place the Block 2 contract later this year.

Kapton Insulation

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what his policy is on the use of Kapton insulation in military aircraft; and if he will make a statement. [91574]

Mr. Spellar: Kapton is a trademarked material. It is one of a range of polyamide coverings used to insulate aircraft wires. The MOD has been aware of potential problems associated with polyamide insulated wires since they were first identified in 1985. Accordingly the use of polyamide insulated wires in MOD aircraft is reviewed regularly. Work has included a detailed assessment of each aircraft installation; a review of defence standards on aircraft wiring; and work with the British Standards Institute to develop standards that are suitable for all airborne electrical wires and cables. We have also developed clear procurement guidelines and improved inspection and husbandry techniques. Decisions about wiring installations on MOD aircraft are made by experienced engineers who are responsible for assessing the risks and benefits, and for making safety and value judgments accordingly.

Apache Helicopter

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many Apache helicopters his Department is planning to acquire; at what cost; what reassessment has been made of their strategic role following the Kosovo conflict; and if he will make a statement. [91874]

Mr. George Robertson: We are acquiring 67 WAH-64 Apache attack helicopters at an estimated cost of some £3.1bn, including munitions and a 30-year training contract. We are currently studying the US Army's report into the deployment of Apache to the Balkans. It is too early to draw any firm conclusions, but we will take full account of any lessons for the aircraft's role.

Mr. Alan Williams: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what analysis has been undertaken of the effectiveness of the Apache helicopter since the Kosovo campaign. [92477]

Mr. George Robertson: We are currently studying the US Army's report into the deployment of US Army Apaches to the Balkans. It is too early to draw any firm conclusions, but we will take a full account of any lessons for the aircraft's role with the British Army.

Mr. Alan Williams: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many Apache helicopters are *(a)* in service and *(b)* on order for the RAF. [92494]

Mr. Spellar: There are currently no Apache helicopters in service with the British Army. Sixty-seven WAH-64 Apache attack helicopters are on order. They will be operated by the Army.

Army Personnel

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list *(a)* the total trained requirement and *(b)* the total trained strength of the (i) Royal Artillery, (ii) Royal Engineers, (iii) Royal Signals, (iv) Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers, (v) Royal Logistic Corps and (vi) Royal Army Medical Service. [91593]

Mr. Doug Henderson *[holding answer 19 July 1999]:* I will write to the hon. Member and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

Electronic Tags

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what progress has been made in the development of personal tags capable of the electronic storage of personal information including medical records. [92166]

Mr. Doug Henderson *[holding answer 20 July 1999]:* I will write to the hon. Member and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

Personnel (Bosnia)

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many United Kingdom service personnel have been disabled in the course of their duties in Bosnia during the last three years; and what percentage of these have been found alternative work within the armed forces. [92215]

Mr. George Robertson *[holding answer 21 July 1999]:* Information on injuries occurring to military personnel serving in Bosnia is not collected in a format which would enable identification of personnel who have become disabled, as defined in the 1995 Disability Discrimination Act.

Anglo-US Defence Co-operation

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence with which organisation within the United States Department of Defence his Department is holding discussions to obtain replacements of stocks of Tomahawk missiles used in the Kosovo theatre; on what date these discussions began; and when his Department expects to conclude these discussions. [92254]

Mr. George Robertson: This is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Defence Procurement Agency. I have asked the Chief Executive to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Sir Robert Walmsley to Mr. Matthew Taylor, dated 27 July 1999:

I am replying to your question to the Secretary of State for Defence about our negotiations with the United States Department of Defense for the replacement of stocks of TOMAHAWK missiles used in Kosovo. This matter falls within my area of responsibility as Chief of Defence Procurement and Chief Executive of the Defence Procurement Agency.

Discussions, which began on an informal basis in April, are being held with the Programme Executive Office Cruise Missiles and Unmanned Autonomous Vehicles (PEO(CU)) in the US Department of Defense. These are expected to conclude at the end of August with the placement of a contract.

Army Medical Centre, Millbank

Mr. Viggers: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is the current use and the planned future use of the Army Medical Centre buildings at Millbank. [92458]

Mr. Spellar: I will write to the hon. Member and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

Ministerial Travel

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence on what date he last used a train in the course of his official duties. [92649]

Mr. George Robertson *[holding answer 23 July 1999]:* In accordance with the terms of the Ministerial Code, Ministers are required always to make efficient and cost-effective travel arrangements. I last travelled by train in the course of my departmental duties on 18 November 1998. In addition, I frequently travel to and from my constituency by train, most recently on 18 July 1999.

Fire Service

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what contingency plans he has made to give emergency assistance to the Fire Service in case of a national firefighters' strike. [92900]

Mr. Spellar: The Ministry of Defence has longstanding arrangements with the Home Office to provide emergency fire cover at their request in the event of industrial action in the Fire Service. Our ability to respond to such a request would depend on the nature and extent of the request and on our operational commitments at the time.

Eurofighter

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many export orders have been placed for the Eurofighter; and if he will make a statement. [93280]

Mr. George Robertson: There have been no export orders for Eurofighter as yet, although the prime contractor, Eurofighter Gmbh, has identified a number of potential early customers.

Tomahawk Missiles

Mr. Menzies Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) what plans the Government have to procure Tactical Tomahawk missiles currently under development in the United States; and if he will make a statement; [91331]

(2) what plans the Government have to give individual Swiftsure and Trafalgar class SSNs on-board capability for the tactical targeting of Tomahawk missiles; and if he will make a statement. [91332]

Mr. George Robertson: I will write to the right hon. and learned Member and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

Mr. Menzies Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when the Government expect to conclude negotiations with the United States Department of Defense for the replenishment of Tomahawk missile stocks; and if he will make a statement. [91327]

Mr. George Robertson *[holding answer 26 July 1999]:* This is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Defence Procurement Agency. I have asked the Chief Executive to write to the right hon. and learned Member.

Letter from Sir Robert Walmsley to Mr. Menzies Campbell, dated 27 July 1999:

I am replying to your question to the Secretary of State for Defence about when the Ministry of Defence expects to conclude negotiations for the replenishment of TOMAHAWK missile stocks. This matter falls within my area of responsibility as Chief of Defence Procurement and Chief Executive of the Defence Procurement Agency.

Negotiations with the United States Department of Defense for the replenishment of RN TOMAHAWK missiles used in the Balkans are progressing and we expect a contract to be placed by the end of August.

Mr. Menzies Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what provisions have been made in his Department's budget for the planned refurbishment of the Royal Navy's Block III Tomahawk missiles for *(a)* this financial year and *(b)* the next financial year. [91329]

Mr. George Robertson *[holding answer 26 July 1999]:* This is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Defence Procurement Agency. I have asked the Chief Executive to write to the right hon. and learned Member.

Letter from Sir Robert Walmsley to Mr. Menzies Campbell, dated 27 July 1999:

I am replying to your question to the Secretary of State for Defence about the budgetary provision for refurbishment of the Royal Navy's Block III TOMAHAWK missiles for this and next financial year. This matter falls within my area of responsibility as Chief of Defence Procurement and Chief Executive of the Defence Procurement Agency.

No provision has been made in this and the next financial year as no RN TOMAHAWK missile refurbishment are planned during this period. Refurbishments are planned to commence from 2003.

Mr. Menzies Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when the first planned refurbishment of the Royal Navy's Block III Tomahawk missiles will take place; and if he will make a statement. [91330]

Mr. George Robertson *[holding answer 26 July 1999]:* This is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Defence Procurement Agency. I have asked the Chief Executive to write to the right hon. and learned Member.

Letter from Sir Robert Walmsley to Mr. Menzies Campbell, dated 27 July 1999:

I am replying to your question to the Secretary of State for Defence about the first planned refurbishment of the Royal Navy's Block III TOMAHAWK missiles. This matter falls within my area of responsibility as Chief of Defence Procurement and Chief Executive of the Defence Procurement Agency.

I can confirm that the first refurbishment of Royal Navy TOMAHAWK missiles is planned for 2003.

Future Aircraft Carrier

Mr. Menzies Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when the final selection for the future aircraft carrier is planned to take place; and if he will make a statement. [91334]

Mr. George Robertson *[holding answer 26 July 1999]:* This is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Defence Procurement Agency. I have asked the Chief Executive to write to the right hon. and learned Member.

Letter from Sir Robert Walmsley to Mr. Menzies Campbell, dated 27 July 1999:

I am replying to your question to the Secretary of State for Defence about the Ministry of Defence's plans for the future aircraft carriers. This matter falls to me for answer within my responsibility as Chief of Defence Procurement and Chief Executive of the Defence Procurement Agency.

Bids have been received from two industrial teams for the next phase of the programme (the Assessment Phase) which will develop overall design proposals. Subject to the satisfactory conclusion of this process, we plan contract placement for the Assessment Phase this Autumn. Bids for the Demonstration and Manufacture Phase are scheduled for 2003 with contract placement scheduled for 2004.

Animal Experiments

Mr. Quinn: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the use of animals in defence research. [93788]

Mr. Spellar: The independent Animal Welfare Advisory Committee, chaired by Dr. Jeremy Lucke, has recently published its third annual Report. The Committee was set up in 1996 specifically to keep under review the care and welfare arrangements of animals used in defence research. I am placing a copy of the Report in the Library of the House.

The use of animals in defence research is concerned with providing the Armed Forces with safe and effective protection against hazards encountered while conducting their duties, and is kept to the absolute minimum.

The Committee's Report highlights the work being done by the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency to find alternatives to the use of animals. In particular, the increasing use of in-vitro studies will lead to a reduction in the number of animals used. For example, use of such technology means that experiments to test the effectiveness of decontaminant and barrier creams against a chemical warfare agent, which would otherwise have needed up to 90 animals, was achieved without using any animals at all.

There is still much to be done in developing technologies which allow the use of animals in experiments to be further reduced. We welcome continuing scrutiny by the Animal Welfare Advisory Committee and aim to minimise the use of animals as far as possible, against the continuing requirement to research effective measures to counter the hazards faced by the armed forces in the conduct of their duties.

Defence Evaluation and Research Agency

Dan Norris: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what key targets have been set for the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency for the financial year 1999–2000. [93790]

Mr. Spellar: The key targets set for the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency for the financial year 1999–2000 are as follows:

1. Return on capital employed

Consistent with Treasury requirements, to achieve at least 6 per cent. return on capital employed.

2. Manpower charging rates

To set manpower chargeout rates for 2000–01 which reflect a reduction in DERA overheads compared with 1999–2000 budgeted levels.

3. New business

To increase new business income (from customers other than the MOD) to £140M in 1999–2000.

4. Professional standing

To increase the number of staff elected as Fellows of professional bodies by 10 per cent.

5. Progress on work

To achieve on time 90 per cent. of the agreed milestones on work for MOD customers.

6. Customer satisfaction

To increase the level of customer satisfaction, as measured by customer surveys.

7. Defence diversification

To establish at least six Defence Diversification Offices across the UK.

Three year rolling targets carried over from 1998–99:

Over a period of three years, to achieve a 20 per cent. increase in peer reviewed publications per professional.

Over a period of three years, to increase by 50 per cent. the number of scientific teams assessed as 'world class' in the technical assessment exercise.

Dr. Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the reason for the purchase of protective shields for mobile phones by the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency together with an explanation of the perceived use of such devices. [93285]

Mr. Spellar: I will write to my hon. Friend and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

Exports (Indonesia)

Ann Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what was *(a)* the number of staff employed by the Defence Export Services Organisation in Indonesia in (i) 1996–97 and (ii) 1997–98 and *(b)* the budget of DESO's branch office in Indonesia in (1) 1996–97 and (2) 1997–98. [93291]

Mr. Spellar: The details are as follows:

	Number of staff employed by DESO in Indonesia	*The Budget of DESO's branch office in Indonesia (£)*
1996–97	1 UK based civilian 1 locally engaged driver 1 locally engaged PA/clerk for two months	88,000
1997–98	1 UK based civilian 1 locally engaged driver 1 locally engaged PA/clerk for eight and a half months	179,000

The increase in 1997–98 is due to rent payments of £86,000 which were paid in advance for three years. Naturally, under these arrangements, no payment was due in 1996–97.

Child Support Agency

Caroline Flint: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence, pursuant to his answer of 19 July 1999, *Official Report*, column *417*, on the Child Support Agency, if deductions from pay to meet child maintenance assessments are made when this would take total deductions over the 25 per cent. limit. [93371]

Mr. Doug Henderson: I will write to my hon. Friend and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

Exports

Mr. Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will implement the recommendation made by the Defence Committee in its Second report (The Appointment of the New Head of Defence Export Services HC 512) to commission a detailed assessment of the full costs and benefits of defence exports for the UK; and if he will make a statement. [93558]

Mr. Spellar: The Government welcome the Defence Select Committee's invitation to provide a more systematic and detailed assessment of the full costs and benefits of defence exports for the UK. Work has been set in hand and we will inform the Committee of the conclusions when this is complete.

Ballistic Missile Programme

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what are the terms of reference of the Technical Readiness and Risk Assessment Programme established to address the technical requirements of a United Kingdom ballistic missile defence programme; and if he will make a statement on their work since establishment. [92963]

Mr. George Robertson: The Technology Readiness and Risk Assessment Programme is a three year programme which was initiated following the Strategic Defence Review. It forms part of the Corporate Research Programme. Its purposes are (i) to monitor developments in the potential threat and the technologies available to counter it and (ii) to establish a position from which a national requirement for fielding an active ballistic missile defence system could be developed, should one become necessary. The programme focuses on the characteristics of ballistic missiles, the performance of radar and other sensors, the guidance of interceptors, and their potential to defeat ballistic missile warheads including those containing biological or chemical agents.

Biological and Chemical Weapons

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence, pursuant to his answer to the hon. Member for South Swindon (Ms Drown) of 21 July 1999, *Official Report*, columns *534–35*, about the defence response to the threat posed by biological and chemical weapons, what expenditure he plans in this area additional to the level of spending previously earmarked for *(a)* 1999–2000, *(b)* 2000–01 and *(c)* 2001–02. [93337]

Mr. George Robertson: In our report, "Defending Against the Threat from Biological and Chemical Weapons", we outlined plans resulting from the Strategic Defence Review and subsequent work to enhance our biological and chemical defence capability. The additional expenditure over the next three years is expected to be some £12 million in 1999–2000, £22 million in 2000–01 and £31 million in 2001–02.

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what were the operating costs in the last financial year of the units involved in biological and chemical defence tasks. [93314]

Mr. George Robertson: In 1998–99, the units dedicated to biological and chemical defence tasks were the Royal Yeomanry and the Defence NBC Centre. The operating cost of those units was some £5 million.

Land Command, Wilton

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if HQ Land Command at Wilton has stand-by generators adequate to ensure security of electricity supply to meet all normal requirements. [92964]

Mr. Doug Henderson: Headquarters Land Command has four generators that would provide immediate backup if the main supply of electricity were to fail. This is sufficient to maintain the essential requirements of the headquarters.

Low Flying

Mr. Kirkwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) if he will make a statement on the incidence and expected future trends in the use of Spade Adam training base for tactical low-flying training involving heavy jets; [93322]

(2) if he will list the number of low-flying training flights across the Scottish borders by heavy jets at *(a)* 100 and *(b)* 250 feet for the last five years for which figures are available; [93320]

(3) if he will make a statement on the incidence and expected future trends in tactical low-flying training over the Border Region in heavy jets. [93321]

Mr. Spellar: I will write to the hon. Member and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

Royal Regiment of Wales

Mr. Livsey: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many Welsh Colonels have served in the Royal Regiment of Wales during the past 10 years. [93324]

Mr. Doug Henderson: In the period between 1989 and 1999, there have been eight Commanding Officers in the Royal Regiment of Wales. It is not mandatory for serving personnel to provide details of their ethnic origin and when they do those details are given on a confidential basis. It would not therefore be appropriate to provide details on an individual basis, but I understand that four of the Commanding Officers in the period have classified themselves as Welsh.

Mr. Livsey: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many Welsh Commanding Officers are serving in the Royal Regiment of Wales. [93323]

Mr. Doug Henderson: Since 1 July 1999, there has been only one Battalion of the Royal Regiment of Wales, and consequently only one Commanding Officer. It is not mandatory for serving personnel to provide details of their ethnic origin and when they do those details are given on a confidential basis.

Smart Procurement Initiative

Mr. Love: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what estimates he has made of the reduction in cost

overruns for major projects in each of the next five years arising from the introduction of the Smart Procurement initiative; and if he will make a statement. [93548]

Mr. George Robertson: I will write to my hon. Friend and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

Sierra Leone

Judy Mallaber: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what assistance his Department is providing to the Government of Sierra Leone following the Lomé Peace Agreement. [93789]

Mr. Doug Henderson: I am pleased to announce today that the Government are prepared to offer up to 20 UK military observers to an expanded United Nations Observation Mission in Sierra Leone (UNOMSIL). This is a substantial increase from the five who are currently deployed with UNOMSIL.

This clearly demonstrates our support for UN peacekeeping operations. The UN Mission has a vital role in upholding peace and democracy in Sierra Leone and we should play our part in that process.

Over and above our support for the UN, we already have in place an eight-man training team to advise on basic training for recruits to the new Sierra Leone army. This team will help to establish more professional and better-trained armed forces.

We also currently have a military officer and civilian adviser in Freetown. Their role is to assist the Government of Sierra Leone in undertaking a review of Sierra Leone's Defence Policy, the roles of the Ministry of Defence and Defence Headquarters, and the size and shape of a new Sierra Leone Armed Forces. The aim of this project is to ensure appropriate civilian control and accountability of the armed forces.

Volvo

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) what assessment he has made of the prospects for continued production in the UK by Volvo; [69322]

(2) if he will assess the *(a)* benefits and *(b)* disadvantages of withdrawing the MOD contract with Volvo Trucks; [69319]

(3) if he will make a statement on the closure of the Irvine Truck plant; and if he will list the contracts in place with Volvo; [69320]

(4) what representations he has received from Volvo on the closure of the Irvine plant. [69321]

Mr. Spellar: I will write to my hon. Friend and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

Radiation (Chatham Dockyard)

Mr. Shaw: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many former Chatham Dockyard workers who were subjected to radiation have received compensation to date. [64561]

Mr. Spellar: I will write to my hon. Friend and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

New Deal

Mr. Keith Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many New Deal candidates have taken up appointments in his Department; what percentage they are of his Department's civilian workforce; and what their appointments are. [65626]

Mr. Spellar: As at 1 July 1999, the MOD has employed 15 people on short-term and three people on permanent appointments from the New Deal initiative, representing less than 1 per cent. of the civilian workforce. There are currently 17 New Deal candidates in post, a further four awaiting pre-employment checks and the Employment Services are attempting to fill another 37 posts identified as suitable for New Deal candidates.

Departmental Pay

Mr. Blunt: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) what is his estimate of the proportion of the defence budget taken by *(a)* civilian and *(b)* armed forces salaries on (i) 31 March 2000, (ii) 31 March 1999, (iii) 31 March 1998 and (iv) 31 March 1997 and assuming future pay awards match the Government's inflation assumptions on (1) 31 March 2002 and (2) 31 March 2003; [71672]

(2) what estimate he has made of *(a)* the civilian and *(b)* the armed forces salary bills in the financial year 1999–2000. [71673]

Mr. Doug Henderson: I will write to the hon. Member and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

Multiple Myeloma

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will commission a review study of the cancers reported in the early National Radiological Protection Board studies in cases involving multiple myeloma. [74730]

Mr. Spellar: Earlier studies by the National Radiological Protection Board (NRPB) embraced all cancer related illnesses including multiple myeloma. The overall conclusion of these studies was that the total incidence of cancer among nuclear test veterans was less than among the general population and no higher than among the control group. I announced on 25 February 1999 that my Department would fund a further study to address the incidence of multiple myeloma among nuclear test veterans. This is because there was some uncertainty about the incidence of this particular illness following the first NRPB study; and we wish to assess whether or not there is any significance in the recently reported increased rates.

Landing Platform Docks Contract

Mr. Davidson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) if the Landing Platform Docks contract is *(a)* on schedule and *(b)* proceeding to budget; and if he will make a statement; [75127]

(2) what *(a)* detailed and *(b)* major changes his Department has sought to make to the design of the ships under the Landing Platform Docks contract; what was the

cost to his Department of such changes; what measures have been taken to ensure that costs do not increase on the contract; and if he will make a statement; [75126]

(3) what stage the work on the Landing Platform Docks contract has reached for *(a)* the first and *(b)* second ship; and if he will make a statement. [75128]

Mr. Spellar: I will write to my hon. Friend and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

Procurement Instructions

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many Chief of Defence procurement instructions have been issued since 1 June 1998; and how many were unclassified. [82246]

Mr. Spellar: This is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Defence Procurement Agency. I have asked the Chief Executive to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Sir Robert Walmsley to Mr. Matthew Taylor, dated 27 July 1999:

I am replying to your question to the Secretary of State for Defence about Chief of Defence Procurement Instructions. This matter falls to me for answer within my responsibility as Chief of Defence Procurement and Chief Executive of the Defence Procurement Agency.

Twenty-three Chief of Defence Procurement Instructions have been issued since 1st June 1998. All of them were unclassified, but a number contain information about the Defence Procurement Agency's procedures which could prejudice the effective conduct of the Agency and would, therefore, be withheld under exemption 7 of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information.

No new Chief of Defence Procurement instructions have been issued since April. Although they remain extant they are being replaced by the Acquisition Management System which fulfils a similar function in respect of Smart Procurement procedures.

Young Soldiers

Mr. McGrady: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many British soldiers aged under 18 years are stationed in *(a)* Yugoslavia and *(b)* Kosovo. [89126]

Mr. Doug Henderson: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence on 26 July 1999, *Official Report*, column *52*, to my hon. Friend the Member for Halifax (Mrs. Mahon).

Aircraft Carriers

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence which United Kingdom shipbuilders have facilities to build an aircraft carrier with a displacement in excess of 45,000 tons. [92400]

Mr. Spellar: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given to the hon. Member for Croydon, South (Mr. Ottaway) on 16 July 1999, *Official Report*, column *352*. The size of the new aircraft carriers is currently estimated to be up to 40,000 tonnes.

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what options have been considered for aircraft types to operate from the two new aircraft carriers for the Royal Navy. [92420]

Mr. George Robertson: This is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Defence Procurement Agency. I have asked the Chief Executive to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Sir Robert Walmsley to Mr. Mike Hancock, dated 27 July 1999:

I am replying to your question to the Secretary of State for Defence about the aircraft options for the new aircraft carriers. This matter falls within my area of responsibility as Chief of Defence Procurement and Chief Executive of the Defence Procurement Agency.

The combat aircraft to equip the two new aircraft carriers for the Royal Navy is known as the Future Carrier-Borne Aircraft (FCBA). A strong contender for FCBA is a variant of the US Joint Strike Fighter (JSF), and the UK is participating in the Concept Demonstration Phase of its development. We are also assessing a navalised version of the Eurofighter, the US F-18 Super Hornet, the French Rafale-M and an advanced version of the Harrier. No decision has yet been made on the choice of aircraft to meet the FCBA.

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is the proposed *(a)* displaced weight and *(b)* overall length of the two new aircraft carriers for the Royal Navy. [92421]

Mr. George Robertson: This is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Defence Procurement Agency. I have asked the Chief Executive to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Sir Robert Walmsley to Mr. Mike Hancock dated 27 July 1999:

I am replying to your question to the Secretary of State for Defence about the proposed displaced weight and overall length of the two new aircraft carriers for the Royal Navy. This matter falls to me to answer within my area of responsibility as Chief of Defence Procurement and Chief Executive of the Defence Procurement Agency.

The current estimate is that the new aircraft carriers will displace up to 40,000 tonnes and have an overall length of approximately 300 metres. The final decision on their design, including their size, however, will be influenced by the selection of the Future Carrier-Borne Aircraft late next year.

Plutonium

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what facilities are used for the processing of plutonium removed from warheads for refurbishment. [92814]

Mr. George Robertson: This is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Defence Procurement Agency. I have asked the Chief Executive to write to my hon. Friend.

Letter from Sir Robert Walmsley to Mr. Llew Smith, dated 27 July 1999:

I am replying to your question to the Secretary of State for Defence which asked what facilities are used for the processing of plutonium removed from warheads for refurbishment. This matter falls within my area of responsibility as Chief of Defence Procurement and Chief Executive of the Defence Procurement Agency.

I can confirm that all such work is carried out in specialised facilities at AWE Aldermaston.

Trident Warhead

Mr. Alan Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) for what reasons the British Trident Warhead requires refurbishing early in the next decade; [93273]

(2) what discussions he has had with the Government of the United States to prepare for the refurbishment of the Trident Warhead. [93272]

Mr. George Robertson: This is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Defence Procurement Agency. I have asked the Chief Executive to write to my hon. Friend.

Letter from Sir Robert Walmsley to Mr. Alan Simpson, dated 27 July 1999:

I am replying to your questions to the Secretary of State for Defence asking for the reasons why British Trident Warhead requires refurbishing early in the next decade, and what discussions have taken place with the United States Government to prepare for the refurbishment of the warheads. This matter falls to me for answer within my responsibility as Chief of Defence Procurement and Chief Executive of the Defence Procurement Agency.

Chapter four, "Deterrence and Disarmament", of the Strategic Defence Review stated that the Government needed to ensure that Trident would remain an effective deterrent for up to 30 years. Whilst Trident remains in service the warheads will be refurbished as necessary to ensure that that undertaking is fulfilled and that they remain safe and serviceable at all times.

There are regular discussions and exchanges of information with the United States in regard to the Trident programme, made under the auspices of the 1958 Agreement between the Government of the United Kingdom and the Government of the United States of America for Co-operation on the Uses of Atomic Energy for Mutual Defence Purposes (Cmnd. 537 as amended). These discussions include refurbishment of the warhead.

Equal Treatment

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he has established a baseline for policy appraisal against which to measure progress on equal treatment. [93465]

Mr. Spellar: As part of the Government's commitment to ensuring that its policies are relevant to the lives that people live today, my Department is working with the Women's Unit, Home Office, and DfEE to develop good practices for ensuring that our policies meet the changing needs of all members of society.

"Policy Appraisal for Equal Treatment", published by the Cabinet Office, Home Office, DfEE and the Women's Unit in November 1998, has been circulated to staff within my Department to ensure that the effects of any policy changes, on all sections of the population, are considered at the earliest stage of policy development.

My Department currently has no baseline for policy appraisal, but we will shortly be introducing new procedures for monitoring.

Training Group Defence Agency

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what key targets have been set for the Chief Executive of the Training Group Defence Agency for financial year 1999–2000. [86705]

Mr. Doug Henderson: Pursuant to my answer of 9 June 1999, *Official Report*, columns *331–32*, I regret that the information given under Key Target 4 was incorrect. The target should have read:

"To provide an Information System to produce full output costings and associated unit cost and efficiency measures by April 2000".

Armed Forces (Youth Recruitment)

Mr. Berry: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many people under the age of 18 years currently serve in the armed forces; in which services; and with what duties. [66225]

Mr. Doug Henderson: I will write to my hon. Friend and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

Depleted Uranium Weapons (Kosovo)

Joan Ruddock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what health monitoring of pregnant women and children is being undertaken in Kosovo in areas affected by the use of depleted uranium weapons. [93455]

Mr. George Robertson: There are currently no health monitoring programmes in place in Kosovo under the auspices of UK forces; however a joint task force has been set up by the UN Environment Programme and the UN Commission on Settlements to assess the environmental and health aspects of the conflict.

SCOTLAND

Departmental Responsibilities

8. **Miss Kirkbride:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will publish a document outlining the responsibilities of his Department and the staffing structure. [91605]

Dr. Reid: The memorandum I recently presented to the Scottish Affairs Committee has, with the permission of the Committee, been placed in the Library in the House of Commons. The staffing structure will be published in due course.

Duty Free

9. **Mrs. McKenna:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what assessment he has made of the sectors of the Scottish economy which will be affected by the abolition of duty free within the European Union. [91606]

18. **Mr. David Marshall:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what assessment he has made of the impact on the Scottish economy of the abolition of duty free within the European Union; and if he will make a statement. [91615]

Mr. Macdonald: The previous Government agreed to the abolition of duty free within the EU in 1991. We took steps to simplify the new regulations whenever possible to mitigate the impact on industry in Scotland, and elsewhere in the UK.

Assisted Areas

10. **Mr. Alexander:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what discussions he has had with the Scottish Executive on revisions to the Assisted Areas Map in Scotland; and if he will make a statement. [91607]

Dr. Reid: Revision of the Assisted Areas Map across Britain is a reserved matter for the UK Government. I have been in close touch with The First Minister throughout the final stages of the Review. The proposals for new assisted areas announced on 15 July represent overall a fair outcome for Scotland.

17. **Mr. Welsh:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what representations he has made to ministerial colleagues regarding the proposed boundaries of Assisted Areas in Scotland. [91614]

Dr. Reid: Scottish Office Ministers and officials were fully involved in discussions within Government on the Review of Assisted Areas.

Post Office

11. **Mr. Hood:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what assessment he has made of the impact in Scotland of the Post Office White Paper. [91608]

Mr. Macdonald: The benefits that will arise from the measures in the White Paper are expected to apply throughout the United Kingdom. These include setting criteria to ensure that a truly national service is provided, including especially Post Office Counters' services and a universal service of postal delivery.

The Economy

12. **Mr. Browne:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what representations he has made to the Chancellor of the Exchequer regarding the state of the Scottish economy. [91609]

Dr. Reid: I will discuss the state of the Scottish economy with the Chancellor as necessary, to ensure that his outstanding management of the UK economy continues to benefit Scotland as it has done over the last two years.

Job Prospects

13. **Mrs. Fyfe:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what discussions he has had with the Chancellor of the Exchequer on increasing job prospects in areas of high unemployment. [91610]

Dr. Reid: I have been involved recently in a number of discussions with my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer and other colleagues about the review of the Assisted Areas Map and the Objective 2 Map.

In redrawing the AA Map, the Government have been concerned to strike the right balance between areas of greatest need and areas offering the greatest potential for development. Given that coverage for the United Kingdom on both Maps had to be reduced, this has involved some difficult decisions. However I am satisfied that the outcome is a fair result for Scotland.

Departmental Internet Site

14. **Mr. Bercow:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will make a statement on the reasons for the discontinuation of his Department's internet site. [91611]

Mr. Macdonald: The work of the Department changed radically on 1 July. The new website will be fully operational soon.

Oil Industry

16. **Sir Robert Smith:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what representations he has made to the Chancellor of Exchequer on the concerns of those using single-person companies about the consequences of the proposals contained in Treasury press release IR35 for the future of the oil industry in Scotland. [91613]

Mr. Macdonald: I have recently received a letter from the hon. Gentleman setting out the views of a number of organisations on the proposals contained in Treasury Press Release IR35. I will ensure that these representations are conveyed to the Chancellor of the Exchequer.

Food Safety

19. **Dr. Gibson:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what proposals the Government have to encourage the co-ordination of policy on food safety matters between the Scottish Executive and the UK Government. [91616]

Mr. Macdonald: Co-ordination of food safety will be for the Food Standards Agency. Until it is established, policy will continue to be co-ordinated by means of close working relations between the Government and the Scottish Executive.

Referendum (Independence)

20. **Mr. Evans:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what discussions he has had concerning his reserved powers to hold a referendum on Scottish independence. [91617]

22. **Dr. Julian Lewis:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what is his policy on utilising his powers to call a referendum on Scottish independence. [91619]

Mr. Macdonald: The Government have no intention of holding any referendum on Scottish independence. Scottish voters demonstrated their clear support for devolution on 11 September 1997, and again on 6 May this year.

Shipbuilding

21. **Mr. Galloway:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland when he will next meet the Scottish TUC to discuss UK Government assistance for the Scottish shipbuilding industry; and if he will make a statement. [91618]

Dr. Reid: The STUC have not so far requested a meeting with me to discuss the shipbuilding industry in Scotland. The Scottish Executive is in regular discussion with the STUC on issues affecting the shipbuilding industry. The Department of Trade and Industry, which retains overall responsibility for the shipbuilding industry

in the UK, also has continuing discussions in its Shipbuilding Forum with all parties that have an interest in the competitiveness of the industry.

Fishing Industry

23. **Dr. Godman:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland when he last met representatives of the Scottish Fishermen's Federation to discuss reserved matters relating to the catching sector of the fishing industry. [91620]

Dr. Reid: I met representatives of the Scottish Fishermen's Federation on 24 June to discuss the designation of the Scottish Fisheries Zone.

Research Council Grants

24. **Mr. Gorrie:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what arrangements he has made to ensure that Scottish universities apply for and use grants from research councils in a co-ordinated manner. [91621]

Mr. Macdonald: It is a matter for individual Scottish universities, departments and researchers to apply for Research Council grants that they consider relevant to their research objectives and expertise.

Coastguard Service

25. **Mrs. Ray Michie:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland when he plans next to meet the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions to discuss the future of the coastguard service in Scotland. [91622]

Mr. Macdonald: The Secretary of State has regular discussions with the Secretary of State for Environment, Transport and the Regions on a range of issues, reflecting his continuing role of representing Scottish interests on matters reserved to the UK Parliament.

Official Engagements

26. **Mrs. Laing:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how many official engagements he has attended since 1 July. [91623]

Dr. Reid: Twenty three. This does not include attendance at Cabinet and Cabinet Committee meetings, bilaterals with Cabinet colleagues and regular meetings with the Advocate General and Scotland Office Ministers.

Tuition Fees

27. **Miss Begg:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland to what extent the costs of abolishing tuition fees in Scotland will be met by the UK Government; and if he will make a statement. [91625]

Mr. Macdonald: The Scottish Executive has set up an independent Committee of Inquiry to examine Scottish student finance. Until the Committee has reported the question does not arise. It is worth noting, however, that over 50 per cent. of Scottish students assessed this year paid no tuition fees.

One Parent Families Scotland

28. **Mr. Chisholm:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will meet One Parent Families Scotland to discuss the funding of the work of that organisation in relation to reserved areas. [91626]

Mr. Macdonald: My right hon. Friend has no plans to so do in the immediate future. But if the hon. Member would like to write with any specific points, we would be happy to consider them.

Concordat (EU Matters)

29. **Ms Squire:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will make a statement on progress with the concordat with the Scottish Parliament on EU matters. [91627]

Dr. Reid: Concordats will guide working relations between the UK Government and the Scottish Executive on a range of matters, including those relating to the EU. They will be published once they have been agreed with the Scottish Executive.

Anti-drugs Strategy

Mrs. Ann Winterton: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland when he last met the United Kingdom Anti-Drugs Co-ordinator to discuss the implementation of Her Majesty's Government's anti-drugs strategy in Scotland. [91612]

Mr. Macdonald: My right hon. Friend has not met formally with the United Kingdom Anti-Drugs Co-ordinator. Responsibility for implementing drugs strategy in Scotland rests with the Scottish Executive.

Disabled People

Mr. Gorrie: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what practical arrangements he has put in place to provide help to disabled people to seek and retain jobs through *(a)* financial support, *(b)* transport and *(c)* individual physical help. [91235]

Ms Hodge: I have been asked to reply.

In Scotland, as elsewhere, most disabled people are helped into work through the mainstream services offered by the Employment Service with additional support for those who require more help. The Disability Service Teams offer specialist employment measures tailored to the needs of individual disabled people. The six Disability Service Teams in Scotland plan to spend around £10 million 1999–2000 on specialist programmes for people with disabilities in Scotland, including Access to Work, the Job Introduction Scheme, Work Preparation and Supported Employment Opportunities.

The Access to Work programme provides both financial and technical support to remove barriers to work created by disability. Support can take many forms, including help with getting to work; the cost of aids and adaptations to equipment, computers or the work place; and of communicators for people with a hearing or visual impairment.

In addition, the New Deal for Disabled People is piloting a range of initiatives, to help disabled people and those with long-term illness on incapacity benefits into work and training at a cost of £195 million over the lifetime of this Parliament. The Personal Adviser service is being piloted in Lanarkshire, and there are three Innovative Schemes operating in Scotland.

The Rail Vehicle Accessibility Regulations came into force on 1 November 1998 and apply to all new rail vehicles entering service from 1 January 1999. These regulations, which are the first regulations to be made under Part V of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995, will considerably improve access for disabled passengers, including wheelchair users, to new rail vehicles. Similar regulations for buses, coaches and taxis are also proposed and consultation on the draft regulations covering these vehicles is expected this year.

River Tweed

Mr. Moore: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if the Board of Scottish Natural Heritage has considered the River Tweed as a candidate Special Area of Conservation under the European Council Directive 92/43/EEC on the conservation of natural habitats and wild flora; and what was their decision. [88787]

Mr. Macdonald *[holding answer 28 June 1999]:* The Board of Scottish Natural Heritage considered the case for recommending the River Tweed as a candidate Special Area of Conservation (SAC) and concluded that it should be recommended as one.

It is, however, for the Government to decide what sites should be proposed to the European Commission as candidate Special Areas of Conservation. The Government decided, in the light of their own appraisal of the scientific case for this site, that the River Tweed should not be proposed as a candidate SAC.

The implementation of the Habitats Directive in Scotland is now a matter for the Scottish Parliament.

Mr. Moore: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will place in the Library the scientific advice received from Scottish Natural Heritage concerning the notification of the River Tweed as a candidate Special Area of Conservation under the European Council Directive 92/ 43/ EEC on the conservation of natural habitats and of wild flora. [88788]

Mr. Macdonald *[holding answer 28 June 1999]:* I refer the hon. Member to the answer given to the right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mr. Beith) by my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Environment on 22 July 1999, *Official Report*, column *5860*.

The implementation of the Habitats Directive in Scotland is now a matter for the Scottish Parliament.

Mr. Moore: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what advice he has received from Scottish Natural Heritage concerning the notification of the River Tweed as a candidate Special Area of Conservation under the European Council Directive 92/43/EEC on the conservation of natural habitats and of wild flora. [88786]

Mr. Macdonald *[holding answer 28 June 1999]:* Scottish Natural Heritage advised The Scottish Office that they considered there was a strong case for proposing the River Tweed as a candidate Special Area of Conservation (SAC).

However, further scientific advice from Scottish Office specialist advisers and from the Freshwater Fisheries Laboratory indicated that there were reasons why, when applying the criteria for site selection specified in the Habitats Directive, the Tweed was not an outstanding candidate for SAC status for Atlantic salmon. Those reasons included the relatively poor state of the spawning salmon stock, the very substantial modification by man of the watercourse and discharges into the river environment. The Government have proposed five other rivers to the European Commission as candidate SACs for Atlantic salmon which we believe better meet the selection criteria of the Habitats Directive.

The implementation of the Habitats Directive in Scotland is now a matter for the Scottish Parliament.

Research

Mr. Gorrie: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what plans he has to ensure that research in Scottish institutions funded by research councils is properly integrated with research funded by the Scottish Executive to ensure the best use of resources. [90778]

Dr. Reid: Appropriate integration of the two streams of the research funding has been recognised for some time as an important matter. The Science and Engineering Base Co-ordinating Committee—which draws its members from the senior officials of the Research Councils, the Funding Councils (including SHEFC), the UK and devolved departments with responsibility for Higher Education and the Office of Science and Technology—aims to co-ordinate science and engineering base research activity across the UK and to ensure that it is consistent with, and targeted on, Government objectives.

Research in Scottish Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) is funded both by the Scottish Higher Education Funding Council (SHEFC) and the UK Research Councils Policy relating to the former is devolved and therefore a matter for the Scottish Executive and the Scottish Parliament similarly, the UK Research Council are the responsibility of my noble Friend, Lord Sainsbury.

Gender Impact Assessment

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will list the subject of each gender impact assessment drawn up by his Department since June 1997, indicating in each case whether the outcome has been *(a)* put out to consultation and *(b)* published. [91998]

Dr. Reid: I shall write to the hon. Member as soon as possible and arrange for copies of my reply to be placed in the Libraries of the House.

Quangos

Mr. Singh: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how many appointments to quangos he made between *(a)* 1 June 1997 and 31 May 1998 and *(b)* 1 June 1998 and 31 May 1999; and in each case of those how many were members of Britain's (i) Asian and (ii) ethnic minority communities. [92145]

Dr. Reid: I shall write to the hon. Member as soon as possible and arrange for copies of my reply to be placed in the Libraries of the House.

Official Documents

Mr. Wilshire: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will publish a list of all those official documents of the last Administration which have been

seen by *(a)* him, *(b)* other Ministers in his Department, *(c)* special advisers in his Department and *(d)* non-career civil servants appointed since May 1997 in his Department. [92172]

Dr. Reid *[holding answer 20 July 1999]:* A large number of official documents were generated during the period of the previous Administration, many of which were published or put in the public domain. Since May 1997, the Scottish Office was guided by the convention governing access to papers of a previous Administration, as set out in the then Prime Minister's reply to a written question on 24 January 1980, *Official Report*, columns *305–07*.

Adjacent Waters Boundary Order

Mr. Gorrie: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what representations he has received from the Scottish Executive about the Scottish Adjacent Waters Boundary Order; and if he will make a statement. [93269]

Mr. Macdonald: Following the debate in the Scottish Parliament about the Scottish Adjacent Waters Boundary Order on 3 June, the Scottish Executive Minister for Rural Affairs, Mr. Ross Finnie, wrote to the Secretary of State. His letter conveyed fishermen's concerns about the Order. The Secretary of State met with representatives of the Scottish Fishermen's Federation on 24 June.

Concordats

Mr. Gorrie: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland when he plans to publish the concordats covering administrative arrangements relating to co-operation between Whitehall departments and departments of the Scottish Executive. [93278]

Dr. Reid: The UK Government will shortly make proposals on concordats which will guide working relations between the UK Government and the Scottish Executive on a range of matters. They will be published once they have been agreed with the Scottish Executive.

Shellfish

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will make a statement on his continuing responsibilities relating to research on matters pertaining to shellfish farming. [92278]

Dr. Reid: Ministerial responsibility for research on matters pertaining to shellfish farming, and fish generally, lies with the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food and, in Scotland, with the Scottish Executive.

CS Gas

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what his responsibilities are in relation to the use by police of *(a)* MIBK and *(b)* CS gas spray. [92320]

Dr. Reid: None. From 1 July this became a matter for the Scottish Executive.

Biological and Chemical Weapons

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland by how much he has agreed to increase the Scottish block grant in each of the next three years to meet the new burdens on Scottish *(a)* health authorities, *(b)* ambulance authorities, *(c)* police authorities, *(d)* fire authorities and *(e)* local authorities laid out in paragraph 7 of Chapter 5 of the Ministry of Defence paper entitled, "Defending Against the Threat from Biological and Chemical Weapons". [93094]

Dr. Reid: No additional provision has been made. Any additional costs for the authorities mentioned are likely to be very small in relation to the overall provision.

Parliamentary Questions

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will make a statement on his Department's policy in respect of transferring oral questions to other departments; and in what ways it has changed since 1 July. [93243]

Dr. Reid: The policy on transferring oral questions has not changed since 1 July.

Fur Farms

Dr. Palmer: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how many mink and fox factory farms there are, by county, in Scotland. [93617]

Dr. Reid: This is now a matter for the Scottish Parliament.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Magistrates Courts

36. **Mr. Ruffley:** To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what recent representations he has received regarding the closure of magistrates courts in shire counties. [91634]

Mr. Vaz: So far this year my Department has received 139 representations regarding the closure of magistrates courts in shire counties.

Under section 56 of the Justices of the Peace Act 1997, the Lord Chancellor has a role in magistrates courthouse closures only where an appeal has been lodged. All representations received are carefully considered before any final decisions are made.

Police Authority-Magistrates Court Committee Chairmen

37. **Mr. Barry Jones:** To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department pursuant to his answer of 7 July 1999, *Official Report*, column *556*, on police authority and magistrates court committee chairmen, if he will take steps to avoid the appointment of the same individual to both chairmanships where the areas of operation are approximately the same; and if he will make a statement. [91635]

Mr. Vaz: The chairman of a police authority and a magistrates court committee are both appointed by the members of their respective bodies. Neither the Home Secretary nor the Lord Chancellor, has any involvement in these appointments. The Lord Chancellor has however taken powers in the Access to Justice Bill for the preparation of a code of conduct to be observed by magistrates court committee members and the panels that select them.

Judges (Discourteous Remarks)

38. **Mr. Gordon Prentice:** To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what advice and guidance he is issuing to judges concerning comments made by them from the bench which may be perceived as being sexist, racist or otherwise disparaging and discourteous. [91636]

Mr. Vaz: The Judicial Studies Board, which is an independent body controlled by a Board whose members are appointed by the Lord Chancellor, is responsible for providing high-quality training to full and part-time judges. All JSB courses and seminars include modules on equal treatment issues. The JSB's Equal Treatment Advisory Committee is chaired by Mr. Justice Keene and will be publishing the second edition of its guidance to full and part-time judges on ethnic minority issues in the autumn. Further material relating to disability, gender and sexual orientation, litigants in person and children will be issued in the following months.

Community Legal Service

39. **Mr. Kidney:** To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department how he intends that experience of the pilot and associate pilot schemes will inform the process of establishing a national community legal service. [91638]

Mr. Vaz: The Pioneers and Associates were chosen for two reasons. First, they are all committed to developing high quality, responsive services to meet the needs of local communities. And second, they represent a range of areas with different characteristics. Some are urban, some rural and some semi-rural. This means that, in one way or another, the various models of best practice which emerge will be capable of transfer onto a national basis.

There will be a careful rolling out, so that the lessons from the Pioneers and Associates can be tailored in a detailed way to meet specific local needs in the rest of the country.

Fiona Mactaggart: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department how the Pioneer Partnerships for the community legal service have sought to improve access to legal advice and representation by socially excluded groups; and if he will make a statement. [91637]

Mr. Vaz: The Pioneer Partnerships are working to establish best practice in joined up planning of the advice provision. This will ensure we have the right services of the right quality at the right price to allow the disadvantaged to resolve disputes, enforce their rights or seek the protection of the courts.

Judiciary (Communication)

40. **Mrs. Laing:** To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if he will make a statement on the Lord Chancellor's role as an intermediary between Government and the judiciary. [91640]

Mr. Vaz: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave today to the hon. Member for Guildford (Mr. St. Aubyn), *Official Report*, column 116, and also to the Lord Chancellor's speech to the Third Worldwide Common Law Judiciary Conference on 5 July 1999, in which he restated the role of his office. I have placed a copy of his speech in the Library.

Magistrates and County Courts (Lichfield)

41. **Mr. Fabricant:** To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if he will make a statement concerning the future of the magistrates and county courts in Lichfield. [91641]

Mr. Vaz: Under section 56 of the Justices of the Peace Act 1997, decisions concerning the future of a magistrates' court are for the relevant magistrates' courts committee to determine, after consultation with the paying authority or authorities. The local authorities that contribute financially to the running of the service may appeal to the Lord Chancellor against a proposed closure. Staffordshire Magistrates' Courts Committee expect to make their final determination concerning the future of Lichfield Magistrates' Court at their meeting on 28 July.

With regard to Lichfield County Court, last September the Lord Chancellor gave permission to begin a public consultation exercise on the proposal to close the court. This has now concluded. I have yet to make a decision on the closure of the county court. As the hon. Member knows, I visited Lichfield Magistrates' Court and County Court at his invitation on 23 July.

Judiciary (Independence)

42. **Dr. Julian Lewis:** To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if he will make a statement on the Lord Chancellor's role as guarantor of the political independence of the judiciary. [91642]

Mr. Vaz: I refer the hon. Member to the answer that I gave today to the hon. Member for Chipping Barnet (Sir S. Chapman), *Official Report*, columns 117–18.

Immigration Appeals

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what is the current backlog of adjudication appeals in immigration cases. [92895]

Mr. Vaz: When a case is received from the Home Office, a first hearing usually takes place within six weeks of receipt, and notice of this is sent out to the parties within five working days. If the appeal cannot be dealt with at the first hearing, it is adjourned and directions given for its progress to a second hearing, which usually takes place within a further six weeks. 1,303 appeals are currently at various stages of progress but there is no backlog, as the Immigration Appellate Authority is currently meeting all its targets.

Legal Aid

Mr. Pickthall: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if he will reconsider the level of property value taken into account in the awarding of legal aid, with particular reference to London. [92962]

Mr. Vaz: I have no plans to do so. It is important to note that the actual market value of the home does not determine eligibility for legal aid. The means test instead takes account of the equity value of the home—that is, the difference between its current market value and the

amount required to redeem any mortgage secured on it. This amount depends on the personal circumstances of the applicant and not on where they live. The present amount of equity disregarded for the purposes of determining legal aid eligibility is £100,000. This level was set in the Civil Legal Aid (Assessment of Resources) (Amendment) Regulations 1996. The Lord Chancellor consulted widely on those regulations, which were introduced to deal with the problem of apparently wealthy applicants receiving legal aid, and there was broad agreement that exempting a universal amount of equity was the correct way to proceed. The amount is the same as the maximum value up to which mortgage interest is paid for people receiving Income Support. Since eligibility for legal aid is related to movements in benefit levels, it would not be appropriate to make any changes independent of the benefit system.

Immigration Appellate Authority

Fiona Mactaggart: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what targets he has set for the maximum reasonable period for the Immigration Appellate Authority to wait, after an appeal has been lodged for a child refused entry clearance under paragraph 297(e) of the Immigration Rules, before it receives the explanatory statement for the case. [93332]

Mr. Vaz: The main component of this type of appeal is the explanatory statement itself, which is currently issued by the IAA within five days of receipt from the Home Office.

Queen's Counsel

Mr. Michael J. Foster: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what the Lord Chancellor intends to do to satisfy himself that appointments to the professional judiciary and as Queen's Counsel are made fairly and on merit and that there are safeguards in the appointments procedures against discrimination on the grounds of race or gender. [93793]

Mr. Vaz: The Lord Chancellor has appointed Sir Leonard Peach, until recently Commissioner for Public Appointments and currently Commissioner for Public Appointments for Northern Ireland and a Civil Service Commissioner, to provide a report to him on the operation of the appointments procedures in relation to all Judicial and Queen's Counsel appointments and in particular to advise on:

The appropriateness and effectiveness of a) the criteria and b) the procedures for selecting the best candidates;

The extent to which candidates are assessed objectively against the criteria for appointment; and

The existence of safeguards in the procedures against discrimination on the grounds of race or gender.

Sir Leonard Peach will also make recommendations, as appropriate, to the Lord Chancellor for further developments in the selection procedures for Judicial and Queen's Counsel appointments.

In preparing his report, Sir Leonard Peach will have full access to all aspects of the appointments process and members of the legal profession and judges will be among those he will consult.

Corporate Bodies

Mr. Michael J. Foster: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department when he expects to make an announcement on Law Commission report No. 253, "The Execution of Deeds and Documents By or on Behalf of Bodies Corporate". [93791]

Mr. Vaz: The Government accept the Law Commission's recommendations in Report No. 253: "The Execution of Deeds and Documents By or on Behalf of Bodies Corporate" and will legislate when Parliamentary time allows.

Solicitors (Complaints)

Mr. Michael J. Foster: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what action has been taken to address the problems faced by the Law Society and the Office for the Supervision of Solicitors about the handling of complaints. [93792]

Mr. Vaz: The performance in the handling of complaints by the Law Society has been deteriorating to an unacceptable level. The Government have therefore amended the Access to Justice Bill to allow for a Legal Services Complaints Commissioner to be appointed. The Commissioner would oversee the handling of complaints by the legal professional bodies. The Lord Chancellor hopes not to have to appoint a Commissioner, but will do so if the situation does not improve significantly.

The Lord Chancellor has written to Robert Sayer, the President of the Law Society, to set down the improvements in performance by the Law Society and the Office for the Supervision of Solicitors that could persuade the Government that it was unnecessary to introduce a Commissioner. Copies of this letter have been placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

Children

Mr. Sutcliffe: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department when the merger of the children's work of the Official Solicitor, the Guardian ad Litem and Reporting Officer Service and Family Court Welfare Service will be finalised and the decision communicated to the relevant parties. [93786]

Mr. Vaz: I am pleased to announce that the Lord Chancellor, the Home Secretary, the Secretary of State for Health and the First Secretary for Wales have agreed to set up a new service, when legislative time permits, which will combine the present Family Court Welfare function provided by the Probation Service, the Children's Branch of the Official Solicitor's Department and the Guardian ad Litem and Reporting Officer Service which local authorities currently provide. The Lord Chancellor will take responsibility for the new service, which will be set up as a non-departmental public body. The service will cover England and Wales and will serve the High Court of the Family Division, County Courts, including Care Centres, and Family Proceedings Courts.

An inter-departmental project team to set up the new service has been established, which the Lord Chancellor's Department will lead. The project management framework to be adopted will ensure close liaison with the relevant services in creating the new organisation.

NORTHERN IRELAND

Gender Impact Assessment

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if she will list the subject of each gender impact assessment drawn up by her Department since June 1997, indicating in each case whether the outcome has been *(a)* put out to consultation and *(b)* published. [92002]

Mr. Paul Murphy: There is no current requirement to consult on or publish gender impact assessments in Northern Ireland. The Policy Appraisal and Fair Treatment (PAFT) administrative guidelines recommend assessments of the equality and discrimination implications when new policies and services are proposed or existing ones are reviewed. Such assessments cover a broad range of issues where there is potential for discriminatory impact—region and political opinion; gender; race; disability; age; marital status; dependants, sexual orientation. Under the Northern Ireland Act 1998, the PAFT administrative guidelines will be superseded by a statutory duty on public authority in relation to equality of opportunity. This will require equality schemes to be drawn up by public authorities, including arrangements for impact assessments with consultation and publication.

Occupational Therapists

Mr. McGrady: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many people were awaiting assessments by occupational therapists for disabled facilities in the (i) Down Lisburn Trust, (ii) Newry and Mourne Trust and (iii) Banbridge and Craigavon Trust *(a)* in 1997, *(b)* in 1998 and *(c)* at the latest available date. [92011]

Mr. McFall: Information is not available in the form requested, as occupational therapy activity is not analysed by reason for referral. The table shows the total numbers of people awaiting commencement of assessment at the end of the relevant quarter.

Trust	*31 December 1997*	*31 December 1998*	*31 March 1999*
Down Lisburn	470	775	885
Newry and Mourne	481	657	328
Craigavon and Banbridge	253	457	492

Ministerial Meetings

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many times Ministers in her Department held meetings with Ministers and officials of the Irish Government between 1 January 1998 and 31 December 1998, indicating the dates and locations of each meeting, the Ministers involved and the names of the Irish Ministers and officials at each meeting. [92268]

Mr. Paul Murphy: I have met Irish Ministers very frequently throughout the Talks Process. Further meetings held by other Ministerial colleagues in 1998 include:

Date	*Location*	*Minister*	*Irish Minister*
13 January 1998	Department of Education, Bangor	Mr. Worthington	Mr. E. O'Cuiv TD and 4 officials
14 January 1998	Castle Buildings	Mr. Ingram	Mr. M. Smith TD
26 January 1998	Parliament Buildings	Mr. Worthington	Mr. D. Ahern TD and 6 officials
25 February 1998	Hotel Conrad, Dublin	Mr. Worthington	Mr. B. Cowen TD and 7 officials
2 March 1998	Waterfront Hall, Belfast	Mr. Ingram	Mr. T. Kitt TD
20 March 1998	Belfast City Hall	Lord Dubs	Dr. M. Woods TD
27 March 1998	Killyhevlin Hotel, Enniskillen	Lord Dubs	Mr. N. Treacy TD and 1 official
6 April 1998	Department of Education, Bangor	Mr. Worthington	Mr. M. Martin TD and 5 officials
17–18 April 1998	Aghadoe Heights Hotel, Killarney	Lord Dubs	Mr. J. Walsh TD and 2 officials
19 April 1998	Leopardstown Race Course, Du[redacted]	Lord Dubs	Mr. J. Walsh TD
15 May 1998	Balyshannon, Co. Donegal	Lord Dubs	Dr. M. Woods TD
15 May 1998	The Old Courthouse, Lifford	Lord Dubs	Mr. J. Walsh TD
16 June 1998	Department of Justice, Dublin	Mr. Ingram	Mr. J. O'Donohue TD
5 September 1998	Aghalane Bridge, Co. Cavan	Lord Dubs	Mr. N. Dempsey TD
15 October 1998	Dublin	Lord Dubs	Mr. B. Molloy TD
16 October 1998	Hillsborough Castle	Lord Dubs	Mr. J. Walsh TD and 1 official
5 November 1998	Royal Hospital, Dublin	Mr. Ingram	Mr. N. Treacy TD and 2 officials
6 November 1998	Belfast	Lord Dubs	Taoiseach
4 December 1998	White Horse Hotel, Cootehill, Co. Cavan	Lord Dubs	Mr. J. Walsh TD
15 December 1998	Castle Buildings	Mr. Ingram	Mr. J. O'Donoghue TD
17–18 December 1998	Brussels	Lord Dubs	Dr. M. Woods TD
22 December 1998	Dublin	Lord Dubs	Mr. N. Dempsey TD

Education

Mr. McGrady: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what steps she is taking to increase the levels of educational attainment, with particular reference to the standards required for the jobs being created through the Industrial Development Board. [93033]

Mr. McFall: The Government have taken a number of steps to seek to ensure that the education system in Northern Ireland develops the range of skills which are likely to be required by employers now and in the future. A major schools improvement programme which will be supported by new investment in the school system for the

period up to 2002 is underway. That, together with a new educational technology strategy and a review of the curriculum, will seek to ensure higher and more relevant educational attainment and prepare young people for future vocational development. In addition, I have published a set of proposals on lifelong learning, "A new Learning Culture for All", in which I set out Government policy for improving general skill levels and for meeting the skill needs of Northern Ireland for the future. Included in the proposals are initiatives to widen and increase access to education and training provision, put in place a skills identification and monitoring system and significantly increase the number of higher and further education places available. I have established a Northern Ireland Skills task Force to advise the Department of Education and the Training and Employment Agency on issues related to skills identification and responses to labour market and skill needs. The Industrial Development Board will play a significant role in that task Force ensuring that its focus includes the target sectors for inward investment and company expansion.

The information and advice from the Skills Task Force and from our labour market research will enable us to focus the education and training provision in Northern Ireland, at all levels, on the future needs of the local economy. This is an issue addressed in the recently published Economic Development Strategy, "Strategy 2010".

Residents Groups (Funding)

Mr. Donaldson: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what public funding has been provided to the *(a)* Lower Ormeau Concerned Community, *(b)* Bogside Residents Group and *(c)* Garvaghy Road Residents Coalition in each year since 1995. [92959]

Mr. Paul Murphy *[holding answer 26 July 1999]:* The information for the Northern Ireland Office and the Northern Ireland Departments is as follows:

(a) £3,000 in 1997

(b) £3,000 in 1997

(c) Reimbursement of travel expenses for meetings with the Prime Minister in London in 1999.

Drumcree Protest

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many weapons were seized in the vicinity of the Drumcree protest in July 1998; how many of these were returned to their owners; how many were legally registered weapons; how many have subsequently been destroyed; who verified this process; and where the remaining weapons are stored. [92737]

Mr. Ingram *[holding answer 26 July 1999]:* One home-made firearm was seized in the vicinity of the Drumcree protest in July 1998 and is currently held in Portadown RUC station pending a disposal order.

Note:

In light of the reference to legally registered weapons this phrase has been interpreted as referring to firearms and the question has been answered using that interpretation. A number of other items were seized during the period.

Western Health and Social Services Board

Mr. Thompson: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how much is to be spent on cancer services in the Western Health and Social Services Board in the financial year 1999–2000; and how much was spent in financial year 1998–99. [93049]

Mr. McFall *[holding answer 26 July 1999]:* The total planned expenditure on cancer services in the Western Health and Social Services Board in the financial year 1999–2000 is £3.95 million and the total spent on cancer services by the Board in the financial year 1998–99 was £2.94 million.

Mr. Thompson: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if she will provide a breakdown of the use of the increase in the money received for the 1999–2000 financial year over the previous year by the Western Health and Social Services Board on the basis of expenditure to each programme of care for each trust; and how much of this funding allocated within each programme and trust is on a (i) recurring and (ii) non-recurring basis. [93050]

Mr. McFall *[holding answer 26 July 1999]:* The proposed breakdown of the use of the increase in the money received for the 1999–2000 financial year over the previous year by the Western Health and Social Services Board, on the basis of expenditure to each programme of care for each trust and the amount of this funding the Board proposes to allocate on a recurring basis, is shown in the table. Community care recurring funding extends over 1999–2000 to 2001–02 and £2.1 million is available for use non-recurrently in 1999–2000.

Proposed recurrent allocations to Trusts in 1999–2000 by WHSSB

£000

	Programme of Care							
	Community care	*Child care*	*Acute*	*Cancer*	*Renal*	*Mental health*	*Learning disability*	*Total*
Alinagalvin	—	—	349	409	—	—	—	758
Sperrin Lakeland	2,471	686	415	83	178	324	240	4,397
Foyle	2,375	653	—	—	—	196	315	3,539
Royal Group	—	—	150	—	—	—	—	150
Belfast City	—	—	50	439	48	—	—	537
Causeway	—	—	59	—	—	—	—	59
Craigavon	—	—	22	—	—	—	—	22
Ulster and Community	—	—	16	—	—	—	—	16
NI Ambulance Service	—	—	—	—	40	—	—	40
Total	4,846	1,339	1,061	931	266	520	555	9,518

Child Support Agency

Mr. Browne: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland when the Child Support Agency's 1998–99 annual report and accounts will be published. [93787]

Mr. McFall: The Northern Ireland Child Support Agency published its 1998–99 Annual Report and Accounts on Friday 23 July. I have arranged for copies to be placed in the Library.

The Agency has met five of the six Ministerial targets and all Milestone targets. An outturn of £14.7 million was achieved for the Maintenance Collected target of £15.8 million and, although this target was not achieved, the maintenance collected is an increase of 16 per cent. on 1997–98 and a 51 per cent. increase on 1996–97.

The Agency has placed a strong emphasis on improving the quality of service to customers and it is gratifying to see that an outturn of 71 per cent. has been achieved for the processing of maintenance assessments against a 65 per cent. target Improvements in quality are also evident with an outturn of 85 per cent. for the accuracy of assessment target of 75 per cent. The Report included details of the contribution which the Northern Ireland Agency makes to the overall performance of the Great Britain Agency through its partnership contract to deliver services to the people of Eastern England.

The Agency recognises that customers have a right to good service provided by skilled staff and the foundations for continuing improvements are in place. Major changes in service delivery, including additional hours of contact with customers and more use of the telephone, will improve customer contact and the service provided. However, the Agency has a long way to go in improving the quality of its work, particularly in the accuracy of maintenance assessments which it makes.

In the longer term, the Government's recently published proposals for a thorough reform of the child support system represent the best opportunity to radically improve services to customers especially, and most importantly, by putting children first.

Fair Employment

Mr. William Ross: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (1) for an employing firm situated in the council districts of (i) Londonderry, (ii) Strabane, (iii) Limavady, (iv) Coleraine and (v) Magherafelt, what geographical area the Fair Employment Commission takes into account in order to determine the percentage of *(a)* Roman Catholic, *(b)* Protestant and *(c)* other which should be employed so as to reflect the percentage balance of the area; [93633]

(2) what percentage of the economically active population aged 16 to 64 years in the council districts of (i) Londonderry, (ii) Strabane, (iii) Limavady, (iv) Coleraine and (v) Magherafelt are deemed by the Fair Employment Commission to be *(a)* Roman Catholic, *(b)* Protestant and *(c)* other; and what percentage in each council district are (1) male, (2) female and (3) self-employed; [93631]

(3) by whom the progress of the Fair Employment Commission towards a pattern of fair employment is monitored and reviewed; what is the timescale for the achievement of fair employment by the Commission; and what was the timescale determined to achieve fair percentages of Roman Catholics and Protestants in 1994; [93634]

(4) what percentage of the economically active population aged 16 to 64 years resident in *(a)* that part of Londonderry council area which lies on the West side of the River Foyle and *(b)* the remainder of that council area are deemed by the Fair Employment Commission to be (i) Roman Catholic, (ii) Protestant and (iii) other; [93632]

(5) what geographical area the Fair Employment Commission takes into account when determining the percentage of *(a)* Roman Catholic and *(b)* Protestant staff it employs; and what is the percentage of (i) Roman Catholic, (ii) Protestant and (iii) others, economically active in that geographical area. [93636]

Mr. Ingram: I will write to the hon. Gentleman as soon as possible.

Foyle Fisheries

Mr. William Ross: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what estimate she has made of the number of (i) salmon and grilse, (ii) sea trout and (iii) brown trout taken by anglers in each river in the Foyle Fisheries Commission area in each of the last 15 years. [93635]

Mr. Paul Murphy: The number of salmon and grilse and sea trout taken by anglers in each of the rivers in the Foyle Fisheries Commission area is shown in the table. These figures are compiled from returns made by anglers. The figures are incomplete as a varying percentage of anglers make returns each year. No figures are available for brown trout catches.

	Camowen/ Drumragh	*Culdaff*	*Dennett*	*Derg*	*Deele*	*Faughan*	*Finn & Reelan*	*Foyle*	*Glenelly/ Owenkillen*	*Mourne/ Strule*	*Roe*	*Misc.*	*Totals*
Returns of salmon and grilse rod catches 1983–97													
1983	4	—	3	11	—	273	339	15	10	89	80	7	831
1984	4	—	3	13	—	52	75	80	5	79	53	15	379
1985	37	2	6	103	2	564	309	7	64	496	224	—	1,814
1986	14	1	2	10	—	371	324	25	22	270	119	14	1,172
1987	3	—	1	3	—	89	77	14	12	82	96	13	390
1988	13	—	—	9	3	165	208	39	20	41	77	16	960
1989	3	1	4	5	—	370	170	20	22	297	81	2	975
1990	2	1	15	40	—	332	188	4	25	156	119	45	927
1991	11	—	—	38	—	220	82	7	10	84	30	—	482
1992	1	—	—	26	2	209	121	7	5	87	60	5	523
1993	55	—	5	86	—	298	243	10	43	398	69	7	1,214
1994	5	—	—	83	—	198	972	9	23	447	16	6	1,759

	Camowen/ Drumragh	Culdaff	Dennett	Derg	Deele	Faughan	Finn & Reelan	Foyle	Glenelly/ Owenkillen	Mourne/ Strule	Roe	Misc.	Totals
1995	—	—	—	21	—	141	237	25	9	174	79	22	708
1996	5	—	5	40	—	251	524	21	7	534	41	16	1,444
1997	13	—	5	273	—	187	207	9	39	247	31	9	1,020
Returns of sea trout catches 1983–97													
1983	2	15	165	5	—	5,723	103	39	368	85	195	57	6,757
1984	4	27	152	6	—	1,425	209	188	254	84	773	466	3,588
1985	40	29	68	121	36	2,808	137	46	633	148	772	—	4,838
1986	30	22	39	13	11	1,864	245	42	271	79	135	178	2,929
1987	—	5	14	11	5	1,210	253	263	97	73	207	218	2,356
1988	—	—	17	23	16	1,003	135	175	364	25	216	107	2,081
1989	—	—	95	5	—	648	55	122	170	23	166	128	1,412
1990	6	4	220	10	8	660	138	9	63	38	193	50	1,399
1991	—	—	14	4	—	1,043	25	7	10	9	110	—	1,222
1992	4	—	27	30	1	1,035	19	45	19	1	62	172	1,415
1993	—	—	—	3	10	617	56	—	11	12	22	7	738
1994	—	—	—	19	3	390	98	—	52	12	11	7	592
1995	—	—	17	25	—	139	88	129	223	13	102	23	759
1996	—	—	38	4	3	397	99	34	4	154	23	15	771
1997	—	—	26	18	—	426	109	12	13	79	78	41	802

Mr. William Ross: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if she will list for each of the last 15 years the density of (i) brown trout, (ii) sea trout and (iii) salmon parr and salmon smalts per 100 square metres, or such area as is used by the Foyle Fisheries Commission, determined by electric fishing surveys in each of the rivers in the Foyle Fisheries Commission area. [93639]

Mr. Paul Murphy: The information requested is not available.

Traffic Offences

Mr. William Ross: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (1) on which roads, and on how many occasions on each such road, radar traps were operated by the Royal Ulster Constabulary in the council areas of (i) Londonderry, (ii) Limavady, (iii) Strabane and (iv) Coleraine during the last three months for which such information is available; [93629]

(2) how many vehicles which did not have a vehicle excise duty disc displayed were detected on *(a)* the East Bank and *(b)* the West Bank of Londonderry during the last six months for which such figures are available. [93630]

Mr. Ingram: I will write to the hon. Gentleman as soon as possible.

PRIME MINISTER

Policy Unit (US Visits)

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Prime Minister, pursuant to his answer of 25 June 1999, *Official Report*, column *480*, on United States visits by his Policy Unit, how many meetings each member held with members and officials of the United States Government on each visit, indicating the dates and locations of each meeting, the Policy Unit members involved and the names of the United States Ministers and officials at each meeting. [92302]

The Prime Minister: Details of the three occasions on which members of the Policy Unit have travelled to the United States of America on official business since 1 January 1998 when not accompanying me or other Ministers are as follows:

Dates	*Unit member*
6–9 December 1998	Robert Hill
29–31 January 1999	David Miliband
21–28 March 1999	Sharon White

All visits were to attend a series of meetings with US public officials. All visits were undertaken in line with the rules set out in the Ministerial Code.

Special Envoys

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Prime Minister, pursuant to the oral answer by the right hon. Member for Livingston (Mr. Cook) to the hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham of 20 July 1999, *Official Report*, column 962, if he will list the occasions on which special envoys have been used by his Government, and the names of the envoys concerned. [93178]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 26 July 1999]:* I refer the hon. Member to the Answer given today to the hon. Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Mr. Maples), *Official Report*, column *373*, by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs.

UK Delegations

Mr. Quinn: To ask the Prime Minister if there are any changes in the composition of the United Kingdom Delegation to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe and the Assembly of the Western European Union. [93655]

The Prime Minister: Baroness Knight of Collingtree DBE replaces the right hon. Sir Alastair Goodlad KCMG as a full representative of the Delegation. Following the resignation of Lord Grenfell from the Delegation, the right hon. Lord Clinton-Davis has been appointed as a substitute representative from the Government benches.

Parliamentary Questions (Good English)

Mr. Kaufman: To ask the Prime Minister if he will inform all members of his administration that, when giving written or oral replies to parliamentary questions, they should not use the locutions relocate, meet with and consult with, and that they should use good English. [93214]

The Prime Minister: What matters most is that Ministers give accurate and truthful information to Parliament, as required by the Ministerial Code. The use of clear and concise English can be the best way of achieving this. However, I do not think it necessary to proscribe the use of any particular phrase.

Ministerial Visits

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Prime Minister when he intends to visit *(a)* the Czech Republic, *(b)* Hungary, *(c)* Slovenia and *(d)* Estonia. [92691]

The Prime Minister: I recognise the importance of these countries but have no plans to visit at present.

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Prime Minister (1) when he intends to visit Poland; [92692]

(2) on how many occasions dates have been identified with the UK Embassy in Poland for the Prime Minister to visit Poland and have subsequently been abandoned. [92802]

The Prime Minister: I regret that I have had to postpone my visit to Poland on two occasions due to pressure of other duties, mainly talks on Northern Ireland. I hope to reinstate a visit as soon as the opportunity arises.

Petitions

Mr. Maclean: To ask the Prime Minister if he will publish a list of the public petitions submitted to the Government in each of the last two years. [93469]

The Prime Minister: There is no operational requirement to maintain these details and no central list is therefore collated. However, in respect of my office, 101 petitions have been received this year, of which 14 contained more than 10,000 signatures. In line with the practice adopted by previous Governments, petitions delivered to my Office are acknowledged wherever possible and the relevant Government Department informed. Where appropriate, the views expressed are reflected in advice to Ministers about what the public response is to an issue.

Cancer Services

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Prime Minister what plans he has to meet the National Cancer Forum to assess progress on implementing the Policy Framework for Commissioning Cancer Services; and if he will make a statement. [93625]

The Prime Minister: The aim of the Policy Framework for Commissioning Cancer Services is to improve the quality and consistency of cancer services across the country. The National Cancer Forum has been established to advise on the on-going implementation of the Policy Framework.

I met members of the National Cancer Forum in May when I hosted a meeting in Downing Street to review progress and to identify where further action is needed to improve cancer prevention and care.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Population Control Agencies

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what proportion of her Department's health budget is paid to *(a)* IPPF, *(b)* UNFPA and *(c)* other population control agencies which provide abortion services as well as contraceptives. [93431]

Clare Short: The Department for International Development (DFID) works with national governments, multilateral agencies and civil society groups in over 150 countries to enable more poor people to benefit from good quality reproductive health care, including voluntary family counselling and services; HIV/AIDS/STD prevention, treatment and care; essential obstetric care, including treatment for the consequences of unsafe abortion and, where legal, elective termination of pregnancy. Around 7.5 per cent. and 2.5 per cent. of DFID's 1998–99 health expenditure of £200 million was invested via UNFPA and IPPF respectively in order to enable poor people to exercise their basic right to reproductive choice and reproductive health.

Abortion and Sterilisation Programmes

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if the British Government funds compulsory abortion and sterilisation programmes. [93432]

Clare Short: All UK Government assistance for sexual and reproductive health is contingent on respect for the human rights principles and standards of privacy and free and informed choice upheld at the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development. Coercion and control have no place in UN supported family planning.

Health Services (Young People)

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement on the British Government's policy in respect of health services for young people. [93495]

Clare Short: The Department for International Development's policies in respect of health services for young people seek to implement the Key Actions recently adopted by the UN General Assembly further to implement the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development and are consistent with the UK Government's recent White Paper "Saving Lives: Our Healthier Nation".

People Living in Extreme Poverty

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what targets have been set by her Department to increase the income of those people who are living on less than one US dollar a day. [92855]

Clare Short: Our aim is to mobilise the international system to achieve the internationally agreed target of reducing by half the proportion of people living in extreme poverty by 2015. In the Comprehensive Spending Review published in July 1998, we set out key targets to be achieved by the end of this Parliament, including annual growth of 1.5 per cent. in Gross Domestic Product per capita, and quantified measures for progress in health and education, strategies for sustainable development, improvements in the effectiveness of the international system and increased effectiveness of the United Kingdom's bilateral aid programme. Progress against these targets, which closely reflect the International Development Goals, will be rigorously monitored in the Department's annual Output and Performance Analysis which will be made publicly available.

Public Attitudes (Monitoring)

Mr. Corbett: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what plans she has for monitoring public attitudes on international development issues. [93699]

Clare Short: The Government are committed to working to increase public awareness and understanding of international development issues and to monitoring the effectiveness of this work. We are therefore conducting a baseline survey this month through the Office for National Statistics' Omnibus Survey, and will make the results publicly available. Further surveys will be undertaken periodically, in order to measure progress against our objectives.

Bangladesh

Mr. Hope: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what funding her Department is providing for intensive shrimp production in Bangladesh. [93703]

Clare Short: We have recently agreed to provide £9.76 million to support the Government of Bangladesh's Fourth Fisheries Project. The project will engage government, non-governmental and community based organisations in improving aquatic resource management of inland waters and coastal polders. Fourteen per cent. of the funding will support a component for improving the shrimp production system. Our contribution is 25 per cent. of the total project requirements, which will be parallel financed with the World bank and the Bangladesh Government over five years.

As a major supporter of sustainable fisheries development in Bangladesh for many years, we share local concerns about the environmental and social impact of past development of the shrimp industry. We have been able to influence development partners in this sector, using our expertise to provide strong environmental and social analyses in the design of the new project. This helped to put poverty elimination and environmental sustainability objectives at the centre of project design. For the shrimp component, we also helped to modify the focus of the project to the creation of more diverse and stable livelihoods in areas where shrimp are produced.

The project plans to promote the production of shrimp by smallholders, but this is conditional on the outcome of a feasibility study in the first year which will fully consider social and environmental dimensions in consultation with the communities concerned and NGOs. The project will also support a regional initiative to develop a Code of Conduct for responsible shrimp culture.

Montserrat

Ms Kelly: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development how many Montserratians have been admitted to the United Kingdom as evacuees; how many still remain in the United Kingdom; and how many have returned to Montserrat. [93627]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: I have been asked to reply.

I will write to my hon. Friend shortly.

HEALTH

Asbestos

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment he has made of extent of the multiplied risk which occurs when smokers are exposed to asbestos in relation to contraction of *(a)* lung cancer and *(b)* asbestosis; and if he will make a statement. [93024]

Mr. Meale: I have been asked to reply.

Workers exposed to asbestos have been found to have up to ten times the risk of lung cancer compared with other workers. A typical smoker, not exposed to asbestos, has about fifteen times the risk of contracting lung cancer compared with non-smokers. When both exposures are present the risks can be—approximately—multiplied together. The total risk of lung cancer faced by smokers exposed to asbestos will depend on the type of fibre to which they are exposed, on the amount to which they are exposed and for how long, but it will be much higher than for non-smokers. The development of asbestosis is unaffected by smoking.

Private Finance Initiative

Mr. Burden: To ask the Secretary of State for Health which existing private finance initiative contracts in the National Health Service provide for the automatic transfer of assets back to his Department after the expiry of the contract or for his Department to have first right of refusal to buy back the units after the expiry of the contract; and if he will make a statement. [89873]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 5 July 1999]:* For all the first wave of prioritised major private finance initiative schemes any leasehold interest held by the private sector partner will either "fall away" at the end of the contract period or the National Health Service trust can exercise an option to take back the leasehold interest, in both cases returning full ownership of the asset to the NHS trust. This principle is set out in NHS Executive guidance on the PFI and will be followed by all subsequent schemes.

Acute NHS Trusts

Mr. Hammond: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what sums have been appropriated from the Primary Care Modernisation Fund to support acute NHS trusts in London. [91724]

Mr. Denham: In 1999–2000, London health authorities received modernisation funds of £13.1 million for improving primary care as part of their unified allocations. It is for health authorities, in partnership with National Health Service trusts, primary care groups, local authorities and local stakeholders to determine how best to use their funds to meet national and local priorities for improving health and modernisation services. In doing so they must however deliver at least the guaranteed floor level of expenditure on general practitioner practice infrastructure costs.

Eye Tests

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many pensioners living in the Tooting parliamentary constituency are able to obtain free eye tests; and if he will make a statement. [92238]

Mr. Denham: From 1 April, everyone aged 60 or over became eligible for free National Health Service sight tests. We made access to eye care easier for older people because they are most at risk of sight threatening disease.

Barnet Health Authority

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) since May 1997, how much money has been allocated to Barnet Health Authority to tackle *(a)* waiting lists and *(b)* winter pressures; [92369]

(2) since May 1997, how much funding in addition to original expenditure plans has been allocated to Barnet Health Authority for additional cancer treatments; and on what the money has been *(a)* spent and *(b)* allocated; [92415]

(3) how much funding in addition to original expenditure plans has been allocated to Barnet Health Authority since May 1997 for its core work; [92417]

(4) how much funding in addition to original expenditure plans has been allocated to mental health services in the Barnet Health Authority area since May 1997; and on what the money has been *(a)* spent and *(b)* allocated; [92418]

(5) how much has been allocated to Barnet Health Authority from the modernisation fund; and on what the money has been spent; [92366]

(6) how much funding, in addition to original expenditure plans, has been given to *(a)* Barnet Health Authority and *(b)* Barnet Council to improve continuing and community care since May 1997; and for what purposes the money has been allocated. [92419]

Mr. Denham: The information available is provided in the following tables. Table 1 shows the additional resources allocated to Barnet Health Authority since May 1997. Table 2 shows Barnet Health Authority's Modernisation Fund allocations announced to date. Table 3 shows the additional grants provided this year to Barnet Council specifically for community care.

Table 1: Barnet Health Authority cash increases since May 1997

£000

Purpose	*Amount*
Breast cancer services	66
Winter pressures	1,057
GMS cash limited—salaried doctors scheme	26
Special assistance for health authorities undergoing strategic change	4,200
Emergency pressure	50
1997–98 Total	5,399
Cash uplift for 1998–99 revenue allocations	6,176
Total cash increase in 1998–99 special allocations	940
Special assistance for health authorities undergoing strategic change	1,500
Waiting list addition	1,955
Waiting list performance fund	217
Whole systems support for waiting lists	441
Winter pressures	1,080
Winter pressure contingency	110
Colorectal cancer	63
1998–99 Total	12,482
Cash uplift for 1999–2000 revenue allocations (including Modernisation Fund)	12,899
Increase in drugs misuse special allocation	93
Recruitment and Retention Allowance	671
1999–2000 Total	13,663
Total extra cash since May 1997	31,544

Table 2: Barnet Health Authority Modernisation Fund allocations (1999–2000)

Modernisation Fund included in main allocations	*£000*
Waiting lists	1,706
PCG Management Costs	886
Improving Primary Care	501
Mental Health	440
Recruitment and Retention	671
Primary Care Groups IT	80
Nurse Prescribing	41
Connections to GP Net	323
Calman Lung Cancer	68
Primary Care	108

Table 3: Additional grants provided this year to the London Borough of Barnet specifically for community care

Grants	*£000*
Partnership Grant	1,775
Prevention Grant	140
Carers Grant	138
Increase in Mental Health Grant	251

Nurse Training

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what is his estimate of the number of male and female nurses in training. [92435]

Mr. Hutton: Data from the English National Board for Nursing, Midwifery and Health Visiting are that at 31 March 1999 there were 6,319 male and 44,740 female nurses and midwives in training in England.

Arachnoiditis

Dr. Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many patients were given myelography with Myodil between 1971 and 1987; and of those how many subsequently developed arachnoiditis. [92472]

Mr. Hutton: Available information does not separately identify patients undergoing myelography with Myodil or the occurrence of arachnoiditis associated with myelography.

Acute Care

Mr. Norman: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many acute care hospitals in the NHS have *(a)* dual sex wards and *(b)* shared toilet facilities. [92370]

Mr. Denham: The data collected by the National Health Service Executive on mixed sex hospital accommodation are at health authority level and do not at present contain detailed information about the position in NHS trusts. We are, however, looking to collect trust level information from health authorities in collections from September 1999 onwards.

Telecommunications Masts

Mr. Pond: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment he has made of the health implications of the siting of mobile phone transmitter masts. [92361]

Ms Jowell: The Government obtain advice from the National Radiological Protection Board (NRPB) on the risks to health from exposure to electromagnetic fields (EMFs), including those emitted by mobile phone masts. At locations accessible to the public the exposure to EMFs emitted by mobile phone transmitters are well below the maximum exposure levels recommended by NRPB in their guidelines. (Restrictions on human exposure to static and time varying electromagnetic fields and radiation. Documents of the NRPB, 4, No 5,7–63 (1993)). These guidelines are intended to prevent acute adverse responses to increased heat load and elevated body temperature. Copies of the guidelines have been placed in the Library.

Concerns have been expressed that there may be other, non-established, health effects of exposure to EMFs, particularly cancer. The question of possible long-term health effects, and specifically cancer-related issues, associated with exposures to electromagnetic fields and radiation has been addressed by the NRPB Advisory Group on Non-Ionising Radiation (chaired by Professor Sir Richard Doll). The Group has concluded that there is no firm evidence for the existence of a carcinogenic hazard from exposure to electromagnetic fields but there is a need for further good quality research to be carried out. This view is supported by international bodies, including the World Health Organisation.

Research into the possible long term health effects of electromagnetic fields in general is being undertaken on a worldwide basis. The Department is currently contributing to the World Health Organisation International Electromagnetic Fields Project which includes health effects of electromagnetic fields and is funding studies investigating possible biological effects from EMF generally. A three year study in the UK of occupational exposure to radiofrequency fields, including those from TV and radio transmitters, was launched in November 1998. The Department is supporting this study.

We recently announced a working group, chaired by Sir William Stewart FRS FRSE, to assess the current state of research into the health implications of mobile telephones usage. Further details of the group will be announced shortly.

Ministerial Travel

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Health on what date he last used a train in the course of his official duties. [92661]

Ms Jowell *[holding answer 23 July 1999]:* In accordance with the terms of the Ministerial code, Ministers are required always to make efficient and cost effective travel arrangements. Trips in and around London, which account for the majority of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State's working week, will normally be made by Government car. The last time he used a train in the course of his official duties was on 23 July 1999 when visiting the National Health Service Executive Headquarters in Leeds.

Psychiatric Hospitals

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many *(a)* men and *(b)* women were detained in psychiatric hospitals in England and Wales on 1 July. [92921]

Mr. Hutton: The information available is contained in the Department of Health's Statistical Bulletin "In-patients formally detained in hospitals under the Mental Health Act 1983 and other legislation, England: 1987–88 and 1992–93 to 1997–98". My hon. Friend may wish to refer to this Bulletin, copies of which are available in the Library.

Sexual and Reproductive Health

Mr. Hesford: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will publish a national strategy on sexual and reproductive health; and if he will make a statement. [93441]

Ms Jowell: I announced on 23 March that the Department will, over the coming year, be developing an integrated strategy on sexual health. Professor Michael Adler will, be joining the Department in September to lead work on the strategy and ensure that it is co-ordinated with work on the HIV/AIDS strategy and teenage pregnancy. We will be in a position to announce the membership of the External Reference Group to assist him in this work shortly.

Medical Devices Agency

Mr. Derek Twigg: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will report the findings of the Quinquennial Review of the Medical Devices Agency, which the Minister for Public Health announced on 2 May; and if he will make a statement about the future status of the Medical Devices Agency and the Medicines Control Agency. [93798]

Mr. Denham: We are publishing today the report of the Medical Devices Agency quinquennial review. Copies have been placed in the Library. The review concludes that the Agency is well respected in the medical device field both in the United Kingdom and Europe and has performed consistently well against its key targets. It finds that Executive Agency status has been beneficial and recommends that the MDA should remain as an Agency.

In light of the recommendation of the report we announced on 9 December 1998 and the more recent conclusions of the quinquennial reviews respectively of the MDA and the Medicines Control Agency, we have

decided that the two Agencies should not be merged and that both should retain their status as separate Agencies for the time being.

Tobacco Advertising

Mr. Alan Keen: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he will publish the 12 Annual report of the Committee for Monitoring Agreements on Tobacco Advertising and Sponsorship. [93820]

Mr. Dobson: I have today published the 12 Annual Report of the Committee for Monitoring Agreements on Tobacco Advertising and Sponsorship. Copies have been placed in the Library.

NHS Estates Agency

Ms Blears: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement about the future of the NHS Estates Agency. [93888]

Mr. Denham: A quinquennial review of the Agency falls to be completed by the end of this year. This will address the performance of the Agency and will re-examine all the options ("Prior Options") which were considered before the Agency was launched.

Equal Treatment

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he has established a baseline for policy appraisal against which to measure progress on equal treatment. [93459]

Mr. Denham: I will write to the hon. Member.

Dementia Research

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how much in each of the last three years his Department has spent on dementia research; and how much is allocated in the Comprehensive Spending Review for the next two years. [93309]

Mr. Hutton: With regard to the Department's spending on dementia research in the last three years I refer the hon. Member to the reply I gave the hon. Member for Mid Sussex (Mr. Soames) on 21 June 1999, *Official Report*, column *289*.

Comprehensive Spending Review settlements are given to Government Departments and do not include allocations to particular research programmes. Ministers are currently reviewing planned expenditure for 2000–01.

IVF Treatment

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Secretary of State for Health which health authorities in the United Kingdom provide IVF treatment to women whose spouses have children by a previous marriage; and what was the cost of such provision to each authority in the last two financial years. [92581]

Ms Jowell: Information is not currently available in the form requested. However, a College of Health survey of health authorities (commissioned by the National Infertility Awareness Campaign in 1998) lists 70 health authorities which had formal eligibility criteria for assisted conception. Details can be found in the survey report, copies of which are available in the Library.

Information on the cost of providing National Health Service infertility treatment to individuals with existing children is not collected.

The Department is currently conducting a survey of health authority provision of infertility services in England. This should provide information on eligibility criteria used by all health authorities. The results of the survey are likely to be available later in the year.

Pharmacy Strategy

Mr. Chidgey: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what was the planned date for publication of the Government's pharmacy strategy review document; and when he expects it to be published. [92966]

Mr. Denham: I will write to the hon. Member.

Continence Services

Mr. Grogan: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he intends to publish updated guidance on continence services following the Review of Continence Services published on 2 September 1988. [93557]

Mr. Hutton: We hope to issue shortly updated guidance which has been developed in the light of the current review of continence policy.

Immunisation

Dr. Fox: To ask the Secretary of State for Health which health authorities have reported shortages of *(a)* DTP, *(b)* haemophilus, *(c)* polio, *(d)* MMR and *(e)* BCG vaccines over the last 12 months. [93222]

Ms Jowell: I will write to the hon. Member.

Dr. Fox: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) how many children over one year of age have received *(a)* polio vaccine, *(b)* haemophilus B vaccine and *(c)* DTP immunisation; [93217]

(2) how many children over the age of two years have not received MMR immunisation; [93221]

(3) how many children at school entry age have not received *(a)* full DTP immunisation, *(b)* polio vaccine and *(c)* MUR immunisation. [93218]

Ms Jowell: I shall write to the hon. Member.

Dr. Fox: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many children over the age of 14 years have not received BCG immunisation. [93220]

Ms Jowell: Information is not held centrally in the form requested. The latest figures on number of BCG immunisations given are published in the Statistical Bulletin National Health Service Immunisation Statistical, England: 1997–98, copies of which are available in the Library.

Councillors

Ms Harman: To ask the Secretary of State for Health, pursuant to his answer of 10 December 1998, *Official Report*, column *257*, on councillors, if he will list the percentage of *(a)* men and *(b)* women councillors in each local authority at the latest available date. [93520]

Ms Jowell: The Women's Unit collated and analysed information on the gender breakdown of councillors during 1998. This information was made public on 10 December 1998 (copies placed in the Library). The tables break down the results by region and by local authority. This information is not routinely collected by any department.

Medicines (Advertising Regulations)

Dr. Harris: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will publish the legal advice pertaining to the Medicines (Advertising and Monitoring of Advertising) Amendment Regulations 1999 (S.I., 1999, No. 267) referred to by the Minister for Public Health on 28 April 1999, *Official Report, Ninth Standing Committee on Delegated Legislation*, column 23. [93447]

Ms Jowell: I shall write to the hon. Member.

Meningitis C Vaccine

Dr. Harris: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will deposit in the Library all data used in the assessment of cost-effectiveness of the new meningitis C vaccine. [93341]

Ms Jowell: I will write to the hon. Member.

IT Procurement

Mr. Alan Johnson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if the review of procurement processes mentioned in the Information for Health document has been carried out. [92582]

Mr. Denham: The purpose of the review into National Health Service information management and technology procurement in England is to improve the procurement and implementation of "fit for purpose" clinical systems. The review is in two phases, with the first phase reporting to Ministers at the end of March 1999. The second Phase is due for completion shortly. Relevant information from the review will be published on the IM and T investment website at www.open.gov.uk/doh/itinvest.htm.

Mr. Alan Johnson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans there are for the NHS Information Authority to implement a standard PFI contract for IT services. [92583]

Mr. Denham: The desirability and feasibility of a standard Private Finance Initiative contract for Information Technology services is being considered as part of the National Health Service IT Procurement Review. In addition, Her Majesty's Treasury's Task Force are developing standard contract clauses for IT services. The NHS Executive will take this work into account before considering whether to implement standard contracts for IT services, whether funded through the Private Finance Initiative or public capital.

Genetic Modification

Mr. Charles Kennedy: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what steps his Department will take to introduce guidance to health authorities concerning compulsory labelling of ingredients produced as a result of genetic modification in meals served to hospital patients. [93363]

Ms Jowell: The Government have recently produced guidance on labelling of food containing genetically modified ingredients which includes meals served to hospital patients.

Biological and Chemical Weapons

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what additional funding he will provide to enhance ambulance and accident and emergency services' ability to protect staff and to improve decontamination facilities, as announced in the Government paper on 21 July, "Defending Against the Threat from Biological and Chemical Weapons"; and if he will make a statement; [93096]

(2) what additional resources he will make available to *(a)* health authorities and *(b)* ambulance trusts in England and Wales for the preparation, provision and annual funding needed to meet the new tasks announced in the Government paper on 21 July, "Defending Against the Threat from Biological and Chemical Weapons"; and if he will make a statement; [93098]

(3) in what ways, and at what cost, his Department will co-ordinate the emergency provision of healthcare services in response to a release of biological or chemical material, as announced on 21 July in the Government paper, "Defending Against the Threat from Biological and Chemical Weapons"; and if he will make a statement. [93097]

Ms Jowell: The Department and the National Health Service have already begun to enhance the capacity of the health service to deal with a possible threat from chemical or biological weapons. Measures being taken as part of this enhancement programme include the further strengthening of protection for ambulance service and hospital staff, and the improvement of decontamination facilities.

Improvements to facilities for decontamination are included in the Government's £115 million accident and emergency modernisation programme, which was announced earlier this year. We are making resources available to ensure the success of the enhancement programme to strengthen further the response capacity of the health service.

Prescription Charges

Mr. Letwin: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when the link between the level of prescription charges payable by a patient and a capital disregard was introduced; and if he will make a statement. [93382]

Mr. Denham: I will write to the hon. Member.

Diabetes

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment was made in preparing his White

Paper, "Saving Lives–Our Healthier Nation", of the effect on diabetics of changes in the prescribing of insulin and insulin pen needles. [93288]

Ms Jowell: The White Paper, *"Saving Lives—Our Healthier Nation"*, was published on 6 July. We are still considering representations from organisations on separate proposals to allow insulin pen needles to be prescribed by NHS general practitioners.

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what representations were considered from the British Diabetics Association and diabetes sufferers before producing his White Paper, "Saving Lives—Our Healthier Nation". [93289]

Mr. Hutton: The Department of Health received and considered 34 responses about diabetes from organisations, including the British Diabetic Association, and a further 63 from individuals.

Community Health Councils

Mr. McCabe: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how the spending of public funds by community health councils is audited and scrutinised. [93211]

Mr. Denham: Community health councils are subject to internal audit by the National Health Service Executive. They also produce an annual financial report.

Mr. McCabe: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the arrangements for the accountability of community health councils; and to whom they are accountable. [93209]

Mr. Denham: Community health councils (CHCs) are subject to the regulations under which they were established. They are accountable to the public, the establishing body, Parliament and the courts. National Health Service Executive Regional Offices maintain strategic links with CHCs.

Mr. McCabe: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the occasions in the past five years when the actions of community health councils have been subject to judicial review. [93212]

Mr. Denham: As far as we are aware, there have been no occasions in the past five years when the actions of community health councils have been subject to judicial review

Mr. McCabe: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how the funding of community health councils is determined. [93210]

Mr. Denham: Community health councils are funded centrally at a level judged appropriate to cover the expenditure they reasonably incur in the course of performing their functions.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Tourism

Mr. Reed: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what estimate he has made of the value of tourism to the economies of *(a)* the east midlands and *(b)* Leicestershire in (i) 1997 and (ii) 1998. [83169]

Janet Anderson: I regret that it has not been possible to provide an answer before the summer recess. I shall therefore write to my hon. Friend and place a copy of my reply in the Libraries of the House.

Mr. Nigel Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what assessment he has made of the impact on the United Kingdom tourist industry of electronic commerce. [93142]

Janet Anderson: I regret that it has not been possible to provide an answer before the summer recess. I shall therefore write to the hon. Member and place a copy of my reply in the Libraries of the House.

Millennium Dome

Mr. Reed: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what percentage of the materials used in the construction of the Millennium Dome originated from East Midlands companies. [90500]

Janet Anderson: New Millennium Experience Company (NMEC) does not keep detailed records of the regional origin of materials used for the construction of the Dome. Contracts totalling over £4 million have been let to companies in the Midlands—Keller Ground Engineering; Euro Air; and Terrapin.

Ministerial Meetings (USA)

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what meetings the previous Under-Secretary, the right hon. Member for Coatbridge and Chryston (Mr. Clarke), held with officials of the United States Government during his visit in January 1998 to Los Angeles; and if he will list the date of, location of, and names of departments of the US officials who took part in each meeting. [92267]

Janet Anderson: I regret that it has not been possible to provide an answer before the summer recess. I shall therefore write to the hon. Member and place a copy of my reply in the Libraries of the House.

Shooting Events

Mr. Laxton: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if the ban on handguns will prevent shooting events being staged during any international games held in the United Kingdom. [92760]

Mr. Banks: Prohibited weapons may not be possessed without the express authority of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for the Home Department. During the passage of the Firearms (Amendment) Act 1997 through Parliament, it was agreed that provision could be made for competitors in pistol events in major competitions such as the Olympics or Commonwealth Games to be granted temporary authority to allow them to bring their pistols into the country for the duration of the event. Indeed, the European Police Pistol Championships were held in this country shortly after the prohibition on handguns took effect, and I understand the arrangements worked smoothly and no problems were experienced by any of the competitors.

Mr. Laxton: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what provisions have been made to allow sportsmen and women who have previously represented

the United Kingdom in events using handguns of a calibre now banned to continue to compete in future Olympic and Commonwealth Games. [92759]

Mr. Banks: The Firearms (Amendment) Act 1997 prohibited handguns of the type used in competition shooting, but it applies only in Great Britain. There is no bar to British pistol shooters practising and competing abroad in whatever disciplines or events they wish. I understand that some competition shooters have chosen to practice and compete in this way.

World Cup

Mr. Nigel Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what discussions he has had with the authorities in Botswana over the hosting of the Football World Cup in 2006. [93143]

Mr. Banks: During my visit to Botswana from 26–30 April with the Football Association I met the hon. Lt. Gen. Mompati S. Merafhe MP, Botswanan Minister for Foreign Affairs, the hon. B. K. Temane MP, Minister for Labour and Home Affairs, the Chairman and representatives of the Botswanan Football Association. I discussed a number of sports issues including UEFA's Meridian Project which links the English FA with Botswana, the significance of sport in national development and the forthcoming Botswanan White Paper on Sports Policy. I also took the opportunity to outline the merits of the FA's bid for the 2006 World Cup. The meetings were extremely useful and productive, and built upon the excellent bi-lateral relations which already exist between our two countries.

Trafalgar Square

Mr. John D. Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport which organisations applied to hold meetings in Trafalgar Square, London on 18 July; in what order the applications were received; which organisation held a meeting on 18 July at Trafalgar Square; and if he will make a statement. [92939]

Mr. Alan Howarth *[holding answer 26 July 1999]:* The Turkish Cypriot Network (TCN) and the National Federation of Greek Cypriots (NFGC) made requests by telephone some time ago to use Trafalgar Square on 18 July and the NFGC by letter on 4 January. Both organisations were advised that the normal practice is to consider applications no more than 3 months in advance and that they should re-apply at that time.

The TCN applied to hold a party and were invited on 20 April to submit details of their intentions: these were submitted on 30 April and permission was refused on 7 May since the proposed celebrations were inappropriate to and out of scale with Trafalgar Square. On 3 May the NFGC sent by facsimile a copy of a letter dated 18 April seeking approval to hold a rally in Trafalgar Square with speeches; similar rallies have been held in Trafalgar Square by this group for a number of years.

The TCN submitted a revised proposal on 12 May. Two other requests to use Trafalgar Square on 18 July were made during this period, but no details were given and no reply received to the Department's request for further information.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State's judgment was that the proposal from the NFGC of 7 May was the first which constituted an application for an event suitable for Trafalgar Square and he noted that such an event had taken place in previous years: this application therefore received consent. The TCN were invited to consider alternative venues for their event. A march from Marble Arch to Belgrave Square, which we understand TCN attended, was held by the British Council of Turkish Cypriot Associations on 18 July.

Millennium Experience (North-West)

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will make a statement about employment opportunities in the north west resulting from the celebrations connected with the Millennium Experience. [72123]

Janet Anderson: I regret that it has not been possible to provide an answer before the summer recess. I shall therefore write to my hon. Friend and place a copy of my reply in the Libraries of the House.

Equal Treatment

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he has established a baseline for policy appraisal against which to measure progress on equal treatment. [93463]

Mr. Chris Smith: As part of the Government's commitment to ensuring that their policies are relevant to the lives that people live today, my Department is working with the Women's Unit, Home Office and DfEE to develop good practices for ensuring that our policies meet the changing needs of all members of society.

"Policy Appraisal for Equal Treatment", published by the Cabinet Office, Home Office, DfEE and the Women's Unit in November 1998, has been circulated to staff within my Department to ensure that the effects of any policy changes on all sections of the population are considered at the earliest stage of policy development.

My Department has set targets for measuring progress on equal treatment in its own employment policies and in appointments to its sponsored bodies. It requires those sponsored bodies to set targets for equal treatment in their areas of interest.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Baton Rounds

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what changes are to be made to the guidelines on the police use of baton rounds. [93894]

Mr. Straw: I have approved new operational guidelines on the use of baton rounds, which will be issued by the Association of Chief Police Officers, replacing current Home Office guidance. These will come into force on 1 August 1999. With the agreement of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, the guidelines will apply in England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

The new guidelines will clarify that baton rounds may be used where other methods of policing to restore order have been tried and failed or are likely to fail; and there is a risk of loss of life or serious injury arising from serious public disorder; or a risk of serious and substantial damage to property which gives rise to a risk of loss of life or serious injury. The new guidelines clarify that, in assessing the risk of loss of life or serious injury occurring, account should be taken of the risk to police officers and members of the emergency services as well as to members of the public and others. The revised guidelines place the use of baton rounds within the current command and control structure for dealing with serious public disorder and other critical incidents.

A copy has been placed in the Library.

Government Information

Dr. Iddon: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he intends to publish the 1988 report on the operation of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information. [93895]

Mr. Straw: I have published this report today and copies have been placed in the Library.

Child Protection

Mr. Ian Stewart: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what progress has been made by the Interdepartmental Working Group on Preventing Unsuitable People from Working with Children and Abuse of Trust on the details of their scheme to protect children following their report on 25 January; and if he will make a statement. [93896]

Mr. Straw: Following its report on 25 January, we asked the Interdepartmental Working Group to work up the details of the scheme. It has now completed this work. I will be placing a short summary in the Library on 29 July.

Immigration

Mr. Ian Stewart: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to amend the Immigration (Places of Detention) Direction 1996; and if he will make a statement. [93897]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The Immigration (Places of Detention) Direction 1996 has been amended and copies have been placed in the Library.

It was necessary to amend the Direction in order to:

enable detention, where facilities have been specially provided, at immigration offices which are not at ports of entry. This will allow our proposals for a new reporting centre at Becket House to be implemented in October of this year when it is expected to be ready for operation;

delete the 'out of date' reference to Meadvale detention centre, which is no longer in operation; and

amend reference to a 'place of safety' in a Northern Ireland context to take account of the observations of the Legislative Counsel in Northern Ireland.

Ethnic Minority Staff

Mr. Ivan Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he will publish his race equality employment targets for ethnic minority staff in the Home Office and its service areas. [93898]

Mr. Straw: I will tomorrow place a copy of "Race Equality—The Home Secretary's Employment Targets" in the Library. The paper sets out recruitment, retention and career progression targets for ethnic minority staff in the Home Office, the prison, the police, the fire and the probation services.

Travel Documents

Maria Eagle: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on charging for Home Office travel documents. [93899]

Mr. Straw: The Home Office has issued travel documents to refugees, stateless persons and some other third country nationals for many years. This service has always been subject to the payment of a fee. These travel documents are issued under the Royal Prerogative, but there is no specific legal power for the taking of fees in connection with such documents. The Home Office first received legal advice raising questions about the legal basis for charges and advising that specific powers should be taken to charge for these documents on 9 February 1999. I have, therefore, decided that it would be right for applications outstanding on that date to be processed free of charge, as will applications received between that date and the date on which new fees regulations are made. These applicants need take no action. Refunds, where appropriate, will be offered automatically by the Immigration and Nationality Directorate, although it is likely to be some months before all applicants receive their refunds.

Until 31 December 1993, refunds were made to all applicants whose applications for a travel document were refused. Since then, the practice has been to charge for processing applications, whether or not a document is issued. It is not proposed to offer refunds to applicants whose cases were completed before 9 February 1999, who were charged in good faith and who received the document for which they applied. But there are an estimated 1,500 applicants who received neither a travel document, because their application was refused, nor a refund, because their application was determined after 31 December 1993. It is proposed to offer refunds to such applicants provided they apply before 30 November 1999. It is, however, not possible to identify such applications from Home Office records and we are inviting those immigration advisers who are members of the Immigration and Nationality User Panel to help to trace those who may be eligible for a refund.

An information line has been established which gives more detail about eligibility for refunds, how to apply if necessary, and how refunds will be made. The number of the information line is 020 8681 5615. Information is also being placed on the Immigration and Nationality internet website—www.homeoffice.gov.uk./ind/hpg.htm.

In the light of the legal advice which has been received, I have decided that it would be right to put beyond doubt the power to levy fees in connection with Home Office travel documents. A new clause to this effect will

accordingly be brought forward to the Immigration and Asylum Bill, which is currently before the House of Lords. The clause will be retrospective—it will have the effect of making charges imposed by the Home Office in the past, in connection with travel documents, lawful.

In the meantime, there is an enabling power in the Finance Act 1973 to charge for services provided by the Government pursuant to any international treaty to which the United Kingdom is a party. This would cover documents issued to refugees and stateless persons in accordance with the relevant United Nations Conventions, although not other types of travel document. I have decided to exercise these powers pending the enactment of wider powers in the Immigration and Asylum Bill. When the Bill has received Royal Assent, regulations will be made covering fees for the full range of travel documents.

National Lottery

Mr. Derek Twigg: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he intends to publish the fourth report on the impact of the National Lottery on the horserace betting levy. [93900]

Mr. George Howarth: An update on the impact of the National Lottery on the horserace betting levy has been published today and copies have been placed in the Library. This fulfils an undertaking made during the passage of the National Lottery Bill.

The paper, which has been prepared by the Economics and Resource Analysis Unit of the Home Office, examines continuing trends in off-course betting expenditure, on which the levy is closely dependent.

The statistical analysis suggests that, in 1998, approximately £1.1 billion was diverted from off-course betting expenditure as a direct result of the National Lottery. This equates to off-course betting expenditure being about 13.2 per cent. below the level it would have reached in the absence of the Lottery. Horserace betting accounts for about 69 per cent. of off-course betting expenditure and, therefore, the levy yield is likely to have been similarly affected. This can be only an approximate figure, and the effect of the Lottery may vary over time.

Motorcycle Gatherings

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the occasions over the past three years when the police have recommended to organisers of motorcycle gatherings that the event be cancelled; for what reason the recommendation in each case was made; what was the response of the organisers; on the occasions when the event subsequently went ahead, if there were any arrests; and if he will make a statement. [92755]

Mr. Boateng: This information is not collated centrally. The decision to recommend cancellation of an event on public order or public safety grounds is an operational matter for the local chief officer of police.

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what requirement is placed upon the police to take account of losses likely to be incurred when they recommend to organisers of motorcycle gatherings that the event be cancelled; and if he will make a statement. [92756]

Mr. Boateng: None. This is a matter for event organisers and the local police.

Young Offenders

Mr. Moore: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what actions he has taken to improve the management of Her Majesty's Young Offenders Institution and Remand Centre, Feltham following the report by the steering group set up by the Director General of the Prison Service in response to the recommendations made by the Chief Inspector of Prisons. [92629]

Mr. George Howarth: The steering group set up by the Director General of the Prison Service for Feltham Young Offenders Institution, following the Chief Inspector of Prisons' report, endorsed the recommendations contained in the four reports submitted to it by the task force which went into Feltham to address the immediate problems. The recommendations will form part of an action plan detailing improvements to be taken forward and will build on the six month improvement plan charted at the time of the inspection. This action plan is expected to be finalised shortly.

Many improvements have already been taken forward at Feltham. The task force identified 39 issues for immediate action, 33 of these have now been implemented and work on the remaining six is well in hand. The significant achievements include:

making significant in-roads into the 'transit-camp' problem by ending the use of Kestrel unit as a daily discharge unit and the use of Osprey unit for allocation purposes;

reducing the capacity of Feltham by 72 thereby reducing the overcrowding and allowing the refurbishment of two units to begin;

increasing the quality of health care by moving into a fully refurbished health care unit and through the provision of eight officers on detached duty from other establishments to offset the staff shortages; discussions have begun with the local health authority about future service delivery;

increasing the amount of physical education from two to five classes in both the morning and afternoon sessions;

increasing the numbers attending education by 30;

securing additional £2 million funding to develop a separate regime for under 18 year olds which will include 12 hours out of cell each day and 30 hours purposeful activity each week, for which a further £3.4 million capital investment is being made to provide separate reception and education facilities for the under 18s.

an assessment centre has been held to recruit more officers. Consultation on proposals for revised staff attendance and shift patterns commenced this month;

nearly 600 mattresses have been replaced and general cleanliness and hygiene have been improved with new cleaning schedules and inspection arrangements; and

funds have been made available to undertake a backlog of small repairs.

Mr. Allan: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) if a court can order a secure remand for a young defendant when no place is available; and if he will make a statement; [92917]

(2) what was the total availability of local authority secure accommodation for juvenile and young offenders on the last date for which figures are available and in each of the last five years; and if he will make a statement; [92916]

(3) what has been the demand for secure accommodation for juvenile and young offenders in each of the last 12 months; on how many occasions a place was not found when requested; and if he will make a statement; [92915]

(4) what representations he has received about the operation of the national clearing system for secure accommodation for juvenile and young offenders; and if he will make a statement; [92918]

Mr. Straw: The local authority secure estate is used both to accommodate any child who is being looked after by the local authority under the Children Act 1989, and to hold those who are sentenced under section 53 of the Children and Young Persons Act 1969, those sentenced to a secure training order under section 1 of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994 and those who are held on secure remand. Since 1994, the number of approved secure places, those children accommodated and the occupancy rate of secure units available[1] in England and Wales[2] (as at 31 March) is given in the table:

Year	Approved places	Children accommodated	Occupancy rate (per cent.)
1994	289	244	84
1995	266	233	88
1996	274	246	90
1997	348	290	83
1998	456	334	73

[1] Children Accommodated in Secure Units, year ending 31 March 1998

[2] Welsh information has only been available since 1997 (previously Wales had two small units providing two places each)

A Government funded building programme was put in place to expand the local authority secure estate by 170 places specifically to allow for the implementation of the provisions in relation to court-ordered secure remands. These places are now available and the total number of approved places in local authority secure accommodation is 460.

Section 97 of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998, which came into force on 1 June 1999, allows courts, where certain criteria are met, to remand direct to local authority secure accommodation 12 to 14 year old boys and girls and 15 and 16 year old girls. Where a court remands a child or young person to local authority secure accommodation, it must designate a relevant local authority. Under section 23(4) of the Children and Young Persons Act 1969, there is a requirement on the court to consult the designated local authority before it imposes a security requirement. The purpose of such consultation is to allow the local authority to provide the court with information so that the court is best placed to make an appropriate decision depending on the circumstances of the case. Such information should include the nature and availability of local provision to support a remand in the community, and the nature and availability of secure and non-secure local authority accommodation. Where the court then remands a child or young person to local authority secure accommodation, the designated local authority is under a duty under section 61 of the Criminal Justice Act 1991 to comply with the security requirement.

Section 98 of the 1998 Crime and Disorder Act, which also came into force on 1 June 1999, allows courts, where certain criteria are met, to remand direct to local authority secure accommodation 15 and 16 year old boys whom, by reason of their physical or emotional immaturity or a propensity to harm themselves, the courts consider it would be undesirable to remand to Prison Service accommodation. Before reaching such an opinion the court must consult a probation officer, a local authority social worker or a member of a youth offending team and before ordering a remand to local authority secure accommodation in such a case, the court must be notified that such accommodation is available.

In providing advice to the courts about the availability of local authority secure accommodation and in complying with security requirements imposed by the courts, local authorities may use information held by the national bedbank service, set up and funded by the Department of Health and operated by Leeds Social Services Department. This is not a clearing house facility and is designed only to provide information to local authorities on the availability of secure places. We have received one written representation on the operation of the national bedbank service.

Information is not recorded centrally on the demand for local authority secure accommodation or the number of occasions a place has not been found when requested.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for the Home Department, announced in his reply to my hon. Friend the Member for North-West Leicestershire (Mr. Taylor) on 22 July 1999, *Official Report*, columns *622–23*, that the Youth Justice Board for England and Wales will, from April 2000, become the commissioning and purchasing body for all forms of secure accommodation for children and young people on remand or under sentence. A copy of the Board's advice on how this should operate has been placed in the Library. One element is the establishment of a clearing house facility to manage the placement of children and young people in secure accommodation, including the local authority secure estate. The Board is now consulting local authorities and other bodies on its proposals.

Mr. Beith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to review the size of young offender institutions in England and Wales; and if he will make a statement. [92883]

Mr. George Howarth: The size of Young Offender Institutions in England and Wales was considered as part of the design for the Prison Service's new distinct juvenile estate, and I refer the right hon. Member to the reply I gave to the hon. Member for Hertsmere (Mr. Clappison) on 27 April 1999, *Official Report*, column *109*, about the composition of the estate.

Since then, Aylesbury has been withdrawn from the estate as the need for the role originally envisaged for the establishment has changed. Aylesbury will continue to take a small number of difficult/longer-term juveniles where that offers the most appropriate way of meeting their individual needs.

There are no proposals to vary the size of Young Offender Institutions for 18–20 year old offenders.

Mr. Beith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to review staff training in young offender institutions in England and Wales; and if he will make a statement. [92884]

Mr. George Howarth: The Prison Service is in the process of developing its 'Nature of Adolescence' training for staff who work with young people in custody. This work is being carried out in collaboration with the Trust for the Study of Adolescence. Separately, the Youth Justice Board has begun tendering for the provision of training for all staff who work in the youth justice system, which will make with special provision for those who work in secure facilities. This is to support the implementation of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998, and the delivery of the principal aim of the youth justice system which is to prevent offending by children and young people.

Immigration and Nationality Directorate

Mr. Pike: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how long it is currently taking the Immigration and Nationality Directorate to respond to correspondence; what progress has been made in reducing the time taken; and if he will make a statement. [92714]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The latest position is that 60 per cent. of correspondence is responded to within 20 working days, excluding correspondence related to applications and casework. Additional staff are being recruited and overtime exercises are being brought into operation in order to achieve significant improvements in response times.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what estimate he has made in respect of each month in the current year of the average daily number of *(a)* callers trying to make a call to the Immigration and Nationality Directorate, *(b)* calls made to that Directorate and *(c)* calls answered by the Telephone Caller Unit. [92843]

Mr. Mike O'Brien *[holding answer 23 July 1999]:* The figures relating to telephone calls to the Immigration and Nationality Directorate are provided each month by British Telecom and are actuals rather than estimates. Daily averages, by month, are set out in the table:

	Number of callers	*Number of calls*	*Calls answered*
January	n/a	60,043	2,109
February	5,281	50,217	1,669
March	5,432	46,334	1,781
April	4,112	42,601	1,495
May	4,610	48,301	1,535
June	5,617	56,223	1,707

Staff in the Immigration and Nationality Enquiry Bureau (INEB) are being hampered in their ability to deal with calls quickly because of delays in other parts of the Integrated Casework Directorate (ICD), arising from the transition to Team Based Caseworking. Measures are in place to improve the situation, including recruitment of around 300 staff to fill vacancies in ICD. INEB staff are being given more in-depth training in call handling and new staff are being recruited and trained. Much of the increase in calls in June has been connected with passport inquiries.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what was the average daily number of personal callers to each public inquiry office of the Immigration and Nationality Directorate in each month since the beginning of 1999. [92894]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The average daily number of callers to each public inquiry office during 1999 is set out in the table:

	January	*February*	*March*	*April*	*May*	*June*
Public Caller Unit, Croydon	723	627	723	661	663	862
Asylum Screening Unit, Croydon	325	297	175	226	202	239
Liverpool Public Enquiry Office	44	40	32	26	40	34
Midlands Public Enquiry Office	92	97	86	81	81	117
Glasgow Public Enquiry Office	40	33	43	32	32	54
Belfast Public Enquiry Office	17	14	10	11	14	23

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what was the average waiting time in each month in 1999 and for the most recent date for which information is available for consideration of applications to each of the divisions of the Immigration and Nationality Directorate. [92893]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The average waiting times in each month of 1999 for nationality cases are set out in the table:

	Average waiting times (Months)		
Month	*Naturalisation*	*Registration*	*Overall*
January	20.5	9	19.4
February	20.3	7.7	18.9
March	20.6	6.8	19.1
April	20.8	6.4	18.7
May	20.7	7.2	18.9
June	20.5.	6.6	18.2

Average waiting times for immigration and asylum cases are not recorded as Integrated Casework Directorate caseworking procedures give priority to types of application rather than dealing with cases in chronological order. All applications are sifted in the Initial Consideration Unit. Straightforward cases (about 40 per cent.) are dealt with under a fast track procedure within about four weeks of receipt. More complex cases are allocated to Case Management Units for detailed consideration. The length of time between receipt and decision will depend on the complexity of the case. Delays in dealing with cases may be due to a variety of factors, including legal interventions by applicants and court cases.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what was the backlog of cases for each of the Immigration and Nationality Directorate's divisions at the end of each month in 1999 and at the latest date for which information is available. [92896]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The Integrated Casework Directorate, which was set up at the beginning of 1999, handles all nationality, immigration and asylum casework previously dealt with in five separate Immigration and Nationality Directorate divisions. The backlog of immigration and asylum cases, and separately nationality cases, at the end of each month is set out in the table:

Month	*Number of cases*
Immigration and Asylum	
January	63,622
February	69,388
March	84,404
April	93,943
May	122,102
June	145,991
Nationality	
January	101,600
February	101,100
March	101,700
April	101,700
May	101,000
June	95,200

Ms Oona King: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the countries for whose nationals the fast-track service operated by the Public Caller Unit at the Immigration and Nationality Directorate for the quick determination of certain types of immigration applications is not available. [93304]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The availability of the fast-track service operated by the Public Caller Unit (PCU) at the Immigration and Nationality Directorate (IND) is normally determined by the category of application rather than the nationality of the applicant, as well as by the individual facts of each case. The only exception to general policy is in respect of North Korean and Libyan nationals. However, in the light of the recent resumption of diplomatic relations with Libya, we are in the process of reviewing our policy towards Libyan nationals. In recent months, because of pressures resulting from the major changes which have taken place in IND, the PCU fast-track service has had to be restricted and occasionally suspended altogether.

Immigration and Asylum

Mr. Pike: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many immigration and asylum cases his Department has had outstanding for over one year; if he will provide a breakdown of the years in which the cases commenced and indicate the progress being made in eliminating the backlog; and if he will make a statement. [92713]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: There are approximately 80,935 immigration and asylum cases that have been outstanding for over one year. The breakdown is:

	Number
1998	36,081
1997	15,964
1996	8,134
1995	9,438
1994	4,820
1993	1,327
1992	343
1991	245
1990	109
Pre 1990	133
Undated	4,3[illegible]

A number of measures have already been identified to tackle the general backlog which has built up because of the difficulties encountered in setting up the Integrated Casework Directorate (ICD). These include the setting up of an After Entry Clearance Team and a Correspondence Backlog Team. Steps already taken include special exercises to target priority cases such as work permit applications, changes in procedures that will result in increased productivity and increased staffing.

Additionally, immediate and long term plans are in hand to tackle the more substantive backlogs in the areas of asylum, enforcement and nationality.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what his policy is towards *(a)* the proposed mutual recognition of member states of the European Union and each other's decisions on asylum applications and *(b)* the proposed harmonisation within the European Union of criteria for the recognition of refugees. [92783]

Kate Hoey *[holding answer 23 July 1999]:* It is a requirement of The Treaty of Amsterdam for measures that determine minimum standards applicable to the handling of asylum applications be introduced. The United Kingdom has the choice to opt in to such measures. There has been no proposal as yet regarding minimum standards for the criteria in recognising refugees. There has been no proposal to effect the mutual recognition of other member states' asylum decisions and such a proposal is not a requirement of the Treaty of Amsterdam.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) how many applications for asylum have been made in each month since the beginning of 1999 *(a)* by persons arriving at ports of entry and *(b)* by persons already in the United Kingdom; [92777]

(2) how many asylum seekers entered the United Kingdom in each month since March 1999; and of these how many were *(a)* granted asylum, *(b)* granted leave to remain and *(c)* refused the right to remain; [92778]

(3) what was the backlog of asylum casework in the Immigration and Nationality Directorate at the last date for which information is available; [92841]

Mr. Mike O'Brien *[holding answer 23 July 1999]:* The information requested was made available on the Home Office Internet site at http//www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/index/htm, as part of the monthly reporting of asylum figures, on 26 July 1999.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many asylum decisions were made in each month from January 1997 to the latest month for which information is available. [92790]

Mr. Mike O'Brien *[holding answer 23 July 1999]:* The requested information is given in the table:

Decisions [1] made on Applications received for asylum in the United Kingdom, excluding dependants, January 1997 to June 1999, by month

Year/month	*Decisions*
1997	
January	3,260
February	3,090
March	2,845
April	3,390
May	2,880
June	2,930
July	3,480
August	2,980
September	2,800
October	3,035
November	2,990
December	2,355
Total	36,045
1998	
January	3,065
February	3,035
March	3,070
April	2,520
May	2,360
June	2,675
July	2,710
August	2,480
September	2,825
October	3,255
November	2,780
December	800
Total	31,570
1999 [2]	
January	995
February	1,275
March	1,855
April	3,045
May	4,185
June	4,680

[1] Figures rounded to the nearest 5
[2] Provisional

Mr. Love: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many asylum applications were received from Sri Lanka nationals in each of the last 10 years; how many of the applications have been *(a)* granted, *(b)* refused but subject to appeal, *(c)* refused and exhausted appeal, *(d)* awaiting initial decision, *(e)* deported and *(f)* left the country; and if he will make a statement. [93549]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: I will write to the hon. Member shortly.

Fiona Mactaggart: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what strategies he is planning to ensure that the Immigration and Nationality Directorate is able to cope with the forecast increase in applications for naturalisation expected 12 months after the granting of indefinite leave to remain to refugees and those affected by the backlog clearance programme, without lengthening current waiting periods. [93336]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: No increase in applications for naturalisation resulting from output elsewhere in the Immigration and Nationality Directorate is expected imminently. By the time these applications start to reach the Integrated Casework Directorate's Liverpool office (which has superseded the Nationality Directorate), various initiatives to speed up output will have taken effect.

Fiona Mactaggart: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if the Ministerial Group on the Family will consider the effect of the immigration rules and the nationality legislation on families with members abroad. [93454]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: In "Supporting Families: summary of responses to the consultation document", published on 8 June 1999, we said that the Ministerial Group on the Family is working on five new initiatives; support for boys, young men and fathers; supporting stepfamilies; adoption policy and practice; the support available to families at different crisis points; and ensuring that Government funding for families fits together well. Given the existing priorities of the group, it has no plans to look into the effect of immigration rules and nationality legislation on families with members abroad at present.

Fiona Mactaggart: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to review the funding of immigration advice under section 23 of the Immigration Act 1971. [93452]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: Subject to the approval of Parliament, funding for advice, assistance and representation will be available through legal aid from January 2000. In due course, when we have had the opportunity to assess the true level of need for immigration advice, we will consider whether funding under section 23 should be transferred from the Home Office to the Lord Chancellor's Department.

Fiona Mactaggart: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to curtail the use of prison accommodation for those detained solely under Immigration Act powers; and by what date he expects to cease to use prison accommodation. [93516]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The Government are committed, as resources become available, to the pursuit of a strategy of detaining those detained soley under Immigration Act 1971 powers in dedicated detention centres and holding centres, not prisons. Key to this strategy is the replacement of the Harmondsworth centre and the use of Her Majesty's Prison Rochester by two larger, purpose designed centres at Heathrow and Aldington. These facilities are expected to be available by the spring of 2002 and will offer an increase of some 250 beds. There are more immediate plans to provide a dedicated centre in the North of England for about 150 detainees within the next six to nine months. This will reduce the ad hoc use of prisons. In order that this can be delivered quickly, it is likely to be provided and managed by the Prison Service. It will however be a self contained, discrete unit solely for the use of Immigration Act detainees.

This strategy will ensure a net gain of about 300–350 detention places by 2002 and will greatly reduce the use of prison accommodation. However the Government accept that there will always be a need to use prisons for a minority of detainees, due to their special requirements, and this practice will continue. The number of such detainees detained in prison accommodation by 2002 is expected to be minimal.

Fiona Mactaggart: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department on what grounds Immigration Service staff refuse to accept those who are themselves asylum seekers, with permission to work, as interpreters or representatives of other asylum seekers at interviews. [93514]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply given to my hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow (Mr. Gerrard) on 16 June 1998, *Official Report*, column *178*.

Fiona Mactaggart: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many warnings have been given to employers concerning liability to prosecution under section 8 of the Asylum and Immigration Act 1996 for the hiring of persons who do not have authority to work in the United Kingdom in the last year. [93450]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: I am afraid there is no central record of the number of section 8 warning letters that have been issued to employers.

Fiona Mactaggart: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many *(a)* breaches of airport security have been occasioned by and *(b)* immigration offences have been committed by the solicitors or other representatives of persons attending interviews with the Immigration Service at airports. [93335]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: Aviation security is the responsibility of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (DETR). I am, however, advised that the Transport Security (Aviation) section of the DETR maintains a voluntary reporting system of aviation security incidents at airports, but the information does not categorise incidents of this kind. Similarly, the Immigration Service does not hold information about immigration offences in the form requested.

Fiona Mactaggart: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how much has been paid out in repatriation expenses under section 29 of the Immigration Act 1971 in each of the past five years. [93453]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The International Social Services of the United Kingdom is funded to administer the Voluntary Return Scheme on behalf of the Government.

The financial returns indicate the following expenditure for the last five years:

£

Year	*Assistance*	*Administration*	*Total*
1998–99	48,610	63,500	112,110
1997–98	59,113	54,713	113,826
1996–97	50,464	57,221	107,685
1995–96	38,819	88,128	126,947
1994–95	73,182	89,406	162,588

Fiona Mactaggart: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many decisions to deport, pursuant to section 3(5)(a) Immigration Act 1971 have been taken, in the past 12 months for (i) failure to report to a medical officer, (ii) failure to support and accommodate without recourse to public funds, (iii) obtaining leave to enter by deception, (iv) obtaining leave to remain by deception, (v) assisting the entry of another person an illegal entrant and (vi) assisting the entry of another person as an asylum claimant. [93334]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: 3,930 decisions to deport were taken under section 3(5)(a) of the Immigration Act 1971 in 1998. 210 of these were for breach of conditions but the records do not show the nature of the conditions which had not been compiled with. It is, therefore, not possible to identify whether any of this latter group of decisions were taken for either of the first two reasons listed in the question other than by examining the individual case files.

Someone who obtains leave to enter by deception is an illegal entrant and would not be subject to deportation action under section 3(5)(a). Someone who obtains leave to remain by deception is currently liable to deportation under section 3(5)(aa) of the Act. No more than five decisions to deport were taken under that section in 1998.

It is extremely unlikely that someone who had assisted the entry of an illegal entrant or an asylum claimant contrary to section 25(1) of the Act would be subject to deportation under section 3(5)(a). In those circumstances, deportation action under either section 3(5)(b) or, where applicable, section 3(6) of the 1971 Act would be more appropriate. 120 decisions to deport were taken under section 3(5)(b) in 1998 and 340 people were recommended for deportation by a court in that year, but again records are not sufficiently detailed to show whether or not the decision was taken for one or other of the last two reasons listed in the question and this information could be obtained only at disproportionate cost by examining each individual case file.

Apart from the number of decisions to deport under section 3(5)(aa), the figures in this reply have been rounded to the nearest 10.

Departmental Expenditure (Leeds)

Mr. Hilary Benn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the programmes funded directly by his Department, relating to social exclusion, regeneration, community development, employment or education, currently operating in *(a)* the City of Leeds and *(b)* the Leeds Central parliamentary constituency, listing for each programme the amount of such funding for each of the last three years and the amount planned to be spent in each of the next three financial years. [92913]

Mr. Boateng: The projects shown in the table have been separately funded by the Home Office in the last three years or are to be funded within the next three years. Future funding decisions remain to be announced.

In addition, the new Home Office Family Support Grants programme was set up to fund family and parenting support across the country. Grants awarded this year will not go to any projects operating in Leeds alone, but £2,611,813 has been allocated this year to national charities for projects supporting parents and families across the country. This includes, for example, Parentline, a national helpline for parents, and funding for Fathers

Direct, a new national charity, which will map the support available for fathers in every town or region. Some of this funding for national organisations will, therefore, directly benefit Leeds.

Since April 1994, four Home Office spending programmes have been included in the Single Regeneration Budget (SRB), some funding of which has gone and is going to projects in Leeds.

Area	*Project*	*Award £*	*Year*
Projects funded by the Home Office Crime Reduction Unit			
Leeds City—Burley/Hyde Park/ Kirkstall	Crime Reduction Programme—Reducing Burglary Initiative Target hardening approach aimed at multi-occupancy/shared housing and crime prevention publicity campaign	60,000 (1999)	1999–2000
Leeds City—Belle Isle/Biddleton	Crime Reduction Programme—Reducing Burglary Initiative Environmental changes aimed at reducing offending opportunities, including fencing of back gardens, improved street lighting etc.	60,000	1999–2000
Chapeltown and Harehills	CCTV Challenge Competition Round 2	192,000	1996–97
Leeds Waterfront	CCTV Challenge Competition Round 3	99,000	1997–98
Projects funded by Home Office Race Equality Unit			
Leeds West Indian Carnival	European Year Against Racism One off grant payment for Projects to tackle racist attitudes and racial harassment	6,845	1997–98
Leeds Racial Harassment Project	European Year Against Racism One off grant payment for Projects to tackle racist attitudes and racial harassment	6,000	1997–98

Projects funded by the Home Office Central Drugs Prevention Unit

Project		*1996–97 £*	*1997–98*
Community Development Chapeltown Phase One—Community Profiling	To tackle drugs prevention through a community development approach (Initial community profile)	4,600	1996–97
Chapeltown project support scheme	To tackle drugs prevention through a community development approach (Continuation of WYO (3)(2) above)	9,996	1997–98
Working with Racial and Cultural Diversity: Network Promotion Event	To extend drug awareness and drugs prevention in racially and culturally diverse communities across West Yorkshire (including Leeds based groups)	18,000	1996–97 (£1,500) 1997–98 (£16,500)
Family of Schools	To support the development of drugs education and drugs policy in two 'families of schools' in Leeds	6,000	1996–97 (£3,000) 1997–98 (£3,000)
Positive Steps	To develop drama education workshop in Leeds schools	1,830	1996–97
Community Drugs Awareness	To raise drug awareness within the Jewish Community in Leeds	5,000	1996–97
Drugs Information for young people	To provide drugs education for 12–16 year olds in East Leeds	1,900	1996–97
Working with drugs users in housing need	To provide a training package for those working with drugs users in housing need	2,000	1996–97
The Big Deal	To provide drugs education to young people in schools in West Yorkshire (including Leeds)	3,050	1997–98
Drugs Awareness in black-led Churches	To provide drugs awareness to members of black-led churches in West Yorkshire (including Leeds)	1,400	1996–97

Drug Seizures

Mr. Beith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many drug seizures occurred in each of the last three years per region; and what was the estimated value of the drugs. [92888]

Mr. Boateng: Regional data relating to drug seizure numbers and value are not available because relevant information from the Regional Crime Squads, Her Majesty's Customs and Excise and British Transport Police cannot be disaggregated into regions. These three authorities contributed nearly three-quarters of total seizures by weight, and therefore value in the United Kingdom in 1997.

Neighbourhood Wardens

Mr. Beith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many neighbourhood patrol or warden schemes are currently in operation in England and Wales; and if he will make a statement. [92886]

Mr. Boateng: No central record is kept of the number of neighbourhood warden-type schemes that are operating in England and Wales.

Mr. Beith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what reports were made by action teams led by his Department on the issue of neighbourhood wardens before April. [93048]

Mr. Boateng: The draft report of the Policy Action Team on Neighbourhood Wardens, which was chaired by a senior civil servant from the Home Office, was submitted to the Social Exclusion Unit in April. The report is to be consulted upon and then will be published in due course.

Mr. Beith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will publish the report of the Policy Action Team relating to neighbourhood wardens; and if he will make a statement. [93383]

Mr. Boateng: The draft report of the Policy Action team on Neighbourhood Wardens, which was chaired by a senior civil servant from the Home Office, was submitted to the Social Exclusion Unit in April. The report is to be consulted upon and then will be published in due course.

Private Security Industry

Mr. Beith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) if he will make a statement on his policy in relation to the use of the private security industry for policing functions including police patrol; [93046]

(2) what discussions Ministers in his Department have had with *(a)* chief police officers and their representatives, *(b)* Police Federation Representatives and *(c)* representatives of private security companies, since May 1997 concerning the future of police patrolling; and if he will make a statement; [92887]

(3) which *(a)* ministerial committees and *(b)* working groups are assessing policy in relation to the private security industry and policing functions including police patrol; and if he will make a statement. [93047]

Mr. Boateng: I have no plans for police patrol or any other police functions to be carried out by the private security industry, except that we have proposed that the escorting of certain abnormal loads should, in future, be carried out by the private sector. Representatives of the police and other bodies have raised many matters in discussions, but neither I nor my Ministerial colleagues have proposed any changes to responsibility for police patrolling. No Ministerial committees or Working Groups are currently examining any such proposals.

Criminals (Age Profile)

Mr. Beith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department for the last year for which figures are available, what was the average age of people who committed a *(a)* violent offence, *(b)* property offence and *(c)* sex offence; and if he will make a statement. [92890]

Mr. Boateng: Information as to the age of offenders is available only for those cautioned or convicted. The average age cannot be calculated exactly from data on the Home Office Cautions and Court Proceedings databases, but the median age in 1997 for violent offence was 23 years, for property offences it was 22 years; and for sex offences it was 33 years. The table shows the number of persons cautioned or convicted from which the median age has been derived.

Number of persons either cautioned or convicted for an indictable violent [1], property [2] or sex offence in England and Wales by age, 1997

Age	*Violent offence [1]*	*Property offence [2]*	*Sex offence*
10	135	1,355	16
11	350	2,962	19
12	841	5,611	66
13	1,654	9,158	142
14	3,067	13,258	248
15	4,243	15,747	241
16	4,653	16,772	243
17	4,636	18,022	206
18	4,071	17,171	182
19	3,390	13,998	142
20	2,842	12,407	104
21	2,591	11,479	101
22	2,472	10,736	120
23	2,208	10,027	113
24	2,274	9,548	137
25 and under 30[3]	10,058	40,294	670
30 and under 35	7,892	27,538	764
35 and under 40	5,144	16,231	636
40 and under 50	5,148	16,538	1,009
50 and under 60	2,124	7,414	703
60 and over	1,099	3,513	579
All ages	70,892	279,779	6,441

[1] Violence against the person, sex and robbery offences
[2] Burglary, theft, handling stolen goods, fraud, forgery and criminal damage offences
[3] Includes persons, cautioned or convicted of an indictable offence, given the default age of 25 where the exact age was not known

HOME DEPARTMENT

Private Finance Initiatives

Mr. Beith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will present to Parliament a report on the operation of all private finance initiative contracts made by his Department; and if he will make a statement. [93025]

Mr. Straw: I have no present plans to present a report to Parliament on the operation of all private finance initiative contracts made by my Department, but the current status of my Department's private finance initiative (PFI) contracts is summarised as follows:

Immigration and Nationality Directorate (IND) Casework Programme

Development of the Information Technology system was delayed, but is now with IND for testing. The IND's reorganised caseworking operation was introduced prior to delivery of the Information Technology system. After an initial deterioration in service to the public, Siemens Business Services (SBS) and IND have co-operated to restore output broadly to previous levels.

Secure Training Centres (STC)

Medway STC opened in April 1998. There were problems in the early months, which were outlined in the Social Services Inspectorate (SSI) Report published in January. A further inspection by SSI in April 1999 found that considerable improvements had been made to provide a more positive regime.

Rainsbrook STC opened on 1 July 1999 and there have been no problems to date. Hassockfield STC is due to open in September 1999.

United Kingdom Passport Agency (UKPA)

There are two PFI contracts in operation in the UKPA. SBS are responsible for data capture, and Security Printing and Systems (SP&S) are responsible for the manufacture of passports.

Roll out of services for all six Passport Agency offices was planned for early 1999. Because of difficulties encountered at the first two offices (Liverpool and Newport) to change over to the new system, further roll out has been postponed. Productivity on the new system has been less than that needed to meet demand; backlogs have built up; customer inquiries have increased; and the Agency's performance against a backdrop of high seasonal demand for passports has seriously declined.

Service credits have been levied on both companies. The UKPA is working closely with SBS to improve productivity, which continues to rise as further system improvements are made. Both SBS and the UKPA have recruited additional staff to deal with backlogs.

Gatwick Detention Facilities (Tinsley House)

Under this project, accommodation is provided by the British Airports Authority and the operation is run by Wackenhut (UK) Ltd. No reductions in payment have been made on either contract and there have been no operational difficulties.

Prisons

There are currently three Design, Construct, Manage and Finance (DCMF) prisons operating: Her Majesty's Prison Altcourse, Her Majesty's Prison Parc, and Her Majesty's Prison Lowdham Grange.

Despite some early teething troubles, in particular at Her Majesty's Prison Parc where an action plan to improve performance was implemented, all three prisons are now operating satisfactorily and provide much needed accommodation for the Prison Service. A Prison Service appointed controller provides permanent on site contract monitoring at each prison with contract management and performance audits being administered by Prison Service Headquarters centrally. Where performance does not meet the standards specified in the contracts, contractors incur financial penalties. Following performance improvements, the level of penalties imposed on contractors has decreased substantially.

Contracts for three further DCMF prisons, Forest Bank, Ashfield and Onley have been signed, but they have not yet opened (Onley was signed on 22 July 1999).

The contract for Coldingley prison industries workshop was terminated on 31 January 1999.

Prison PABX System

Delays were experienced during the installation phase of the contract, and this resulted in a reduction in payment. Since completion of the installations in October 1997, the systems have performed well and are providing a good service. The Prison Service holds regular meetings with the supplier to ensure that the quality of service is maintained.

Prison Shops

Mr. Beith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many prison service establishments have contracted out their shops *(a)* following competitive tendering, *(b)* without competitive tendering and *(c)* in total; if he will list the companies which operate each of the shops; what is the expected saving to the Prison Service from contracting out prison shops; and if he will make a statement. [92904]

Mr. George Howarth: The information requested is given in the table. I will write to the right hon. Member in respect of the four prisons for which information on the savings made is not immediately to hand.

Prisons in England and Wales operating contracted out shops

£

Prisons with contracted out shops	*Formal tender*	*Supplier*	*Expected approximate savings*
Acklington	Yes	Aramark	45,000
Ashwell	No	Aramark	25,000
Belmarsh	No	Sutcliffe	Not available
Castington	Yes	Aramark	15,000
Coldingly	Yes	Aramark	21,000
Deerbolt	Yes	Aramark	30,000
Drake Hall	Yes	Eurest	15,000
Durham	Yes	Aramark	53,000
Foston	Yes	Eurest	[1]None
Frankland	Yes	Aramark	72,000
Full Sutton	Yes	Sutcliffe	40,000
Garth	Yes	Aramark	17,500
Guys Marsh	Yes	Aramark	30,000
Hatfield	No	Aramark	Not available
Holme House	Yes	Sutcliffe	104,000

Prisons in England and Wales operating contracted out shops

£

Prisons with contracted out shops	*Formal tender*	*Supplier*	*Expected approximate savings*
Kirklevington	Yes	Aramark	Not available
Leeds	Yes	Aramark	200,000
Lindholme	Yes	Aramark	38,000
Littlehey	Yes	Sutcliffe (temp. contract)	12,000
Long Lartin	Yes	Eurest	Not available
Northallerton	Yes	Eurest	9,000
Shepton Mallet	No	Aramark	20,000
Stocken	Yes	Aramark	20,000
Swinfen	Yes	Eurest	25,000
Wealstun	Yes	Primary Management	49,100
Wetherby	Yes	Primary Management	8,000
Whatton	Yes	Aramark	23,200
Winchester	Yes	Eurest	29,600
Woodhill	Yes	Aramark	40,000
Wormwood Scrubs	Yes	Aramark	50,000
Wymott	Yes	Aramark	33,000
Known total			1,024,400

[1] Contract awarded to coincide with reopening of prison in 1997

Stop and Search

Mr. Beith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what assessment he has made of the accuracy of police stop and search statistics; and if he will make a statement. [92889]

Mr. Boateng: Police forces submit statistics on the number of recorded stops and searches under the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984 (PACE) annually to the Home Office. These are published in 'Statistics on Race and the Criminal Justice System', a copy of which is available in the Library.

The Government accept that there is likely to be a disparity between the number of stops and searches made by the police under the PACE and the number of stops and searches recorded by police officers. Home Office research 'Ethnic Monitoring in police forces: A beginning' (FitzGerald and Sibbitt 1997) noted variations in the recorded use of stop and search under PACE in different police areas, with the possibility that under-recording is higher in the provincial forces than in the Metropolitan Police Service.

There is also likely to be a higher public perception of stops given that most people do not distinguish between voluntary non-recorded stops, and stops carried out under PACE which should be recorded.

The Stephen Lawrence report recommended that a record be made of all stops and stops and searches, including "voluntary" stops. The Home Office is considering further this recommendation and has commissioned research to gather information on current practices within forces with a view to testing the practical implications of the Inquiry's recommendations. The Metropolitan Police Service has been running its own pilot projects to help develop a plan to manage the tactic fairly and effectively. The Home Office will work with the Metropolitan Police Service in testing the Stephen Lawrence Report's recommendations.

Mr. Love: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many cases of stop and search have been recorded in *(a)* the constituency of Edmonton and *(b)* the borough of Enfield in each of the past five years; what proportion of those stopped and searched were (i) black and (ii) subsequently arrested. [93606]

Kate Hoey: The Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police has provided the following summary of information on stop and search for the years 1994–1998 for Edmonton and Enfield Police Divisions. The Divisions make up an area which equates to the London Borough of Enfield plus Cheshunt (Hertfordshire) to the North.

Edmonton Police Division stop and search, 1994–98

	1994	*1995*	*1996*	*1997*	*1998*
Total Searches (including unattended vehicles)	4,419	3,039	2,088	4,721	5,237
Percentage of people searched who were black	18.4	17.8	25.0	21.8	22.7
Percentage of people searched subsequently arrested	12.9	10.4	12.5	9.9	12.8

Enfield Police Division stop and search, 1994–98

	1994	*1995*	*1996*	*1997*	*1998*
Total Searches (including unattended vehicles)	6,128	7,546	5,142	3,835	4,474
Percentage of people searched who were black	6.3	7.5	8.4	10.1	9.9
Percentage of people searched subsequently arrested	17.0	16.3	16.3	13.7	12.0

Kosovo

Mr. Greenway: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many United Kingdom police officers he is intending to send to Kosovo. [93034]

Mr. Boateng: We currently have a British Forensic Team of 16 persons already in Kosovo assisting in the investigation of war crimes. Seven British officers have transferred from the International Police Task Force in Bosnia to Kosovo. We are currently training a party of 12 officers to go and assist with the recruitment and training of a Kosovan police force and a further 27 officers are on standby to act as trainers.

Mr. Greenway: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what contingency plans he has to assist police forces whose police officers are being deployed in Kosovo. [93035]

Mr. Boateng: Officers going to Kosovo have been selected from various forces around the country with the agreement of the relevant chief constables to ensure that no one force has the burden of supplying a large contingent of officers. The full costs of seconding officers are currently being met by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

EU Fire Safety Provisions

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will place in the Library the letter issued in 1998 by Commissioner Flynn under Article 169 of the Treaty of Rome concerning the United Kingdom's implementation of the general fire safety provisions of the European Framework Directive together with his response to that letter. [92891]

Mr. George Howarth: Correspondence between the European Commission and member states, including the United Kingdom, on Article 226 (formerly 169) cases is regarded by both parties as confidential between them. The broad content of Commissioner Flynn's letter was set out in my reply to my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham, East (Mr. Heppell) on 8 April 1998, *Official Report*, column *255*. The Fire Precautions (Workplace) (Amendment) Regulations 1999 reflect the Government's response to the letter in that they amend the Fire Precautions (Workplace) Regulations 1997 to the necessary extent to address the Commission's concerns about our implementation of the general fire safety provisions of the directive.

Passport Agency

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many telephone calls were made to the Passport Agency by members of the public; and how many of those calls received a courtesy message at *(a)* each office of the United Kingdom Passport Agency and *(b)* in total, in the weeks ended (i) 4 July and (ii) 11 July. [92774]

Mr. Mike O'Brien *[holding answer 23 July 1999]:* The information requested is given in the form of calls received on the United Kingdom Passport Agency's (UKPA) published telephone number (0870 5210410); and calls received by the new emergency call centre (0845 6004646), for customers who have already submitted an application and are travelling within one week.

A breakdown of the telephone calls received on the 0870 5210410 number is as follows:

week ending Friday, 2 July 1999—total of 225,297 calls received of which 135,877 received an explanatory message; and

week ending Friday, 9 July 1999—total of 106,949 calls received of which 54,474 received an explanatory message.

The UKPAs management information is recorded weekly from Saturday to the following Friday. These figures are collated centrally and cannot be broken down to an estimate for each office in any accurate way.

The total number of telephone calls received on the 0845 6004646 emergency number, which became operational on Friday, 2 July 1999, was:

week ending Sunday, 4 July 1999–66,189; and

week ending Sunday, 11 July 1999–69,709.

Mr. Beith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what was the average time for processing straightforward applications by the UK Passport Agency *(a)* per office and *(b)* in total, (i) on the last available date and (ii) in each of the last six months; and if he will make a statement. [92965]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The information requested in the form of the average maximum processing time in working days for non-urgent applications is shown in the table:

1999	*Belfast*	*London*	*Newport*	*Liverpool*	*Peterborough*	*Glasgow*
January	8	2	12	16	5	11
February	14	4	20	20	11	10
March	16	6	28	25	12	16
April	21	6	36	33	15	18
May	31	5	33	46	27	26
June	36	6	39	38	35	36
July[1]	19	6	39	43	35	47

[1] Up to week ending 18 July 1999

These figures need to be treated with caution because processing is often done in declared travel date order rather than the date received. The processing times reflect the Agency's priority to meet passport applicants' declared travel dates. July travel dates, apart from applications being made now, have been cleared, and the Agency is making considerable progress with August travellers. Applications in process represent less than three weeks work at current output levels, and with intake declining, processing times for non-urgent work should begin to fall over the next few weeks.

Immigration, Frontiers and Asylum Committee

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the dates when the Strategic Committee on Immigration, Frontiers and Asylum is due to meet during 1999; and if he will make a statement on the programme of work of that committee. [92784]

Mr. Mike O'Brien *[holding answer 23 July 1999]:* Meetings of the Strategic Committee on Immigration, Frontiers and Asylum (SCIFA) were held on 15 June, under the German Presidency, and on 26 July, under the Finnish Presidency. The Presidency has not notified dates of future meetings although none is scheduled for September, the latest month for which a calendar is available. The Presidency has, however, indicated its intention to make such dates available on its Presidency website.

The programme of work of the SCIFA is to prepare dossiers, after initial consideration by the working groups, for discussion by the Justice and Home Affairs (JHA) Council. Copies of the Finnish Presidency Work Programme in the area of JHA will be placed in the Library.

I very much welcome the Finnish Presidency's pragmatic approach to its work programme and their aim to continue discussions on issues raised under previous Presidencies. I am also pleased to note the high priority being given to combating illegal immigration and to improving the effective operation of the Dublin Convention, both issues which are of considerable concern to the Government.

Immigration Detainees

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) how many people are currently detained under Immigration Act powers in *(a)* detention centres, *(b)* Prison Service establishments and *(c)* other accommodation; [92892]

(2) how many people are currently detained solely under Immigration Act powers who have been detained continuously for longer than three months. [92897]

Mr. George Howarth: The latest available information, relating to the snapshot of all persons detained solely under Immigration Act 1971 powers, by location, as at 31 May, is given in the table. The figures exclude persons detained under dual Immigration Act 1971 and other powers, for whom comprehensive data are not recorded centrally.

Data relating to length of detention are not recorded centrally for all persons detained solely under Immigration Act 1971 powers. The information requested on the number of persons who had been detained continuously for longer than three months is, therefore, only available at disproportionate cost.

Persons recorded as being in detention [1] in the United Kingdom solely under Immigration Act powers as at 31 May 1999, by place of detention

Location	*Total detainees*
Immigration detention centres [2]	
Campsfield	182
Dover Harbour	14

Persons recorded as being in detention [1] in the United Kingdom solely under Immigration Act powers as at 31 May 1999, by place of detention

Location	*Total detainees*
Harmondsworth	91
Heathrow's Queen's Building	12
Manchester Airport	14
Tinsley House	142
Other immigration detention centres	1
Prison establishments	
Aberdeen	2
Bedford	2
Belmarsh	10
Blackenhurst	4
Bristol	2
Brixton	10
Canterbury	6
Chelmsford	2
Cornton Vale	2
Dorchester	2
Elmley	5
Feltham	2
Haslar	151
High Down	22
Highpoint	3
Holloway	16
Holme House	7
Lancaster Farms	2
Leeds	4
Liverpool	2
Longriggend	22
Manchester	9
Norwich	2
Pentonville	9
Preston	2
Rochester	181
Winchester	2
Woodhill	2
Wormwood Scrubs	10
Other prison establishments	11
Total	962

[1] Figures exclude persons detained in police cells (other than at Dover Harbour)

[2] Figures include the use of police cells at Dover Harbour

Fiona Mactaggart: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department on how many occasions in the past 12 months for which records are available the recommended period, in respect of persons held under Immigration Act powers, of five days in policy custody was exceeded by *(a)* extending, *(b)* renewing and *(c)* transferring a detainee from one station to another. [93517]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The Immigration (Places of Detention) Direction 1996 specifies that an individual may be detained in a police station for a maximum of five nights with an additional two nights only where Removal Directions have been set. However, current policy is to detain an individual in a police station for no more than two nights with the provision of an extension with the authority of an Immigration Inspector. Data on those detained in police cells for more than five nights, ie where

Removal Directions are in place, cannot be obtained without incurring disproportionate costs. However, the number is believed to be very small.

Fiona Mactaggart: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what was the total cost of immigration detention in the past 12 months; how much of this is represented by *(a)* designated prisons, *(b)* other prisons, *(c)* police stations, *(d)* Immigration Service detention facilities and *(e)* airport holding facilities; and what proportion of the cost is represented by ex-convicts awaiting deportation, beyond the date on which they would otherwise have been released, under section 3(5) or (6). [93515]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The total cost of immigration detention in the last financial year is estimated to be £40,228,000, including overheads, of which £15,135,000 is for designated prisons, *(a)* costs for Immigration Act 1971 detainees in other prisons, *(b)* can only be provided at disproportionate cost; £1,360,000 is for detention in police stations, *(c)* £18,151,000 for Immigration Service detention facilities at Harmondsworth, Tinsley House and Campsfield House, *(d)* £5,582,000 for other detention facilities at ports and airports, and *(e)* the costs of detaining ex-convicts awaiting deportation, beyond the date on which they would normally be released cannot be obtained except at disproportionate cost.

Metropolitan Police

Mr. Mullin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will call for a report from the Metropolitan Police Commissioner regarding the circumstances in which a picture of armed police officers making an arrest appeared on the front page of the *Daily Mail* on 22 July; and what charges have arisen from the incident. [93267]

Kate Hoey: The Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police tells me that he understands that a member of the public took the photograph and passed it to the *Daily Mail*. No charges have yet arisen from the incident which was photographed.

Freedom of Information

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what representations he has received on the draft Freedom of Information Bill proposing the *(a)* repeal and *(b)* amendment of Clause 28(7) of the Health and Safety at Work, etc. Act 1974. [93281]

Mr. Straw: I have received one representation referring to section 28(7) of the Health and Safety at Work, etc. Act 1974 in the course of the consultation on the draft Freedom of Information Bill. This response, from the Health and Safety Commission, recorded their desire for the removal of the restriction in section 28 of the Health and Safety at Work, etc. Act 1974, subject to certain minimum safeguards against prejudice to their enforcement and regulatory functions.

It is intended that the Freedom of Information Bill will be used to repeal or amend many existing statutory prohibitions on disclosure, where appropriate.

All statutory prohibitions are currently being reviewed to see if they would be suitable candidates for repeal or amendment. Section 28 of the Health and Safety at Work, etc. Act 1974 has been considered as part of this review and the statutory prohibition on disclosure contained in it is a strong candidate for repeal or amendment under the draft Freedom of Information Bill.

Extradition

Mr. Donaldson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) on how many occasions his Department has issued consent certificates to remove the rule of specialty in respect of extradition proceedings where consent was granted to *(a)* the Irish Republic and *(b)* other countries which have extradition treaties with the United Kingdom; [92949]

(2) if he will list the legal causes upon which consent certificates were granted in extradition proceedings on account of *(a)* the extradited person making known an outstanding offence not known to the requesting authority, *(b)* the requesting authority discovering an offence which was not known to them at the time of the initial extradition request and *(c)* any other reason. [92950]

Kate Hoey *[holding answer 26 July 1999]:* It is very rare to depart from the rule of specialty in respect of extradition proceedings. Formal certification to waive the rule is only required in relation to our extradition arrangements with Ireland, where in recent years just two such certificates have been issued.

In one of these cases, the offence for which specialty was waived related to a suspected murder. In this case, the Irish authorities knew of the offence at the time of the request, but had insufficient information to include it with other lesser offences listed in the request for the individual's return. In the other case, the waiver certificate is currently subject to court proceedings, and so I cannot comment as the matter is sub judice.

Figures relating to other countries are not recorded. Officials estimate that there have been three or four specialty waivers in the past three years, but exact numbers, and the reasons for them, could only be obtained with disproportionate cost.

Cab Licences (St. George's Flag)

Sir Richard Body: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if it is his policy to advise cab-drivers and owners in the metropolitan area when re-applying for their licence of the possibility of refusal of licence in cases where the cab displays the St George's Flag. [93271]

Kate Hoey: The issuing of licences for London taxis is a matter for the Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police. He informs me that the Public Carriage Office advise cab-drivers and owners, when they first apply for a licence, that their vehicle must comply with the Metropolitan Conditions of Fitness. The Conditions of Fitness prohibit the display of national emblems. Licences must be renewed annually and the application form carries a reminder that Conditions of Fitness must be met.

CS Gas

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what representations he has received on the safety of *(a)* CS gas spray and *(b)* MIBK from the Chief Constable of Northamptonshire. [92318]

Mr. Boateng: The Chief Constable of Northamptonshire has decided not to issue CS spray to officers in his force. He has corresponded with my officials about this decision and submitted a report to the relevant sub-committee of the Association of Chief Police Officers in 1998 setting out his concerns.

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what representations he has received about the length of time for which research on CS gas spray and MIBK should have continued before they were judged safe; and what timescales were suggested. [92319]

Mr. Boateng: A wide range of research has been conducted into the safety of CS which has not raised concerns in respect of its effects on human health. MIBK is an industrial solvent and has also been extensively researched for adverse health effects. I am not aware of any specific representations concerning the length of time for which particular research programmes should be conducted.

Citizenship

Fiona Mactaggart: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will seek to amend the British Nationality Act 1981 to restore the principle of *ius soli* for the acquisition of citizenship. [93654]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: No. It is our policy to restrict the acquisition of citizenship by birth in this country to children whose parents have real and substantial connections with the United Kingdom. Children born here with non-British citizen or non-settled parents can become British either through residence or when a parent becomes a British citizen or settled here.

Public Footpaths (Crimes)

Helen Jackson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what statistics or other information have been evaluated by *(a)* the Home Office and *(b)* police forces regarding (i) assaults or other crimes committed on public footpaths and (ii) cases where public footpaths have been used as a means of access to property where a burglary or other crime has been committed. [93809]

Mr. Boateng: The information is not collected centrally by the Home Office. The British Crime Survey collects information on offences against individuals by location, but does not hold the information specifically for public footpaths. Information collected by the police is a matter for the respective Chief Officers, although those forces with geographical information systems are more likely to have information at this level of detail.

Equal Treatment

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he has established a baseline for policy appraisal against which to measure progress on equal treatment. [93458]

Mr. Straw: Yes. Targets are being set for the recruitment, promotion, and retention of ethnic minority staff directly employed by my Department, and in respect of services for which my Department has oversight, including the police, prison service, fire service, and probation service.

'Policy Appraisal for Equal Treatment', published by the Cabinet Office, the Home Office, the Department for Education and Employment and the Women's Unit in November 1998, has been circulated to all senior managers at Grade seven level and above within my Department to ensure that the effects of any policy changes on all sections of the population are considered at the earliest stage of policy development.

Community Police Officers

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to ensure that the number of community police officers in the Sutton and Cheam constituency is maintained and that those officers continue to be dedicated to their main duties. [93308]

Kate Hoey: This is an operational matter for the Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police. He advises me that the number of community officers in Sutton and Cheam will be maintained and that redeployment of them under mutual aid arrangements is being kept to a minimum.

Neighbourhood Watch

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he expects the Metropolitan Police to supply new Kat neighbourhood watch reflective street signs and window stickers showing the meerkat logo to neighbourhood watch members in the constituency of Sutton and Cheam. [93310]

Kate Hoey: The Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police tells me that the new Meerkat neighbourhood watch window stickers have been distributed to all divisions.

Since the launch of the sponsorship agreement between the Metropolitan Police and Yellow Pages in June 1999, 1,700 street signs have been erected in London, and a further 3,500 signs will be erected between now and the end of the year. It seems that Sutton's request for street signs was not received by the contractors. But arrangements to supply signs there are now in hand.

Refugee Allocation Project

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many allocations have been made under the Refugee Allocation Project to *(a)* Camrex House, Sunderland and *(b)* the Balmoral Hotel Newcastle; what was the total cost of such allocations; and what was the average weekly cost of such allocations in each location. [93610]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: Over the last 12 months, the Refugee Arrivals Project (RAP) has assisted 114 adults and eight families to secure accommodation in Camrex House, Sunderland, all of whom are in receipt of social security benefits, RAP do not assist placements in the Balmoral Hotel, Newcastle. Information on the cost of such allocations is not separately available.

Road Traffic Offences

Mr. Jenkins: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many and what proportion of prosecutions for road traffic offences have involved people with non-United Kingdom driving licences in each of the last five years. [93339]

Mr. Boateng: The information requested is not available.

The statistics collected on motoring offences by the Home Office do not enable people with non-United Kingdom driving licences to be identified. Records kept by the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Authority relate only to non-United Kingdom licence holders who are disqualified.

Police Dogs

Mr. Kaufman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will give instructions to the police that, when called on to deal with demonstrations by supporters of hunting accompanied by dogs, they should be accompanied by police dogs. [93215]

Mr. Boateng: No. The use of police dogs is an operational matter for chief officers of police.

Biological and Chemical Weapons

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what additional resources he will make available to *(a)* police authorities, *(b)* fire authorities and *(c)* local authority emergency planning offices in England and Wales for the preparation, provision and annual funding needed to meet the new tasks announced in the Government paper of 21 July, Defending Against the Threat from Biological and Chemical Weapons; and if he will make a statement. [93095]

Mr. George Howarth: No new tasks for the police, fire or local authorities were announced in the Government paper "Defending Against the Threat from Biological and Chemical Weapons".

EC-Russian Partnership and Co-operation Agreement

Ms Oona King: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what measures have been taken to implement in domestic law and practice the right of Russian companies to send key personnel to the United Kingdom as provided for in Articles 28 to 30 of the EC/Russian Partnership and Co-operation Agreement. [93302]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: It has not been necessary to introduce specific measures and Russian companies wishing to take advantage of these provisions are expected to apply under the existing well-established work permit procedures.

The European Community/Russian Partnership and Co-operation Agreement specifically allows the parties to continue to apply immigration and work permit controls. Under the provisions of the Agreement, key personnel are still required to obtain work permits and Russian nationals still require visas to enter the United Kingdom. The Agreement specifically provides by means of a joint declaration by the parties that the requirement of a visa does not nullify or impair its benefits.

Chinese Nationals

Ms Oona King: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the regime of checks for Chinese nationals who wish *(a)* to extend their leave in the United Kingdom and *(b)* to obtain indefinite leave to remain. [93303]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The process by which the Immigration and Nationality Directorate (IND) considers applications for further leave to remain or indefinite leave to remain varies by category rather than by nationality. The criteria to be applied by IND caseworkers are set out in the Immigration Rules.

Police Force (Ethnic Minorities)

Mr. Love: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what steps the Government are taking to recruit more black and minority ethnic people into the police force; and if he will make a statement. [93608]

Mr. Boateng: I refer my hon. Friend to the replies I gave my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester, East (Mr. Vaz), on 23 March 1999, *Official Report*, column *174* and to my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton, North-East (Mr. Crausby), on 26 April 1999, *Official Report*, columns *17–18*.

Metropolitan Police (Complaints)

Mr. Love: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many complaints have been made against the Metropolitan Police in each of the last five years; what proportion of those complaints either wholly or in part concerned accusations of police racism; and if he will make a statement. [93607]

Kate Hoey: The Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police has provided the following summary of information on the total number of complaints made against the Metropolitan Police and the proportion of those complaints that were of racially discriminatory behaviour, within the last five years:

	Total complaints [1]	*Percentage police racism complaints*
1994–95	9,658	2.97
1995–96	10,128	2.98
1996–97	9,919	3.11
1997–98	8,881	2.88
1998–99	7,087	3.47

[1] Total complaints include all allegations, not only the main allegation

Public Interest Immunity Certificates

Sir Nicholas Lyell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many public interest immunity certificates or equivalent documents have been provided by Ministers or officials in his Department since 3 May 1997; and at what level each such document has been signed. [93534]

Mr. Straw: Since 3 May 1997, I have signed 13 public interest immunity certificates. In addition, one certificate has been signed by a Minister of State at the Home Office.

These figures do not include certificates which may, exceptionally, have been issued and considered by the Court without notice of their existence being given to the other parties in the case.

Hunting

Mr. Maclean: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what have been the costs to the Metropolitan Police, in each of the last five years, of policing demonstrations about hunting. [93471]

Kate Hoey: The Commissioner has provided the following information on costs to the Metropolitan Police for policing demonstrations about hunting:

£

Year	*Cost*
1994	46,408
1995	Nil
1996	8,808
1997	97,786
1998	267,810
Total	420,812

Mr. Maclean: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many *(a)* pro-hunting and *(b)* anti-hunting demonstrations have been held in London since May 1997. [93472]

Kate Hoey: The Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police tells me that between 1 May 1997 and 25 July 1999 there were ten major hunt demonstrations—seven were anti-hunting and three were pro-hunting.

Mr. Maclean: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what assessment he has made of the fund raising activity of local hunts and their contribution to local charities. [93478]

Mr. George Howarth: Information about fund raising activities of hunts is not held centrally.

Immigration Act Breaches (Prosecutions)

Fiona Mactaggart: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many prosecutions have been brought, in the last 12 months for which records are available, for each of the following breaches of the Immigration Acts (i) failure to report to a medical officer (section 24(1)(d) Immigration Act 1971), (ii) failure to support and accommodate without recourse to pubic funds (section 78 Social Security Act 1986, with section 106 Social Security Administration Act 1992), (iii) obtaining leave to enter by deception (section 24(1)(aa) Immigration Act 1971), (iv) obtaining leave to remain by deception (section 24(1)(aa) Immigration Act 1971), (v) assisting the entry of another person as an illegal entrant (section 25(1)(a) Immigration Act 1971) and (vi) assisting the entry of another person as an asylum claimant (section 25(1)(b) Immigration Act 1971). [93333]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: Available information, taken from the Home Office Court Proceedings database for 1998, is given in the table. Information on the number of defendants who fail to support and accommodate without recourse to public funds cannot be identified separately from other similar offences.

Number of defendants proceeded against in magistrates courts for a variety of offences under the Immigration Act 1971 in England and Wales, 1998 [1]

Offence description	*Number of defendants*
Non citizen failing to comply with requirements to report to a medical officer or to submit to a test or examination required by such an officer[2]	—
If by means which includes deception by him, he obtains or seeks to obtain leave to enter or remain in the United Kingdom[3]	2
Knowingly concerned in making or carrying out arrangements for securing or facilitating the entry into the UK of anyone whom he knows or has reasonable cause for believing to be:	
an illegal entrant[4]	177
an asylum claimant[5]	4

[1] All data are provisional
[2] Sec 24(1)(d)
[3] Sec 24(1)(aa) as added by Asylum and Immigration Act 1996 sec 4
[4] Sec 25(1)(a)
[5] Sec 25(1)(b) as added by Asylum and Immigration Act 1996 sec 5

Immigration Rules

Fiona Mactaggart: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will repeal paragraph 297(e) and (f) of the Immigration rules. [93519]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: There are no plans to do so.

Carer Policy BDI 2/95

Fiona Mactaggart: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he has reviewed the carer policy BDI 2/95. [93451]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: Yes. Details of the revised policy are set out in the Immigration Directorates' Instructions, a copy of which is in the Library, and is also available on the internet.

Immigration (Carriers' Liability) Act 1987

Fiona Mactaggart: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, pursuant to his answer of 7 July 1998, *Official Report*, column *427*, on what criteria decisions to waive fines under the Immigration (Carriers' Liability) Act 1987 are made. [93449]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The criteria for waiving charges are contained in Appendix A of the publication entitled "Charging Procedures. A Guide for Carriers", commonly known as the "Green Guide", a copy of which is in the Library. In addition, charges are normally waived in respect of passengers arriving without documents from stations with Approved Gate Check (AGC) Status. The criteria for AGC status are contained in section 7 of the "Green Guide". Charges are also waived in respect of inadequately documented passengers who are granted full refugee status in accordance with the 1951 United Nations Convention and the 1967 Protocol relating to the status of refugees, as described in section 5 of the "Green Guide". Charges are also not imposed where a false document is produced unless the falsity of the document is reasonably apparent nor where a carrier is able to show that the required documents were produced to them when the passenger embarked for the United Kingdom.

Elections (Ballot Papers)

Mr. Stringer: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many tendered ballot papers were issued in *(a)* the 1997 General Election, *(b)* the 1999 European Election and *(c)* the 1999 and 1998 local elections. [93216]

Mr. George Howarth: In Great Britain, lists of tendered votes issued at general elections are retained by the Clerk of the Crown and, unless ordered by the House of Commons or the High Court, are destroyed after 12 months. Lists compiled at the European Parliamentary elections are retained by the local returning officer for 12 months and lists compiled at local elections are retained by the proper officer of the authority for six months and then, unless directed by order, respectively, of the High Court, or a county court or election court, are destroyed. The lists of tendered votes for the 1997 and 1998 elections are thus no longer available but those for the 1999 elections are available locally for inspection.

In Northern Ireland, where figures are kept centrally, 77 tendered votes were issued at the 1997 general election and 40 at the 1999 European Parliamentary election. No ordinary local elections were held there in 1998 or 1999.

Hunting Ban

Mr. Maclean: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) what discussion he *(a)* has had *(b)* intends to have with animal welfare groups about the disposal of hounds used for hunting, following the introduction of a ban on hunting; [93488]

(2) what discussions he *(a)* has had and *(b)* intends to have with associations representing those whose livelihoods depend on hunting; [93473]

(3) if he will publish a list of the petitions submitted to his Department in each of the last two years; [93468]

(4) what representations he has received since May 1997 about hunting. [93470]

Mr. George Howarth: Representations have been received from hon. Members, members of the public and various organisations which support or oppose hunting. These include two Parliamentary petitions between May and December 1997, two in 1998 and 30 in 1999.

No meetings have taken place between Home Office Ministers and either representative associations or animal welfare groups concerning the disposal of hounds. There are currently no plans for such meetings to be staged, nor have there been any such approaches for meetings.

Mr. Maclean: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) what is his estimate of the number of hounds used for hunting; [93525]

(2) what estimate he has made of the number of horses used for hunting in this country; and what is his assessment of the impact on these animals of a ban on hunting; [93485]

(3) what assessment he has made of the extent to which a ban on hunting will comply with the right of peaceful assembly provided for by the European Convention on Human Rights; [93474]

(4) what assessment he has made of the effects on equine businesses of a ban on hunting; [93490]

(5) what assessment he has made of the impact of a ban on hunting on the British horse racing industry; [93476]

(6) what assessment he has made of the effects on the rural economy of a ban on hunting; [93491]

(7) if legislation to criminalise hunting will include provision to allow the use of hounds or terriers to follow up wild mammals injured by firearms; [93479]

(8) if he plans to establish a close season for fox control, following the introduction of a ban on hunting; [93482]

(9) what measures he intends to take to deal with the problem of mange in foxes, following the introduction of a ban on hunting; [93477]

(10) what measures he intends to take to encourage landowners to maintain the conservation activities currently undertaken by local hunts; [93467]

(11) what measures he will take to ensure that there is sufficient support available to farmers for the control of pest populations following the introduction of a ban on hunting. [93486]

Mr. George Howarth: We are actively considering ways of taking forward the issue of hunting and assessing the effects of any ban. The right of peaceful assembly will be taken into account, along with any exceptions and wider implications.

Various estimates of the number of horses and hounds used for hunting have been provided by organisations which support or oppose hunting.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Benefit Claimants (Hammersmith and Fulham)

Mr. Coleman: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many claims from residents living in the London Borough of Hammersmith and Fulham for *(a)* incapacity benefit, *(b)* income support and *(c)* disability living allowance were received in each calendar month of this year; how many were (i) agreed and (ii) refused; and if he will make a statement. [92105]

Mr. Bayley: The administration of benefits is a matter for Peter Mathison, Chief Executive of the Benefits Agency. He will write to my hon. Friend.

Letter from Peter Mathison to Mr. Iain Coleman, dated 26 July 1999:

The Secretary of State for Social Security has asked me to reply to your recent question asking how many claims from residents living in the London Borough of Hammersmith and Fulham for (a) Incapacity Benefit (IB), (b) Income Support (IS) and (c) Disability Living Allowance (DLA) were received in each calendar month of this year; how many were (i) agreed and (ii) refused; and if he will make a statement.

The information is not available in the format requested. The Benefits Agency (BA) collects IS and IB claim statistics by BA district areas and DLA statistics by Disability Benefit Centre areas. These areas do not reflect constituency boundaries or Local Authority areas.

The information that is available is provided in the attached annex.

I hope that this is helpful.

Incapacity Benefit (IB) claims received/processed

	IB claims received	*IB claims awarded*	*IB claims refused*
Ealing District			
January 1999	470	114	316
February 1999	581	161	356
March 1999	593	132	377
April 1999	418	—	—
May 1999	426	118	290
June 1999	502	126	391
Palace District			
January 1999	440	76	271
February 1999	526	61	292
March 1999	552	98	297
April 1999	455	—	—
May 1999	423	91	266
June 1999	453	151	352

Income Support (IS) claims received/processed

	IS claims received	*IS claims awarded*	*IS claims refused*
Ealing District			
January 1999	931	736	268
February 1999	1,138	840	342
March 1999	1,136	780	347
April 1999	1,118	865	300
May 1999	1,028	775	292
June 1999	1,091	804	268
Palace District			
January 1999	1,203	776	348
February 1999	1,252	802	384
March 1999	1,395	972	427
April 1999	1,188	849	310
May 1999	1,085	772	277
June 1999	1,154	804	272

Notes:

1. The Palace District comprises of the offices of Crystal Palace, Dulwich, Fulham, Kensington and Peckham.
2. The Ealing District comprises of the offices of Ealing, Acton, Notting Hill and Southall.
3. Figures for IB awards and refusals in April 1999 are not available because a system report was not received by DSS Analytical Services Division and it has not been possible to obtain a reprint.

Disability Living Allowance (DLA) claims received/processed

	DLA claims received	*DLA claims awarded*	*DLA claims refused*
Sutton DBC			
January 1999	3,227	1,748	1,849
February 1999	3,753	1,707	1,883
March 1999	4,751	1,933	2,164
April 1999	3,914	1,930	2,124
May 1999	3,613	1,627	1,823
June 1999	3,916	1,828	1,787

Notes:

1. Sutton DBC covers a large part of South East England, including the whole of Hammersmith and Fulham.
2. Data relative to specific geographical areas is not routinely kept.
3. As at 31 May 1998 there were 4,338 people resident in Hammersmith and Fulham in receipt of DLA. Figures for May 1999 are not yet available.
4. The number of claims on which a decision is issued in a monthly period may not equate to the number of claims received. This is because a number of uncleared claims may have been carried forward form a previous statistical period. The information is provisional and may be subject to change.

Benefits Agency

Mr. Sarwar: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if staff at the Benefits Agency aged 60 years or over are allowed to continue in employment on a year-to-year basis until the age of 65. [92203]

Angela Eagle: Employment within the Benefits Agency is a matter for Peter Mathison, the Chief Executive of the Benefits Agency. He will write to my hon. Friend.

Letter from Peter Mathison to Mr. Mohammed Sarwar, dated 26 July 1999:

The Secretary of State for Social Security has asked me to reply to your recent question asking if staff in the Benefits Agency aged 60 or over are allowed to continue in employment on a year to year basis until the age of 65.

Retirement age in the Department of Social Security was restored to age 60 for all staff with effect from 31 July 1998. However, the policy provides for retention of staff for business reasons for periods of 12 months at a time until the age of 65 for administrative grades and until 62 for junior managers. Middle managers and above are required to retire at age 60.

The availability of the facility for retention beyond age 60 is reviewed annually and is dependent upon the projected staffing requirements; staff are currently able to be retained until 31 July 2000.

I hope you find this reply helpful.

Pensioners

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security, pursuant to his answer of 19 July 1999, *Official Report*, column *442*, on pensioners and income support, if he will make a statement on the progress which has been made to date in increasing take-up of income support by pensioners, and on the timetable for implementation of further measures. [92537]

Mr. Timms: I refer the hon. Member to my written answer of 19 July 1999, *Official Report*, columns *442–43*. We will bring forward our plans as soon as possible.

Mr. O'Hara: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what percentage and number of *(a)* single pensioners, *(b)* pensioner couples and *(c)* all pensioner

households were dependent on state benefits for at least 75 per cent. of their income in the latest year for which figures are available. [93499]

Mr. Timms: The information is in the table.

Pensioner units with at least 75 per cent. of income from State benefits, 1996–97

Thousand

Pensioner unit	*Percentage*	*Number*
Single pensioners	56	2,450
Pensioner couples	36	980
All pensioner units	49	3,430

Notes:

1. Estimates are rounded to the nearest 10,000 pensioners, although they are not necessarily accurate to that degree.
2. A pensioner couple is defined as a couple where the man is over State pension age. A Pensioner Unit is defined as a single person over State pension age or a pensioner couple.

Source:

Family Expenditure Survey 1996–97.

Mr. O'Hara: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will list *(a)* the mean and *(b)* the median income for (i) single men aged over 65 to 74 years, (ii) single men aged 75 years and over, (iii) single women aged 65 to 74 years, (iv) single women aged 75 years and over, (v) pensioner couples aged 65 to 74 years and (vi) pensioner couples aged 75 years and over for (1) 1979 in the prices for the latest year for which figures are available and (2) the latest year for which prices are available. [93500]

Mr. Timms: The information is in the table.

Pensioners average income by age

	Mean incomes		*Median incomes*	
	1979	*1996–97*	*1979*	*1996–97*
Single men				
Aged 65–74	98	148	81	116
Aged 75 or over	84	134	74	114
Single women				
Aged 65–74	77	121	70	106
Aged 75 or over	75	126	70	108
Couples				
Aged 65–74	162	259	134	208
Aged 75 or over	132	226	113	179

Notes:

1. All incomes are expressed in £ per week at July 1996 prices.
2. Couples are allocated to each age group according to the age of the head of the household.
3. Income is defined as net income before housing costs.
4. Some estimates, particularly those for single men, are based on small sample sizes, so should be treated with caution.

Source:

Family Expenditure Survey

Mr. O'Hara: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what percentage and number of *(a)* single pension and *(b)* pensioner couples have a total income of at least £150 per week; and what percentage and number of pensioner couples have a total income of at least (i) £250 per week and (ii) £300 per week in the latest year for which figures are available. [93497]

Mr. Timms: The information is in the tables.

Pensioners with total income of at least £150 per week

	Single Pensioners	*Pensioner Couples*
Percentage	24	74
Number (thousand)	1,060	2,000

Pensioner couples with total income above selected thresholds

	Total weekly income of at least £250	*Total weekly income of at least £300*
Percentage	34	22
Number (thousand)	910	599

Notes:

1. All incomes are expressed in £ per week at July 1996 prices.
2. Income is defined as net income before housing costs.
3. Numbers are rounded to the nearest 10,000, although they are not necessarily accurate to that degree.
4. Estimates for singles and couples are not directly comparable since incomes have not been adjusted to take account of the number of people in the pensioner unit.

Source:

Family Expenditure Survey, 1996–97

Pensions

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security by what date he expects the first individuals to receive the annual pensions statement proposed in the Green Paper on Pensions. [93065]

Mr. Timms: We will implement the Green Paper commitment to introduce combined pension forecasts in 2002. We intend to conduct pilot exercises before that date.

On 22 July 1999, *Official Report*, column *573*, I announced the membership of a Pension Forecasting Advisory Group to consider how our proposals for introducing combined forecasts might best be implemented. The group will also advise on what supporting information and facilities need to be provided to ensure that individuals make best use of the new information.

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what plans he has to prevent members of defined benefit occupational pension schemes from transferring into stakeholder pension schemes. [93066]

Mr. Timms: We would expect information provided to members or potential members of stakeholder pension schemes to indicate clearly that they should seek financial advice before making such a transfer.

Housing Benefit

Ms Buck: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will estimate the costs of *(a)* extending entitlement to Housing Benefit to cover the first (i) 12 weeks and (ii) 24 weeks of work and *(b)* placing Housing Benefit entitlement on the same time basis as Working Families Tax Credit. [93069]

Angela Eagle: It is not possible to estimate the cost of extending entitlement to Housing Benefit for everyone starting work to cover the first 12–24 weeks of work, owing to insufficient information.

However, if it is assumed that the eligibility conditions for a Housing Benefit extended payment are applied, (eg receipt of Income Support or Jobseeker's Allowance for at least 26 weeks before starting work) the cost of increasing the extended payment to cover the first (i) 12 weeks in work is £50 million and (ii) 24 weeks in work is £125 million, at 1999–2000 prices. Estimates assume that there are no behavioural changes.

It is not possible to estimate the cost of placing Housing Benefit entitlement on the same time basis as Working Families Tax Credit due to insufficient information.

Departmental Funding (Leeds)

Mr. Hilary Benn: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will list the programmes funded directly by his Department, relating to social exclusion, regeneration, community development, employment or education, currently operating in *(a)* the City of Leeds and *(b)* the Leeds Central parliamentary constituency, listing for each programme the amount of such funding for each of the last three years and the amount planned to be spent in each of the next three financial years. [92911]

Angela Eagle: Information is not collected locally or centrally on the proportion of funding related to social exclusion. The vast majority of the Department's programme spending is dedicated to tackling poverty and social exclusion.

Benefits Agency (Scotland)

Mr. Salmond: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will list the procedural steps for assessing eligibility, reviewing, appealing and making payment of *(a)* severe disablement allowance, *(b)* maternity allowance, *(c)* industrial injuries disablement allowance, *(d)* reduced earnings allowance/retirement allowance, *(e)* attendance allowance and *(f)* disability working allowance; indicating which of the offices of his Department and his agencies in Scotland would handle each of these steps. [92356]

Mr. Timms: The administration of benefits is a matter for Peter Mathison, the Chief Executive of the Benefits Agency. He will write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Peter Mathison to Mr. Alex Salmond, dated 26 July 1999:

The Secretary of State has asked me to reply to your recent question asking if he will list the procedural steps for assessing eligibility, reviewing, appealing and making payment of (a) Severe Disablement Allowance, (b) Maternity Allowance, (c) Industrial Injuries Disablement Allowance, (d) Reduced Earnings Allowance/ Retirement Allowance, (e) Attendance Allowance and (f) Disability Working Allowance; indicating which of the offices of his Department and his agencies in Scotland would handle each of these steps.

Applications advice and information for all of the above benefits can be obtained from each local office of the Benefits Agency in Scotland.

The procedural steps on a claim including those for assessment, reviews, appeals and payments are set out in the following booklets, NI252 "Severe Disablement Allowance", NI17A "A Guide to Maternity Benefits", NI6 "Industrial Injuries Disablement Benefit", HB5 "A guide to Non-Contributory Benefits for Disabled People" and HB4 "A Guide to Disability Working Allowance".

Copies of all of these documents are in the House library.

All aspects of appeals are handled by the Independent Tribunal Service.

I hope this is helpful.

Ms Roseanna Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) which Benefits Agency office would handle *(a)* provision of advice and information, *(b)* assessment of eligibility to claim, *(c)* review of the claim, *(d)* appeal relating to the claim, *(e)* payment of the benefit and *(f)* recovery of over-paid benefit for a person living in (i) (A) Perth and (B) Glasgow and claiming incapacity benefit and (ii) (x) Perth and (y) Edinburgh and claiming family credit; [92392]

(2) which Benefits Agency office would handle *(a)* provision of advice and information, *(b)* assessment of eligibility to claim, *(c)* review of the claim, *(d)* appeal relating to the claim, *(e)* payment of the benefit and *(f)* recovery of over-paid benefit for a person living in (i) (A) Perth and (B) Inverness and claiming jobseeker's allowance, (both income and contribution based) and (ii) (x) Perth and (y) Greenock and claiming disability living allowance. [92393]

Mr. Timms: The administration of Benefit Agency offices is a matter for Peter Mathison, the Chief Executive of the Benefits Agency. He will write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Peter Mathison to Ms Roseanna Cunningham, dated 26 July 1999:

The Secretary of State has asked me to reply to your recent questions asking which Benefits Agency (BA) office would handle (a) provision of advice and information, (b) assessment of eligibility to claim, (c) review of the claim, (d) appeal relating to the claim, (e) payment of the benefit and (f) recovery of over-paid benefit for a person living in (i) (A) Perth and (B) Glasgow and claiming Incapacity Benefit (IB) and (ii) (A) Perth and (B) Edinburgh and claiming Family Credit (FC); and also, (a)—(f) above for a person living in (i) (A) Perth and (B) Inverness and claiming Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA), (both income and contribution based) and (ii) (A) Perth and (B) Greenock and claiming Disability Living Allowance (DLA).

For IB, four BA districts cover Glasgow, these are Glasgow North, Glasgow South, Glasgow East and Argyle and West. One district, Tayside, covers Perth.

All offices in these districts provide benefit advice and information, and handle assessments, reviews, payment of benefits, recovery of overpayments. They also accept appeals which are sent to the Area Centralised Contributory Benefits Appeals Units in Motherwell and Glasgow, where appeals are prepared.

For FC, East Edinburgh and Borders and Lothian West districts cover Edinburgh and Tayside district covers Perth.

Advice, information and claim packs can be obtained from offices in these districts, which also accept appeals for onward transmission to the Family Credit Unit (FCU) in Preston. The FCU deals with all aspects of FC claims for the whole of Great Britain.

For JSA, in Inverness advice and information can be obtained from Inverness Employment Services Jobcentre (ESJ) or Inverness BA office. Assessment of benefit, reviews and payment of JSA is carried out in the ESJ. Appeals are prepared in Elgin office and recovery of overpaid benefit is processed in Stornoway.

In Perth, the principal point of contact for advice and information on JSA is Perth ESJ. Advice and information is also available in Perth BA Office where claims are assessed. Reviews and payments are processed in both the BA office and Perth ESJ. Appeals are prepared in Dundee office and recovery of overpaid benefit is processed in Perth.

Information and advice on DLA can be obtained from the BA offices in Perth (Tayside district) and Greenock (Clyde Coast and Renfrew district). Claims are assessed in the Disability Benefit

Centres (DBCs) in Glasgow and Edinburgh which also issue payments, carry out reviews and process appeals, although these functions may be carried out at the Disability Benefit Unit (DBU) in Blackpool. Any overpaid benefit is recovered by the DBU.

All aspects of benefit appeals are handled by the Independent Tribunal Service.

I hope this is helpful.

Mr. Salmond: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) which Benefits Agency office would handle the *(a)* provision of advice and information, *(b)* assessment of eligibility to claim, *(c)* review of the claim, *(d)* appeal of the claim, *(e)* payment of the benefit and *(f)* recovery of over-paid benefit for a person living in (i) Peterhead, (ii) Stranraer and (iii) Glasgow and claiming incapacity benefit; [92380]

(2) which Benefits Agency office would handle the *(a)* provision of advice and information, *(b)* assessment of eligibility to claim, *(c)* review of the claim, *(d)* appeal of the claim, *(e)* payment of the benefit and *(f)* recovery of over-paid benefit for a person living in (i) Peterhead, (ii) Stranraer and (iii) Inverness and claiming jobseeker's allowance, both income based and contribution based; [92382]

(3) which Benefits Agency office would handle the *(a)* provision of advice and information, *(b)* assessment of eligibility to claim, *(c)* review of the claim, *(d)* appeal of the claim, *(e)* payment of the benefit and *(f)* recovery of over-paid benefit for a person living in (i) Banff and (ii) Paisley and claiming incapacity benefit; [92384]

(4) which Benefits Agency office would handle the *(a)* provision of advice and information, *(b)* assessment of eligibility to claim, *(c)* review of the claim, *(d)* appeal of the claim, *(e)* payment of the benefit and *(f)* recovery of over-paid benefit for a person living in (i) Elgin, (ii) Banff and (iii) Paisley and claiming jobseeker's allowance, both income based and contribution based; [92386]

(5) which Benefits Agency office would handle the *(a)* provision of advice and information, *(b)* assessment of eligibility to claim, *(c)* review of the claim, *(d)* appeal of the claim, *(e)* payment of the benefit and *(f)* recovery of over-paid benefit for a person living in (i) Elgin, (ii) Banff and (iii) Paisley and claiming disability living allowance; [92387]

(6) which Benefits Agency office would handle the *(a)* provision of advice and information, *(b)* assessment of eligibility to claim, *(c)* review of the claim, *(d)* appeal of the claim, *(e)* payment of the benefit and *(f)* recovery of over-paid benefit for a person living in (i) Peterhead, (ii) Stranraer and (iii) Edinburgh and claiming family credit; [92381]

(7) which Benefits Agency office would handle the *(a)* provision of advice and information, *(b)* assessment of eligibility to claim, *(c)* review of the claim, *(d)* appeal of the claim, *(e)* payment of the benefit and *(f)* recovery of over-paid benefit for a person living in (i) Peterhead, (ii) Stranraer and (iii) Greenock and claiming disability living allowance; [92383]

(8) which Benefits Agency office would handle the *(a)* provision of advice and information, *(b)* assessment of eligibility to claim, *(c)* review of the claim, *(d)* appeal of the claim, *(e)* payment of the benefit and *(f)* recovery of over-paid benefit for a person living in (i) Elgin, (ii) Banff and (iii) Paisley and claiming family credit. [92385]

Mr. Timms: The administration of benefits is a matter for Peter Mathison, the Chief Executive of the Benefits Agency. He will write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Peter Mathison to Mr. Alex Salmond, dated 26 July 1999:

The Secretary of State has asked me to reply to your recent questions relating to procedural steps for Social Security benefits and indicating which officers and agencies would handle each of these steps. A copy of the questions is attached.

The local offices and the services they provide for people claiming incapacity benefit are as follows;

For Peterhead, Peterhead Benefits office provide (a) advice and information, (b) assessment of eligibility to claim, (c) review of the claim, (d) appeal of the claim, (e) payment of the benefit and (f) recovery of overpaid benefit.

For Stranraer, Stranraer Benefits office provide (a), Kilmarnock Benefits office provide (b), (c), (d), (e) and (f).

There are four districts covering Glasgow. These are Glasgow North, Glasgow South, Glasgow East, Argyle and West. All offices in these districts provide (a)-(f).

For Banff, Elgin Benefits office provide (a)-(f).

For Paisley, Paisley Benefits office provide (a)-(f), with the exception of (d) which is provided by Johnstone Benefits office.

For Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA), advice and information can be obtained from Employment Services Jobcentres (ESJ) and local BA offices. Assessments of benefit, review and payment of JSA, lodgement of appeals and recovery of overpaid benefit is processed within the Employment Services and BA district office network as follows:

Peterhead - Peterhead Benefit Office provide (a)-(f), with the exception of (d) provided by Aberdeen District Office.

Stranraer - Stranraer Benefits office provide (a), (c), (d), (f), Stranraer ESJ (a), (b), (e).

Inverness - Inverness District Office provide (a), Inverness ESJ (a), (b), (c), (e), Elgin Benefit Office (d), Stornoway Benefits office (f).

Elgin - Elgin Benefit Office (a), (d), Elgin ESJ (a), (b), (c), (e), Stornoway Benefit Office (f).

Banff - Banff ESJ (a), (b), (c), (e), Aberdeen District Office (d), Peterhead Benefit Office (f).

Paisley - Paisley Benefit Office (a), (d), (f), Paisley ESJ (a), (b), (c), (e).

Information and advice on Disability Living Allowance can be obtained from the BA offices in Elgin, Paisley, Peterhead, Stranraer and Greenock. Claims are assessed in the Disability Benefit Centres in Glasgow and Edinburgh which also issue payments, carry out reviews and process appeals, although these functions may be carried out at the Disability Benefit Unit (DBU) in Blackpool. Any overpaid benefit is recovered by the DBU.

For Family Credit, advice information and claim packs can be obtained from BA offices in these areas. They will also accept appeals for onward transmission to the Family Credit Unit in Preston, which deals with all aspects of Family Credit claims for the whole of Great Britain.

The Area Centralised Contributory Benefits Appeals Units in Motherwell and Glasgow prepare appeal submissions for Scotland. All aspects of appeals are handled by the Independent Tribunal Service.

I hope this is helpful.

Mr. Swinney: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) which Benefits Agency office would handle the *(a)* provision of advice and information, *(b)* assessment of eligibility to claim, *(c)* review of the claim, *(d)* appeal of the claim, *(e)* payment of the benefit and *(f)* recovery of

over-paid benefit for a person living in (i) Blairgowrie, (ii) Duns and (iii) Inverness and claiming jobseeker's allowance, both income based and contribution based; [92354]

(2) which Benefits Agency office would handle the *(a)* provision of advice and information, *(b)* assessment of eligibility to claim, *(c)* review of the claim, *(d)* appeal of the claim, *(e)* payment of the benefit and *(f)* recovery of over-paid benefit for a person living in (i) Blairgowrie, (ii) Duns and (iii) Glasgow and claiming incapacity benefit; [92352]

(3) which Benefits Agency office would handle the *(a)* provision of advice and information, *(b)* assessment of eligibility to claim, *(c)* review of the claim, *(d)* appeal of the claim, *(e)* payment of the benefit and *(f)* recovery of over-paid benefit for a person living in (i) Blairgowrie, (ii) Duns and (iii) Edinburgh and claiming family credit; [92353]

(4) which Benefits Agency office would handle the *(a)* provision of advice and information, *(b)* assessment of eligibility to claim, *(c)* review of the claim, *(d)* appeal of the claim, *(e)* payment of the benefit and *(f)* recovery of over-paid benefit for a person living in (i) Blairgowrie, (ii) Duns and (iii) Greenock and claiming disability living allowance. [92355]

Mr. Timms: The administration of benefits is a matter for Peter Mathison, the Chief Executive of the Benefits Agency. He will write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Peter Mathison to Mr. John Swinney, dated 26 July 1999:

The Secretary of State has asked me to reply to your recent questions asking which Benefit Agency office would handle the (a) provision of advice and information, (b) assessment of eligibility to claim, (c) review of the claim, (d) appeal of the claim, (e) payment of the benefit and (f) recovery of over-paid benefits.

For Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA), advice and information can be obtained from Employment Services Jobcentres (ESJ) and local Benefits Agency (BA) offices. Assessment of benefit, review and payment of JSA, lodgement of appeals and recovery of overpaid benefit is processed within the Employment Services and BA district network is set out in the annex.

For Incapacity Benefit, the local offices and the services they provide for people are as follows;

Blairgowrie-Blairgowrie Benefit Office provides (a), Perth Benefit Office provides (a), (b), (c), (d), (e), (f).

Dunns-Galashiels Benefit Office provide (a), (b), (c), (d), (e), (f).

Four districts cover Glasgow, these are Glasgow North, Glasgow South, Glasgow East and Argyle and West. All offices in these districts provide (a), (b), (c), (d), (e), (f).

For Family Credit (FC), Tayside, East Edinburgh and Borders and Lothian West districts cover Blairgowrie, Dunns and Edinburgh. Advice, information and claim packs can be obtained from all BA offices in these districts, which also accept appeals for onward transmission to the Family Credit Unit in Preston, which deals with all aspects of FC claims for the whole of Great Britain.

For Disability Living Allowance, information and advice can be obtained from BA offices in Tayside, East Edinburgh and Borders, Lothian West and Clyde Coast and Renfrew districts. Claims are assessed in the Disability Benefit Centres in Glasgow and Edinburgh which also issue payments, carry out reviews and process appeals although these functions may be carried out at the Disability Benefit Unit (DBU) in Blackpool. Any overpaid benefit is recovered by the DBU.

The Area Contributory Benefits Appeals Units in Motherwell and Glasgow prepare appeal submissions for Scotland. All aspects of appeals are handled by the Independent Tribunal Service.

I hope this is helpful.

Annex

	a	*b*	*c*	*d*	*e*	*f*
Blairgowrie Benefit Office	Yes	—	—	—	—	—
Blairgowrie ESJ	Yes	Yes	Yes	—	Yes	—
Dundee Benefit Office	—	—	—	Yes	—	—
Perth Benefit Office	—	—	—	—	—	Yes
Eyemouth ESJ	Yes	Yes	Yes	—	—	—
Galashiels Benefit Office	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Inverness Benefit Office	Yes	—	—	—	—	—
Inverness ESJ	Yes	Yes	Yes	—	Yes	—
Elgin Benefit Office	—	—	—	Yes	—	—
Stornaway Benefit Office	—	—	—	—	—	Yes

Mr. Welsh: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) which Benefits Agency office would handle the *(a)* provision of advice and information, *(b)* assessment of eligibility to claim, *(c)* review of the claim, *(d)* appeal of the claim, *(e)* payment of the benefit and *(f)* recovery of over-paid benefit for a person living in (i) Dundee, (ii) Arbroath and (iii) Glasgow and claiming Incapacity Benefit; [92348]

(2) which Benefits Agency office would handle the *(a)* provision of advice and information, *(b)* assessment of eligibility to the claim, *(c)* review of the claim, *(d)* appeal of the claim, *(e)* payment of the benefit and *(f)* recovery of over-paid benefit for a person living in (i) Dundee, (ii) Arbroath and (iii) Edinburgh and claiming Family Credit; [92349]

(3) which Benefits Agency office would handle the *(a)* provision of advice and information, *(b)* assessment of eligibility to claim, *(c)* review of the claim, *(d)* appeal of the claim, *(e)* payment of the benefit and *(f)* recovery of over-paid benefit for a person living in (i) Dundee, (ii) Arbroath and (iii) Inverness and claiming Jobseeker's Allowance, both income based and contribution based; [92350]

(4) which Benefits Agency office would handle the *(a)* provision of advice and information, *(b)* assessment of eligibility to claim, *(c)* review of the claim, *(d)* appeal of the claim, *(e)* payment of the benefit and *(f)* recovery of over-paid benefit for a person living in (i) Dundee, (ii) Arbroath and (iii) Greenock and claiming Disability Living Allowance. [92351]

Mr. Timms: The administration of benefits is a matter for Peter Mathison, the Chief Executive of the Benefits Agency. He will write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Peter Mathison to Mr. Andrew Welsh, dated 26 July 1999:

The Secretary of State has asked me to reply to your recent questions asking which Benefit Agency (BA) offices would handle the (a) provision of advice and information, (b) assessment of eligibility to claim, (c) review of the claim, (d) appeal of the claim, (e) payment of the benefit and (f) recovery of over-paid benefits.

For Incapacity Benefit, four BA districts cover Glasgow, these are Glasgow North, Glasgow South, Glasgow East and Argyle and West. One district covers Tayside. All offices in these districts provide benefits advice and information, and handle assessments, review, payment of benefit and recovery of overpayments. They also accept appeals, which are sent to the Area Centralised Contributory Benefits Appeals Units in Motherwell and Glasgow, where all appeals for Scotland are prepared.

For Family Credit (FC), East Edinburgh and Borders and Lothian West districts cover Edinburgh and Tayside district covers Dundee and Arbroath. Advice information and claim packs can be obtained from all offices in these districts, which also accept appeals for

onward transmission to the Family Credit Unit (FCU) in Preston. The FCU deals with all aspects of FC claims for the whole of Great Britain.

For Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA), advice and information can be obtained from Employment Service Jobcentres (ESJ) and local BA offices. Assessment of benefit, review and payment of JSA, appeals and recovery of overpaid benefits are processed within the Employment Services and BA district network (see appendix).

For Disability Living Allowance (DLA), information and advice can be obtained from the BA offices in Tayside (Dundee & Arbroath) and Clyde Coast and Renfrew districts (Greenock).

Claims are assessed in the Disability Benefit Centres in Glasgow and Edinburgh, which also issue payments, carry out reviews and process appeals, although these functions may be carried out at the Disability Benefit Unit (DBU) in Blackpool. Any overpaid benefit is recovered by the DBU.

After the initial preparation by the BA, all aspects of benefit appeals are handled by the Independent Tribunal Service.

I hope this is helpful.

Appendix

	(a)	*(b)*	*(c)*	*(d)*	*(e)*	*(f)*
Dundee Benefit Office	Yes	—	—	Yes	—	—
Dundee ESJs	Yes	Yes	Yes	—	Yes	—
Perth Benefit Office	—	—	—	—	—	Yes
Arbroath Benefit Office	Yes	—	—	—	—	—
Arbroath ESJ	Yes	Yes	Yes	—	Yes	—
Inverness Benefit Office	Yes	—	—	—	—	—
Elgin Benefit Office	—	—	—	Yes	—	—
Stornaway Benefit Office	—	—	—	—	—	Yes
Inverness ESJ	Yes	Yes	Yes	—	Yes	—

Industrial Deafness

Mr. Pike: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what plans he has to review the procedure for determining industrial deafness; and if he will make a statement. [93206]

Mr. Bayley: We are advised on matters relating to the Industrial Injuries Benefit Scheme, which includes provision for occupational deafness, by the Industrial Injuries Advisory Council. The Council's sub-group, the Occupational Deafness Working Group is currently examining all the criteria for awarding benefit and when their work is concluded the Council will report to us. The timing of the Council's report is a matter for them.

Income Support (Scotland)

Mr. O'Hara: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many and what percentage of people aged over 60 years who receive Income Support live in Scotland. [93501]

Mr. Timms: The information is in the table.

Income Support claimants in Scotland aged over 60-years-old, February 1999

Claimants	*Number of cases*	*As percentage of over 60-years-old Income Support population in Great Britain*
Claimants aged over 60-years-old	158,000	10
Claimants and/or partner aged over 60-years-old	160,000	10

Notes:
1. Numbers are rounded to the nearest thousand.
2. Estimates are based on a 5 per cent. sample of all Income Support claimants and may be subject to a degree of sampling error.
3. Cases are allocated to the Scotland Government Office Region by matching postcodes against the 1999 version 1 of the Postcode Directory.

Source:
Income Support Statistics Quarterly Enquiry, February 1999.

Cold Weather Payments (Scotland)

Mr. O'Hara: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will provide a breakdown of cold weather payments paid in Scotland in 1998–99. [93502]

Angela Eagle: The administration of cold weather payments is a matter for Peter Mathison, the Chief Executive of the Benefits Agency. He will write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Peter Mathison to Mr. Eddie O'Hara, dated 27 July 1999:

The Secretary of State has asked me to reply to your recent question asking if he will provide a breakdown of cold weather payments paid in Scotland in 1998–99.

During the 1998–99 winter in Scotland there were 11 occasions when cold weather payments were triggered. This resulted in the issue of 11,293 payments, totalling £95,990.50. Details are provided in the attached table.

I hope this is helpful.

Weather station	*Postcode districts*	*BA districts affected*	*Period of trigger(s)*
Aviemore	AB31, AB33, AB34, AB36–37, PH18–26	Grampian & Shetland Highlands & Islands Tayside	13/11/98–19/11/98 06/01/99–12/01/99 07/02/99–13/02/99
Braemar	AB35	Grampian & Shetland	13/11/98–19/11/98 12/01/99–18/01/99 07/02/99–13/02/99
Lerwick	ZE1–3	Grampian & Shetland	05/02/99–11/02/99
Loch Glascarnoch	IV3–4, IV6, IV23–24	Highlands & Islands	06/01/99–12/01/99 07/02/99–13/02/99
Tulloch Bridge	PA33, PA35–36, PA38–40, PH8–11, PH15–17, PH30–35, PH37	Argyll & West Highlands & Islands Tayside	06/01/99–12/01/99 04/02/99–10/02/99

State Earnings-Related Pension Scheme

Mr. Alan Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what estimate has been made of the cost of not implementing the proposed change to SERPS from April 2000 in each of the next three years. [93286]

Mr. Timms: The information is in the table.

The estimated gross SERPS costs

£ million

Year	Estimated gross costs
2000–01	60
2001–02	170
2002–03	280

Notes:
1. Costs are supplied by the Government Actuary's Department.
2. No allowance has been made for income related benefit offsets.
3. Costs are rounded to the nearest £10 million and are at 1998–99 rates.
4. Costs include SERPS pension paid to widows and widowers above State pension age and to widows below State pension age.
5. The estimates are based on current legislation.
6. Real earnings growth of 1.5 per cent. has been assumed.

Mr. Alan Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what estimate has been made of the number of people likely to be affected by the proposed change to SERPS from April 2000 in each of the next three years. [93287]

Mr. Timms: I refer my hon. Friend to the Written answer the then Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Southampton, Hitchen (Mr. Denham) gave to the hon. Member for Northavon (Mr. Webb) on 8 December 1998, *Official Report*, columns *174–75*.

Benefits (Capital Limits)

Mr. O'Hara: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what the upper and lower capital limit would be for *(a)* income support, *(b)* housing benefit and *(c)* council tax benefit if they had been uprated by (i) prices since introduction, (ii) prices since 1990, (iii) the higher of prices or earnings since introduction and (iv) the higher of prices and earnings since 1990. [93498]

Angela Eagle: The information is in the table.

Comparison between the values of capital limits if uprated by different indices [1]

£

Benefit and date of introduction	Income Support April 1988		Housing Benefit April 1988		Council Tax Benefit April 1990 [2]	
	Lower	Higher	Lower	Higher	Lower	Higher
Rate of capital limits at date of introduction	3,000	6,000	3,000	6,000	3,000	16,000
Rate if uprated by prices since introduction [3]	4,627	9,255	4,627	9,255	4,201	22,406
Rate if uprated by higher of prices and earnings since introduction	5,611	11,221	5,611	11,221	4,701	25,071
Rate of capital limits at April 1990	3,000	8,000	3,000	16,000	3,000	16,000
Rate if uprated by prices since April 1990	4,201	11,203	4,201	22,406	4,201	22,406
Rate if uprated by higher of prices and earnings since April 1990	4,701	12,536	4,701	25,071	4,701	25,071

[1] The ROSSI index is used to uprate Income Related Benefits. Figures have been rounded to the nearest pound.
[2] In April 1990, Community Charge Benefit was introduced in England and Wales. In April 1993, this was replaced by Council Tax Benefit.
[3] For Income Related Benefits (IRBs), the percentage used to uprate benefits in April 1994 was 3.9 per cent. not 3.5 per cent. as shown in the Annual Abstract of Statistics, to take account of VAT on fuel.

War Pensions

Sir Nicholas Lyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what is the current position in relation to the war pensions case of Mr. Kenneth Winter of Langford, Ref YX953640C; and if he will make a statement. [93545]

Mr. Bayley: The administration of the War Pensions Agency is a matter for its Chief Executive, Mr. Gordon Hextall. I have asked him to write to the right hon. and learned Member.

Letter from Gordon Hextall to Sir Nicholas Lyell, dated 26 July 1999.

The Secretary of State for Social Security has asked me to reply to your recent Parliamentary Question about the current position in relation to the war pension case of Mr. Kenneth Winter of 98 Church Street, Langford.

Mr. Winter has an outstanding appeal against our 50 per cent assessment of his service related disablement for the period 22 December 1994 to 5 August 1996. All relevant papers are now with the independent Pensions Appeal Tribunal (PAT) office. The PAT is completely separate from the WPA and is administered by the Lord Chancellor's Department. The PAT office has been unable to give us a specific date for the hearing but anticipates that the appeal will be heard during September 1999. They will send full details to Mr. Winter within the next two weeks.

If Mr. Winter has any further queries about the appeal hearing date, he may wish to contact the PAT office direct. Their telephone number is 0171 936 7033.

I hope this is helpful and if you need any further information, I will be happy to assist.

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) what is the average time taken to process appeals in respect of claims for war disablement pension; [92967]

(2) what action he has taken in response to the findings and recommendations of the Final report of the Review of the Decision Making and Appeals Process in the War Pensions Agency; [92960]

(3) what is the average time taken to process a claim for war disablement pension. [92961]

Mr. Bayley: The administration of the War Pensions Agency is a matter for its Chief Executive, Mr. Gordon Hextall. I have asked him to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Gordon Hextall to Mr. Christopher Chope, dated 26 July 1999:

The Secretary of State for Social Security has asked me to reply to your recent Parliamentary Questions relating to war pensions. You asked about the average time taken to process War Disablement

Pension (WDP) claims and appeals and what action was being taken in response to the findings and recommendations of the Final Report of the Review of the Decision Making and Appeals Process in the War Pensions Agency (WPA).

The latest annual figures available (April 1998 to March 1999) show that the average time taken to process a claim to WDP was 111 days, whilst the average time taken to process an appeal was 278 days.

The WPA is committee to reducing the processing times and this was why I commissioned the review of the Decision Making and Appeals Process. Once the report as received, I appointed a Programme Manager and established a programme team, working under PRINCE project management discipline in line with the recommendations about implementation. The team is testing the feasibility, implications, timing and costs of implementing the recommendations. They are specifying and proposing in greater detail what is required to take forward the changes necessary to improve the service we provide. As the Senior Accountable Official, I am chairing a Steering Group which includes the DSS Policy Manager and the Chief Medical Adviser. A meeting has also been arranged with the Presidents of the Pensions Appeal Tribunal (PAT) in August at which the recommendations, particularly those which involve the Lord Chancellors Department, will be discussed.

Although it is necessary to test their feasibility, it is clear that some of the recommendations are relatively straightforward and there are some "quick wins" which can be achieved. For example, improvements to the process involving more telephone contact can be made quickly and easily. These improvements are to be pilcted in Autumn this year. Some changes, which are IT related, will need more careful consideration, including the funding and business case aspects. Others, in particular those involving matters of policy, will need much wider consultation with stakeholders and interested parties to assess the impact and to canvass opinion.

I hope this is helpful and if you need any further information, I will be happy to assist.

Benefits (New Year)

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what action he is taking to ensure that vulnerable people will receive their benefits over the New Year, with particular reference to people with disabilities and those receiving direct and manual payments; and if he will make a statement. [93483]

Angela Eagle: The administration of benefits is a matter for Peter Mathison, the Chief Executive of the Benefits Agency. He will write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Peter Mathison to Mr. Tim Boswell, dated 27 July 1999:

The Secretary of State has asked me to reply to your recent question asking what action he is taking to ensure that vulnerable people will receive their benefits over the New Year with particular reference to people with disabilities and those receiving direct and manual payments.

Each year the Benefit Agency (BA) brings forward the production of order books, Girocheques and Automated Credit Transfers (payment directly to bank accounts) so that people receiving direct and manual payments of benefits can have their money in advance for holiday periods when Banks and Post Offices are closed. These arrangements will again be made for people in receipt of all BA benefits, including disability benefits, for the forthcoming Christmas and New Year period.

Throughout the year, the BA has continuity planning arrangements in place which could involve manual payments being implemented where problems such as postal disruption are anticipated. In the most vulnerable cases, such payments could be issued to the customer in the office the same day. The BA will also consider sending a visiting officer to those who are unable to attend the office.

Over the Christmas and New Year period BA local offices will be open on 24, 29 and 30 December, and 4 January (except in Scotland, where offices return to normal working hours on 5 January). Working hours will be advertised in the local office.

The BA also provides an out of hours service (OOHS) to help customers who find themselves in particular need outside normal office hours. On weekdays this service operates until at least 20.00 hours. At weekends and on statutory holidays, it will operate for at least six hours daily, normally between 9.00 and 20.00 hours. Contact with the OOHS is normally made through the social services or police who liaise with a central emergency officer through a telephone message service. The officer then considers the individual person's needs in consultation with outside agencies.

In addition, the BA has been aware for some time of the issues which my arise as a result of the Year 2000 date change. A full programme of work was established in 1996. Most of the major mainframe systems (the benefit payment computer systems) hold their dates in a way which is largely unaffected by the Year 2000 problem. Nevertheless, a full regime of checking has taken place and all benefit payment systems are now full year 2000 compliant.

Interfaces with external computer systems, including the systems which pay benefits directly to bank accounts (BACS), have been rigorously tested, or plans are in place to do so. An intensive testing process is also under way on our major benefit paying systems to provide additional assurances. For example, BA has recently concluded a business confidence review of Job Seekers Allowance and Income Support that did not identify any risks of material disruption to payment of benefits.

I hope this is helpful.

Income Support

Mr. Love: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many and what percentage of *(a)* adults and *(b)* children in families were in receipt of income support and jobseeker's allowance in (i) Edmonton, (ii) Enfield, (iii) Greater London and (iv) the UK, in the last year for which figures are available. [93589]

Angela Eagle: The information is not available in the format requested. Such information as is available is in the tables.

Beneficiaries of income support as at February 1999

Number of Beneficiaries

Area	*Adults (aged 16 and over)*	*Children (aged 15 and under)*	*Adults as a percentage of 16 years and over population*	*Children as percentage of 15 years and under population*
Edmonton Constituency	10.5	7.1	[1]--	[1]--
Enfield LA	24.6	14.8	12	26
Greater London	667.6	393.6	12	27
Great Britain	4,424.9	2,196.3	10	19

Beneficiaries of Jobseeker's Allowance as at February 1999

Number of Beneficiaries

Area	*Adults (aged 16 and over)*	*Children (aged 15 and under)*	*Adults as a percentage of 16 year and over population*	*Children as percentage of 15 years and under population*
Edmonton Constituency	4.5	1.5	[1]—	[1]—
Enfield LA	10.4	2.7	5	5
Greater London	266.8	53.8	5	4
Great Britain	1,699.4	326.1	4	3

[1] Not available

Notes:

1. Numbers are rounded to the nearest hundred and displayed as thousands. Percentages are rounded to the nearest whole number.
2. Estimates are based on a 5 per cent. sample of all Income Support and Jobseeker's Allowance claimants and will therefore be subject to a degree of sampling error eg the true population value for an estimate of 2,000 could lie within the range of approximately 1,500 to 2,500.
3. Children are defined as dependants aged 15 years old and less.
4. Adults refer to all adult beneficiaries of Income Support or Jobseeker's Allowance i.e. Claimants, partners and dependants aged 16 years old and over.
5. Cases are allocated to the Local Authority Districts by matching postcodes against the 1999 version 1 of the Postcode Directory.
6. Cases were allocated to Edmonton Constituency by matching postcodes against the 1999 version 1 of the Postcode Directory and as such represent Constituency boundaries as at May 1997.
7. Estimates for Jobseeker's Allowance include income-based, contribution-based Jobseeker's Allowance and cases where nil benefit is in payment.
8. Population estimates used in the percentage calculation were taken from the Office for National Statistics mid year estimates for 1997.
9. It has not been possible to provide an estimate of the percentage of the population in the Edmonton constituency area who are beneficiaries of either Income Support or Jobseeker's Allowance. Instead, data has been provided for Enfield Local Authority.
10. Estimates for the United Kingdom can not be provided as requested, as social security in Northern Ireland is the responsibility of the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, but Great Britain totals have been supplied.

Source:

1 Income Support Statistics Quarterly Enquiry, February 1999
2 Jobseeker's Allowance Statistics Quarterly Enquiry, February 1999

Lone Parents

Mr. Rapson: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security when he intends to introduce the benefit run-on for lone parents starting work; what effect this will have on the housing benefit and council tax benefit extended payments scheme; and if he will make a statement. [93901]

Angela Eagle: The lone parent's benefit run-on will give extra help, and financial security, to lone parents during the transition from welfare to work. It will allow lone parents who have been getting Income Support (IS) or income-based Jobseeker's Allowance for at least six months to be paid IS for their first two weeks in work, provided that work is expected to last at least five weeks. We expect more than 100,000 lone parents to benefit from the run-on in a full year (about 5,000 at a point in time), at a cost of between £15 million and £25 million.

We also intend to make consequential changes to the Housing Benefit (HB) and Council Tax Benefit (CTB) extended payment schemes. At present, these schemes give four extra weeks HB and/or CTB to a number of groups—including lone parents—moving from income-related benefits to work, provided they claim it. Lone parents getting the IS benefit run-on will automatically retain entitlement to maximum HB/CTB during the run-on period, and will then receive extended payments for the next two weeks without the need for a separate claim. This should ensure that they continue to receive maximum HB/CTB for the first four weeks of work.

The benefit run-on complements other aspects of welfare-to-work policies, in particular the New Deal for lone parents. It is a positive response to concerns that the abrupt withdrawal of what has been a regular income, the gap between starting work and receiving wages and the wait for in-work benefits can combine to form a barrier to making the move into work. These concerns can be particularly acute for lone parents, who often have to meet child care costs in advance.

We are also taking this opportunity to broaden the scope of the HB/CTB extended payments scheme to include sick and disabled people moving from income-related benefits into work. This will benefit an estimated 22,000 people a year at an annual cost of £3 million.

Draft regulations have been referred to the Social Security Advisory Committee and consultation with representatives of Local Authority Associations is under way. Following this, we plan to lay the regulations during September to bring the scheme into place in October to coincide with the introduction of Working Families Tax Credit.

Benefit Fraud Inspectorate

Ms Oona King: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security when he expects to publish the Benefit Fraud Inspectorate report on Tower Hamlets. [93448]

Mr. Timms: I published the report of the Benefit Fraud Inspectorate's inspection of the London Borough of Tower Hamlets on Thursday 22 July 1999.

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will list the local authorities for which Benefit Fraud Inspectorate inspections have been completed and reports remain to be published. [93315]

Mr. Timms: The Benefit Fraud Inspectorate is currently undertaking 27 inspections. These inspections are all at different stages. Of these, 15 have been completed to at least draft report stage.

These inspections are in the following local authorities:

Oxford
Bournemouth
Lichfield
Sandwell
Swansea
West Wiltshire
Powys
Wigan
Shrewsbury and Atcham
Norwich
York
Carlisle
Calderdale
Rotherham
Ellesmere Port.

NIRS2

Mr. Pike: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many complaints and representations have been received by *(a)* his office and *(b)* the Benefits Agency arising from the new NIRS2 computer system; and if he will make a statement. [93196]

Mr. Timms: To date there have been 110 parliamentary questions arising from the implementation of the new National Insurance Recording System (NIRS2). Between 1 June 1998 and 31 March 1999 the Secretary of State for Social Security received 87 parliamentary questions. Since 1 April 1999 a further 23 have been received of which 11 were transferred to my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer.

There have been 240 letters specifically relating to NIRS2 of which 85 were received by Ministers, 73 by the Benefits Agency and 82 by the former Contributions Agency.

Between 1 April 1998 and 31 March 1999 752 letters were received with queries about the rates of Retirement Pension, 366 were addressed to Ministers and 386 to the Benefits Agency. Some of these will relate to the implementation of NIRS2.

Information about the numbers of complaints, received at local benefit offices, arising from the NIRS2 computer system, is not available. However, the Benefits Agency has completed over 13,600 clerical calculations of Retirement Pension and Widows Benefits.

Mr. Pike: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many people have not received their full pension at retirement date due to failure of the new NIRS2 computer system; and if he will make a statement. [93197]

Mr. Timms: I refer my hon. Friend to the written answer I gave to the hon. Member for Northavon (Mr. Webb) on 22 July 1999, *Official Report*, columns *575–76*.

It is estimated that there were up to 285,000 pensioners affected by the NIRS2 problems who therefore potentially may have been underpaid at retirement date.

Contingency arrangements were put in place to minimise the effect on customers claiming Incapacity Benefit, Maternity Benefit, Jobseeker's Allowance, Retirement Pension and Widows Benefit. These arrangements included making emergency payments to people claiming Retirement Pension and Widows Benefits where information was not available, interim payments of Jobseeker's Allowance and payment of some Incapacity Benefit claims based on information provided by the customer. Parliament was kept informed of the arrangements.

In order to provide adequate protection for the public purse, those who receive payments under emergency procedures are required to sign an undertaking to repay benefit where subsequent inquiries show that the amount due was less than the amount paid. This procedure has been followed in the case of the payments made as a result of the NIRS2 problems and recovery of any overpayments will be pursued in accordance with laid down procedures. Early figures from the Benefits Agency's work on reviewing affected cases indicates that overpayments have occurred in only a very small proportion of those examined. In addition, I have instructed the Benefits Agency to ensure that cases are dealt with as sensitively as possible and with full regard to the individual's circumstances.

HIV/AIDS

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many people in receipt of any disability benefit are *(a)* HIV positive and *(b)* AIDS patients in the current year; and what were the equivalent figures for the each of the past three years. [93542]

Mr. Bayley: The information is not available in the format requested. Such information as is available is in the table.

The number of people of working age in receipt of one or more of Incapacity Benefit, Severe Disablement Benefit or Disability Living Allowance, with either HIV or AIDS recorded as the main disabling condition

Date	*Number*
August 1995	5,300
August 1996	6,000
August 1997	6,500
August 1998	6,700

Notes:
1. Figures exclude a small number of cases not recorded on the computer system.
2. The statistics do not include cases where a diagnosis of HIV/AIDS is not recorded as the main disabling condition.
3. Information on people either below working age or over retirement age is not included.

Source:
Cross Benefit Analysis of Analytical Services Division 5 per cent. statistical samples.

Myalgic Encephalomyelitis

Mr. Love: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what arrangements are made to take account of ME sufferers in estimating capacity to work in the All Work Test for invalidity benefit; what changes will be made on the introduction of the new test; and if he will make a statement. [93550]

Mr. Bayley: The All Work Test is an objective test of the effects of illness or disability on functional capacity, which assesses whether a person reaches the level of incapacity at which they are not required to work, or seek work, as a condition for receiving social security benefits.

Full account is taken of factors such as pain, fatigue and the ability to repeat an activity reliably and safely. Doctors and decision makers are required to look at what a person is able to do over a period of time, not just at the time of a medical examination.

ME, also known as Chronic Fatigue Syndrome or post viral fatigue disease, is a complex and widely variable condition and each case needs to be assessed on individual findings. The Department's Chief Medical Adviser issues guidance to examining doctors and ensures that guidance and training is reviewed in the light of the latest developments in the understanding of ME.

The Welfare Reform and Pensions Bill replaces the All Work Test with the Personal Capability Assessment. The criteria for entitlement to benefit, and the way in which entitlement decisions are reached, will not change but the new assessment will also provide information on what individuals are able to do despite their illness or disability and medical advice on practical measures which might help them return to work. For conditions such as ME, this will include information about, for example, the ability to sustain activities and the effects of stress and of fluctuation in the condition.

European Commission

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will make a statement on the nature of the cases of alleged misconduct which led to investigation by the European Commission, listed in his letter to the right hon. Member for Penrith and The Border (Mr. Maclean) of 29 April, indicating the nature of the delays in those cases pending action. [91839]

Ms Quin: I have been asked to reply.

I shall write to the hon. Member shortly and place copies of the letter in the Libraries of the House.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Advantage West Midlands

Mr. Gill: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when he last met the Chairman of Advantage West Midlands; and what matters were discussed. [92542]

Mr. Wills: RDA Chairs including Alex Stephenson, Chairman of Advantage West Midlands, met with my right hon. Friend the Member for Hartlepool (Mr. Mandelson), in his former capacity as Secretary of State for Trade and Industry in November 1998 when they discussed the Competitiveness White Paper, "Inward Investment, Innovation and Business Support".

European Structural Funds

Mr. Gill: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what population figure is being used for the purpose of assessing post-1999 European funding for the West Midlands; and how the basis for this figure differs from that submitted by the Development Agency. [92545]

Mr. Wills: The UK's overall population coverage under Objective 2 is defined by the safety net at 13.7 million. This figure is for the whole UK, there are no pre-determined population figures for the regions. No decisions have been made yet on which areas will be eligible for Objective 2 funding for 2000 to 2006.

The basis for assessing the West Midlands will be the relevant population figures required to conform with Article 4 of the European Structural Funds Regulations.

All areas will be considered for inclusion on the basis of need against the criteria under Article 4 of the Structural Funds Regulations published on 26 June 1999.

Mr. Gill: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (1) what formula is used to calculate the relevant population figures for post-1999 European structural funding; [92544]

(2) what basis is used for establishing population figures relevant to post-1999 European structural funding. [92546]

Mr. Wills: The populations ceilings for Objective 1 and 2 are governed by Article 3 and 4 in the European Structural Funds Regulations. It is the responsibility of the European Commission to calculate the population ceilings at member state level.

Mr. Gill: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list *(a)* the actual population and *(b)* the notional population figures used for the purpose of allocating European structural funds for each region in England. [92543]

Mr. Wills: The UK's overall population coverage under Objective 2 is defined by the safety net which limits the reduction in coverage to one third of existing Objective 2 and 5b population. This amounts to 13.7 million total population based on figures provided by the European Commission.

This population total is for the whole UK. There is no pre-set population figure for regions.

Type Approval Certificates

Mr. Steen: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if Type Approval certificates for *(a)* MPT 1305 and *(b)* MPT 1383 are still valid. [93187]

Mr. Wills *[holding answer 26 July 1999]:* Type approval certificates issued under MPT 1305 are valid. However, there have been no Type Approval certificates issued under MPT 1383.

Mr. Steen: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what Non-technical Variant Approval certificates have been issued citing necessary compliance with MPT 1383. [93190]

Mr. Wills *[holding answer 26 July 1999]:* There have been no Type Approval certificates issued citing compliance with MPT 1383 and hence no Non-technical Variant Approval certificates have been issued to this Standard by the Radiocommunications Agency.

Mr. Steen: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if the Radiocommunications Agency has issued Type Approval certificates with a specification of MPT 1383; and if this is a recognised standard in *(a)* the European Union and *(b)* elsewhere. [93188]

Mr. Wills *[holding answer 26 July 1999]:* The Radiocommunications Agency has not issued any Type Approval certificates under specification MPT 1383. MPT 1383 was written with the intention that it was to become a UK specific Type Approval specification for Short Range Business Radio equipment. However, when it became clear that efforts were being made to harmonise a similar European service (subsequently launched as Private Mobile Radio 446) work ceased on the necessary notification procedure for MPT 1383 to be adopted as a recognised national standard. It was, therefore, never adopted as a Type Approval standard and remains uncompleted. MPT 1383 would only be used for national approvals if it was to be adopted.

Mr. Steen: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if the Radiocommunications Agency library issues copies of Type Approval certificate MPT 1318 for inspection. [93189]

Mr. Wills *[holding answer 26 July 1999]:* The Radiocommunications Agency only issues Type Approval certificates to the applicant and a copy is sent to the respective test house that carried out the technical analysis.

However, the Agency can inform third parties whether a particular product has been type approved. It is at the discretion of the applicant to provide copies of the type approval certificate to interested parties.

Safeguards Office

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many staff are employed in the UK Safeguards Office; what are the qualifications of each staff member; and what staff have been seconded to the Safeguards Office from *(a)* other Government Departments and *(b)* outside bodies. [93282]

Dr. Howells: There are five technical posts and three administrative/support posts within the UK Safeguards Office. One technical post is currently vacant. Of the 4 technical staff members currently in post, two have first class honours degrees in Chemistry, one has a 2:1 class honours degree in Chemistry and a D.Phil. and one a 2:1 class honours degree in Applied Chemistry and a PhD. No staff have been seconded to the Safeguards Office from other Government Departments or outside bodies.

ECGD

Mr. Borrow: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what plans he has for a review of ECGD's status. [93796]

Mr. Byers: ECGD will shortly be commencing a Review of its Status in accordance with "Next Steps" principles. This will allow us to take a fundamental look at ECGD's functions in order to establish a clear Mission Statement to define ECGD's role over the next few years.

The Terms of Reference for the Mission and Status Review are:

> "To review the aims and objectives, role and status of ECGD and to make recommendations to the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry."

The Review should take account of the relationship of ECGD's activities to HMG's wider objectives and of the need to balance the benefits of ECGD's support for UK exporters and investors against the risks to the taxpayer. The Review should consider international practice in the provision of export credit and investment insurance both in the public and private sectors.

It should also take into account the results of other concurrent reviews which may have a bearing on ECGD's future activities, namely the Export Finance Review, announced on 11 February 1998, *Official Report*, columns *218–19*, the Reinsurance Scheme Review, announced 27 April 1999, *Official Report*, column *84* and the Risk Management Review, announced 26 May 1999, *Official Report*, columns *198–99*.

The Review should also include a period of public consultation to seek the views of exporters, investors, lenders, private sector credit insurers and their representative bodies and other interested parties.

The Status element of the Review should be conducted in accordance with established principles for "Next Steps" reviews, taking account of any proposed change to ECGD's Mission Statement, to consider how its services can best be delivered and whether any change in the Status of ECGD would be required.

ECGD will be writing to all customers seeking their views and I very much look forward to receiving ideas and suggestions from all sections of the exporting community and, indeed, from others who have an interest in developing the role of ECGD and strengthening the partnership between Government and industry.

Utility Regulation

Mrs. Gilroy: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement setting out the significant changes in the Government's proposals for the reform of utility regulation made since publication of the White Paper in July 1998. [93797]

Mr. Battle: Since July 1998, the Government have been working on the detail of its proposals for the reform of utility regulation. This further work has resulted in the modification of some of the proposals.

First, the Government originally concluded that, for the energy and telecommunications sectors, individual regulators should be replaced with full-time executive boards composed of a chairman and two others. In the light of further analysis, the Government have decided that Ministers should be able to appoint any number of board members, who may be full or part-time, and executive or non-executive, so that the size and composition of each regulatory board meets the requirements of each office, and can change, over time, in response to developments. For the water sector, where the demands and pressures on the regulator are somewhat different from the other sectors, the Government now intend to retain the existing provision for an individual regulator. However, the Government intend to introduce a provision requiring the individual regulator to be supported by an advisory panel appointed by Ministers.

Second, the Government originally concluded that they would introduce legislation to extend to all regulators powers of the type held by the gas regulator to impose

monetary penalties for breach of overall and individual service standards. Those powers related only to current and likely future breaches of licence conditions and other relevant requirements. They would not, as currently drafted, allow the imposition of penalties in relation to breaches, however serious, which were discontinued by the company when an enforcement notice was issued, or which ceased before enforcement action could be taken. This significantly weakens the effectiveness of monetary penalties as an enforcement mechanism. The Government now intend, therefore, to give regulators powers to impose penalties for past as well as for continuing breaches of licence conditions and other statutory requirements (but not including breaches committed before the legislation to introduce the powers is enacted). These powers will not extend to likely future breaches. Similar powers have recently been proposed for the Strategic Rail Authority.

Combined Heat and Power

Mr. David Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when he will announce his decision on Scottish Power plc's application to build a new combined heat and power gas-fired power station at the Sappi paper mill. [93795]

Mr. Battle: I have today granted consent under Section 36 of the Electricity Act 1989 to Scottish Power plc for construction of a 60 MW gas-fired Combined Heat and Power station at the Sappi paper mill at Feniscowles, near Blackburn, Lancashire. The station has also today been given clearance as a gas-fired station under Section 14 of the Energy Act 1976 and planning permission has been deemed to be granted, subject to 52 planning conditions agreed with the Blackburn with Darwen Borough Council and Lancashire County Council. The decisions have been taken in accordance with the policy set out in the White Paper entitled "Conclusions of the Review of Energy Sources for Power Generation and Government response to fourth and fifth Reports of the Trade and Industry Committee" (Cm 4071).

Copies of the Press Notice and decision letters are being placed in the Library of the House.

Limited Liability Partnerships

Mr. David Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what progress is being made on the introduction of Limited Liability Partnerships legislation. [93794]

Mr. Ian McCartney: The Government are fully committed to introduction of the Limited Liability Partnerships Bill as soon as possible. I am aware that the professional business community are keen to see progress on this, and I can assure them that the Bill will be introduced as soon as the Parliamentary timetable permits. To assist business, and to enable them to see the Bill as we expect it to come before the House, we will publish it in draft for a second time shortly, alongside revised draft regulations, which are being published to show changes made as a result of consultation last September.

Riot Control Equipment

Mr. Berry: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, pursuant to his reply on 19 April 1999, *Official Report*, column *456*, what measures have been instigated by his Department to ensure that they provide accurate information about the export of tear gas and other riot control equipment. [93522]

Dr. Howells: As noted in my earlier answer, the export of tear gas is controlled under a variety of entries in the legislation, depending whether it is bulk tear gas or tear gas incorporated in any of a range of possible devices. The term riot control equipment could describe a wide range of items and, as noted in the answer of 23 March 1998, *Official Report*, column *76*, to my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Mr. Corbett), several of the entries in Part III of Schedule 1 to the Export of Goods (Control) Order (the so-called Military List) might be capable of playing some role in riot control.

In her answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley (Caroline Flint) on 30 October 1997, *Official Report*, columns *870–71*, my hon. Friend the Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Mrs. Roche) explained that, because of the problems that had been identified with the Export Control Organisation's databases, all information relying on data derived from those databases and given in response to Parliamentary Questions or in correspondence should be read in conjunction with a caveat set out in her answer.

However, the information on export licensing decisions between 2 May and 31 December 1997 set out in the Government's Annual Report on Strategic Export Controls, which includes a summary description of all military equipment licensed for export during this period as well as the ratings of the goods concerned, is not subject to the caveat set out in my hon. Friend's answer of 30 October 1997, notwithstanding that it relied on data obtained from the Export Control Organisation's databases. On the contrary, as stated in the Annual Report, the information

> "may be treated as definitive subject to the constraint that there is always a risk of human error in the compilation of such a large body of data".

Furthermore, as noted in my hon. Friend's answer of 30 October 1997, among the steps taken to improve the situation she described was the decision to develop a new database for recording information about standard individual export licences. This database became operational on 1 March 1999 and will be used to supply information for future Reports. Because the database allows for information to be accepted and transferred electronically, it will be easier for exporters to submit their licence applications and it will greatly enhance the integrity of the data, although human error can never be eliminated altogether.

Finally, I should note that the information on physical exports of military equipment from the UK included in the Annual Report was in part supplied by HM Customs and Excise and in part based on information provided for the UK's contribution to the UN Arms Register; the Export Control Organisation does not compile records of licensed exports.

Handcuffs

Mr. Berry: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if export licences are required for handcuffs. [93523]

Dr. Howells: The export to any destination of leg-irons, gangchains and shackles, specially designed for restraining human beings, excluding handcuffs the maximum overall dimension of which when locked does not exceed 240mm, are controlled under entry PL5001 in Part III of Schedule 1 to the Export of Goods (Control) Order 1994, as amended.

In accordance with their policy requirements, as determined by them, applications for a licence to export handcuffs controlled under this entry are circulated to the Ministry of Defence and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office for advice in light of the Foreign Secretary's announcement on 28 July 1997, *Official Report*, columns *65–66*.

Overseas Arms Production Agreements

Mr. Berry: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what discussions his Department has with UK arms companies prior to the establishment of licensed production agreements between UK companies and arms manufacturers overseas. [93521]

Dr. Howells: Production equipment and technology, components and sub-assemblies whose export from the UK is subject to control are set out under a range of headings in the Export of Goods (Control) Order 1994, as amended, and the Dual-Use and Related Goods (Export Control) Regulations 1996, as amended, and Council Decision 94/942/CFSP, as amended (which has effect through Council Regulation (EC) 3381/94). While a valid export licence is needed for the export of controlled goods or technology, exporters are not required to obtain one before they conclude an agreement for production overseas.

I also refer my hon. Friend to the answer given to my hon. Friend the Member for Cynon Valley (Ann Clwyd) by the Minister for Small Firms, Trade and Industry on 12 January 1999, *Official Report*, column *150*.

North-West (Assistance)

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what his policy is regarding regional selective assistance in the areas of highest unemployment in the North-West. [92861]

Mr. Wills: Regional selective assistance is available for eligible projects in both the development and intermediate areas of the North-West region. Support for projects will in future reflect the priorities in RDA regional economic strategies.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list the members of the North West Industrial Development Advisory Committee in January 1992 and the dates of their appointment. [92860]

Mr. Wills: The members of the North West Development Board in January 1992 and the dates of their appointment are as follows:

Members	*Date of appointment*
Mr. J. Dwek	1 January 1983
Mr. J. B. Ashworth	23 January 1988
Mr. A. Manning	15 September 1987
Mr. D. Weir	1 January 1988
Mr. I. W. Wooley	1 January 1988
Mr. E. Baxendale	16 March 1988
Mr. B. Lawson	1 January 1989
Mr. E. J. Billington	1 January 1990
Mr. D. L. Davies	1 January 1990
Mr. G. N. Elliott	1 January 1990
Mr. E. P. Foden	1 January 1992
Mr. I. C. Sellars	1 January 1992

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list the members of the North West Regional Industrial Development Board. [92859]

Mr. Wills: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I gave previously on 14 July 1999, *Official Report*, columns *211–12*.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will review the workings of the Industrial Development Act 1982 in relation to the management by civil servants and the treatment by regional development advisory committees of applications for regional selective assistance. [92807]

Mr. Wills: I have no plans to review the workings of the Industrial Development Act 1982 in this respect.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, pursuant to his answer of 14 July 1999, *Official Report*, columns *212–13*, what the circumstances were on the occasion when a decision taken by the North West Industrial Development Board was amended by the Secretary of State under the Industrial Development Act 1982. [92862]

Mr. Wills: In the case in question, the Board gave their support to a recommendation from officials regarding the amount of grant that should be offered. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State subsequently decided a higher offer was necessary to secure the project.

Regional Selective Assistance

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, pursuant to his answer of 14 July 1999, *Official Report*, column *212–13*, if he will make it his Department's practice to continue contacts and routinely record data and subsequent developments in the case of companies where rejection of applications for regional selective assistance have led to the cancellation of proposed investment projects. [92806]

Mr. Wills: I have no such plans. This is not always practicable and would increase the costs of administering the scheme.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if members of industrial development advisory committees are permitted to speak to hon. Members prior to the consideration of applications for regional selective assistance. [92858]

Mr. Wills: There are no restrictions on members of the Industrial Development Advisory Board and the Regional Industrial Development Boards which would prohibit them from speaking to hon. Members. As an application for regional selective assistance is a commercially confidential matter, it would be inappropriate for board members to comment on particular company applications.

Road Fuel Taxes

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, pursuant to his oral statement of 22 July 1999, *Official Report*, columns 1342–44, if he will give details of the arrangements which the European Commission has for publishing international comparisons of pump prices for diesel and petrol and the means by which UK consumers can access such information. [93475]

Mr. Battle: Prices of motor spirits and diesel are published by the European Commission in their weekly Oil Bulletin. "The Digest of United Kingdom Energy Statistics", to be published by the Department of Trade and Industry on 29 July 1999, will also provide this information for the first time. A copy will be available in the Library of the House.

International Price Comparisons

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list the 100 products which will be the subject of international price comparison, and the date upon which such comparisons will commence. [93370]

Dr. Howells: The list of products which the DTI's research into international price differences will examine will be finalised with the successful contractor. A draft list of the types of product that will be included is as follows.

The commissioning process for the research will have to comply with EC procurement regulations, and we are therefore unable to contract the research until the middle of October 1999 at the earliest. Results will be made available at the end of January 2000.

Draft list of items for collection in a comparison of international prices.

Based on data from the Family Expenditure Survey July 1997-June 1998

FES category/suggested item for collection

Food

- Fresh milk:
  - Fresh milk
  - UHT milk
- Fresh fruit:
  - Fresh loose apples
  - Fresh loose oranges
- Fresh vegetables and salad:
  - Fresh loose tomatoes
  - Fresh loose carrots
- Poultry (uncooked):
  - Whole frozen chicken
  - Boneless fresh chicken breasts
- Bread:
  - White loaf
  - Bread rolls
- Sweets and chocolates:
  - Chocolate bar
  - Chewing gum
- Cakes, buns, currant bread, fruit pies, pastries and scones etc.:
  - Fruit pie/tart
  - Croissants
- Cold meats, ready to eat meats:
  - Garlic sausage
- Cheese:
  - Edam
- Beef and veal (uncooked):
  - Steak
- Pickles, sauces, flavourings, colourings etc.:
  - Mayonnaise
- Biscuits, shortbread, wafers, chocolate biscuits etc.:
  - Choc chip cookies
- Fruit juices, squashes:
  - Orange juice
- Fizzy drinks:
  - Lemonade
- Yoghurt and milk based desserts:
  - Fruit yoghurt
- Potato crisps and savoury snacks:
  - Potato crisps
- Breakfast cereals:
  - Cornflakes
- Bacon and ham (uncooked):
  - Ham joint
- Fish (uncooked) and shellfish:
  - Trout
- Meat—ready meals:
  - Frozen lasagne
- Pizzas, quiches, vegetarian pies:
  - Frozen pizza
- Potatoes:
  - Fresh loose potatoes
- Pork (uncooked):
  - Pork chops
- Coffee:
  - Espresso ground coffee

Clothing

- Women's outerwear:
  - T-shirt
  - Blouse
  - Skirt
  - Trousers
- Men's outerwear:
  - Jeans
  - T-shirt
  - Shirt
- Women's footwear:
  - Court shoes
- Women's underwear and hosiery:
  - Tights
- Men's footwear:
  - Boots
- Girls' outerwear:
  - Dress
- Children's footwear:
  - Trainers
- Boys' outerwear:
  - Track suit
- Babies outerwear:
  - Babygro

Household

- Furniture:
  - Single bed
  - Kitchen chair
  - Table lamp
- Soft floor coverings, carpets, mats:
  - Doormat
  - Wool carpet (per sq metre)

Major electrical appliances e.g. cookers, fridges, vacuum cleaners, showers etc.:
Cooker
Fridge

Fancy decorative goods, mirrors:
Mirror

Curtains, cushions, towels etc.:
Towel (per sq metre)

Paint, wallpaper, plaster, wood:
Paint

Doors, electrical and other fittings:
Light bulb

Detergents, washing-up liquid, washing powder:
Washing powder

Disinfectants, polishes, other cleaning materials:
Bleach

Kitchen equipment, tableware and utensils:
Kitchen scales

China, glassware (not mirrors), pottery, cutlery, silverware, thermometers, clocks:
Dinner plates

Small electrical equipment, e.g. hair dryers, calculators, shavers, irons:
Clock radio

Washing machines, spin dryers:
Washing machine

Other household hardware and appliances:
Electric drill

Bedspreads, blankets, duvets, pillows, sheets (excluding beds and mattresses):
Fitted cotton sheets

Leisure

Newspapers:
Sunday broadsheet
Daily tabloid

Horticultural goods, plants and flowers:
Trowel
Packet flower seeds

Toys and hobbies:
Pre-recorded video
Hammer

Greetings cards, stationery and paper goods:
Birthday card
Packet envelopes

Pet food:
Dog food

Personal computers, printers, calculators:
Printer

Books, maps, diaries:
Road atlas

Photography and camcordersl
35mm camera film

Records, CDs, audio cassettes—hire and purchase:
CD (specified)

Magazines and periodicals:
Women's magazine

Sports and camping equipment:
Tennis racquet

Audio equipment, CD players:
Personal stereo

Personal goods

Cosmetics and related accessories—after shave, sun lotion etc.:
Sun lotion

Toiletries—cotton wool, toothpaste, tissues, shaving soap etc.:
Soap

Personal effects—jewellery, watches, personal silverware etc.:
Wristwatch

Hair products—shampoo, colour rinses:
Shampoo

Toilet paper:
Toilet paper

Baby toiletries and disposables:
Disposable nappies

Services

Cinema admissions:
Cinema ticket

Hire of self-drive cars and vans:
One week's car hire.

Helplines

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when and where he expects the pilot telephone helplines for consumers to be established; what is the estimated cost; and what restrictions will be placed upon national access to it. [93342]

Dr. Howells: We are discussing these issues with our partners in Trading Standards, Citizen Advice and others, and expect to take decisions on these matters later this year.

Arms Exports (Indonesia)

Ann Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what is the current ECGD exposure on *(a)* exports to Indonesia and *(b)* defence-related exports. [93292]

Mr. Wilson: ECGD's estimate of its exposure on Indonesia currently stands at £1,642 million of which £691 million is in respect of defence-related business.

Of ECGD's total future amounts at risk of £16,897 million, defence-related business accounts for £3,857 million.

Market Research

Ann Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list the funding which his Department has given to *(a)* the Defence Manufacturers Association, *(b)* the Association of Police and Public Security Suppliers and *(c)* other defence, police and security industry bodies to produce market research reports. [93504]

Mr. Battle: Since 1997 the Department has paid the Defence Manufacturers Association £49,631 under the Sector Challenge scheme towards the costs of setting up the Export Opportunities (Defence and Security) Service, which includes provision of market reports. It runs this service jointly with its sister trade association, the Association of Police and Public Security Suppliers. Since 1997 the Department has also paid around £43,000 towards the Society of British Aerospace Companies for their Business Winning Service, which includes market research work for the civil and defence aerospace industry.

Solar Energy

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what practical research projects he has commissioned into solar energy; what discussions he has had with his counterparts in (i) Japan and (ii) Germany on this subject; and if he will make a statement. [92277]

Mr. Battle: My Department has had a solar energy R&D programme for a number of years, as part of the New and Renewable Energy Programme. The budget for the photovoltaics (PV) element has doubled from £0.5 million to £1 million over the past 2 years.

The Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council (EPSRC) has also run a significant photovoltaics R&D programme, with a budget of £1 million per annum for the past four years. PV is now included in the EPSRC's new £3.5 million per annum programme on Renewable and New Energy Technologies.

In addition, the Foresight Scolar Programme, which aims to put PV systems onto 100 schools and colleges across the country by 2000, is receiving funding from Government for £1 million of the total £2.5 million costs.

In my speech at the Manchester DTI/EPSRC PV Conference on 17 February, I announced three major new PV initiatives:

a) a call for proposals for the development of PV components and systems, with the aim of enhancing the competitiveness of UK companies;

b) a field trial for at least 100 homes across the country to test a variety of actual PV installations under UK conditions;

c) development of a scheme to demonstrate the use of PV in large-scale commercial building applications.

The total value of these three initiatives is expected to be £15 million, with £5 million coming from the DTI. In the case of the demonstration scheme the final go-ahead will have to await the outcome of the Renewables Review.

The subject of solar energy has not arisen in recent discussions with my counterparts in Japan and Germany, but our embassies in those and other countries keep my officials regularly updated on their programmes in this area.

Consumer White Paper

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what consultations he has had with Yellow Pages over the proposals in the Consumer White Paper. [93366]

Dr. Howells: Officials met with Yellow Pages as part of the consultations that led to the White Paper.

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (1) if *The Times* industrial correspondent was briefed by Government sources on the Consumer White Paper prior to his oral statement on 22 July 1999, *Official Report*, columns 1342–44; [93326]

(2) which newspapers were briefed prior to his oral statement on 22 July 1999, *Official Report*, columns 1342–44, on the publication of the Consumer White Paper. [93235]

Dr. Howells: Members of the press were invited to a briefing at 12.00 pm Tuesday 22 July. As is normal practice, they were locked in until my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State spoke in the House.

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list the codes of practice which he regards as unsatisfactory and which his Consumer White Paper refer to as little more than sales devices. [93369]

Dr. Howells: No. There is currently a wide spectrum of codes ranging from the comprehensive and effective, through those which are well intentioned but do not work as well as they could, to those which exist as adjuncts to seemingly legitimate logos but have no practical effect. The Director General of Fair Trading has no power to disapprove codes at present, merely to encourage the preparation and dissemination of consumer codes. The Consumer White Paper "Modern Markets: Confident Consumers" (Cm 4410) proposes to give the OFT a power to give a seal of approval to codes that put the core principles into effect so that consumers, including those with poor literacy skills or who do not speak English, can see at a glance which codes are satisfactory; and that OFT will publicise decisions to approve or reject codes.

Consumer Legislation

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list the consumer legislation he intends to review. [93368]

Dr. Howells: The Government intend to mount a rolling programme to review all consumer protection legislation. This process began with the publication of a consultation document on weights and measures law on 22 July 1999.

Street Lighting

Mr. Grieve: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what increase or decrease in the amount of energy used per annum in providing street lighting nationally has occurred since *(a)* 1980, *(b)* 1985, *(c)* 1990 and *(d)* 1995. [93347]

Mr. Battle: Total electricity supplied for use in public lighting in the United Kingdom and the percentage changes in the quantity used are shown in the following table:

Year	*Consumption GWh*	*Percentage change*
1980	2,252	1980 to 1997: +19
1985	2,335	1985 to 1997: +15
1990	2,588	1990 to 1997: +4
1995	2,443	1995 to 1997: +10
1997	2,679	—

Source:
Digest of United Kingdom Energy Statistics 1998

Mr. Grieve: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how much energy in kilowatts was consumed in the provision of street lighting in the past financial year in *(a)* built-up areas and *(b)* outside built-up areas. [93348]

Mr. Battle: In 1997 total electricity supplied for use in public lighting in the United Kingdom amounted to 2,679 GW hours. Figures are not available for built up areas separately.

Arms Exports

Mr. Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (1) what export licences his Department has issued for HMX explosives since September 1998; and how many applications are pending; [93425]

(2) pursuant to his answer of 26 May 1999, *Official Report*, column *200*, what is the stated end use as indicated on Form A, part 1: Export Licence Application Section D7 of each of the licences, granted or pending, for the export of RDX to *(a)* China, and *(b)* the USA. [93317]

Ann Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (1) if he will list the export licences granted for the export of armoured vehicles, spare parts, components and weapons to Singapore since 1988, where the end use destination was *(a)* Indonesia and *(b)* another country; [93509]

(2) if he will list the export licences granted for the export of armoured vehicles, spare parts, components and weapons to Singapore and Malaysia since 1988; [93508]

(3) if he will list the export licences granted for the export of armoured vehicles, spare parts, components or weapons to Sierra Leone since 1988; [93507]

(4) if he will list the export licences granted for the export of armoured vehicles, spare parts, components or weapons to Malaysia since 1988, where the end use destination was for Indonesia. [93506]

Dr. Howells: I will write to the hon. Members as soon as possible, and place a copy of that Letter in the Library of the House.

Ministerial Visits

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list the countries visited by himself and his predecessors since 1 May 1997. [92803]

Mr. Byers: The countries visited are listed as follows:

Australia
Belgium
China
France
Hong Kong SAR
India
Italy
Japan
Pakistan
Russia
Singapore
South Africa
Spain
Switzerland
USA.

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when he intends to visit *(a)* Poland, *(b)* Hungary, *(c)* the Czech Republic, *(d)* Slovenia and *(e)* Estonia. [92689]

Mr. Byers: I recognise the importance of these countries and hope to visit them as soon as possible.

Milk Marque

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what assessment he has made of the former MMC's conclusion that the reform of the milk selling system could not produce a competitive market for milk. [93331]

Dr. Howells: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State made clear in his statement on 6 July 1999, *Official Report,* column *455–56* that reform of the milk sales system was essential if the raw milk market was to function as effectively and fairly as possible. Both Milk Marque and the processors have indicated that they are in favour of reform of the selling system. Both sides have a common interest in devising a system which enjoys the confidence of all.

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what assessment he has made of Milk Marque's application to extend its operations into processing. [93329]

Dr. Howells: The MMC concluded that Milk Marque's planned increase in its milk processing capacity may be expected to operate against the public interest, by enhancing its ability to exploit its monopoly power. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State concluded that, while Milk Marque remained a monopoly supplier of raw milk to the processing sector, it should not be allowed to extend its milk processing activities in this way. The Secretary of State therefore asked the Director General of Fair Trading to seek undertakings from Milk Marque that it would not take any further steps towards making or carrying out any agreement to acquire or build a processing plant without the prior agreement of the Director General, as the MMC recommended.

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on the effect of the Competition Act 1998 on his proposals for Milk Marque. [93249]

Dr. Howells: Milk Marque will be subject to the Competition Act 1998 when it comes fully into force on 1 March 2000. It will continue to be under an obligation to comply with any remedies resulting from the monopoly investigation into milk.

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry for what period, following the rejection of the former MMC's recommendation that Milk Marque be broken up, the Government plans that the interim measures will apply. [93330]

Dr. Howells: The interim measures will apply until a satisfactory long term solution has been agreed to the adverse effects of the existing way milk is sold by Milk Marque.

Oftel Inquiry Lines

Judy Mallaber: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what powers he has to ensure that members of the public are able to reach Oftel on their inquiry lines. [93057]

Mr. Wills: As is the case for any organisation, public or private, it is for Oftel itself to ensure that it can be reached by members of the public. In recent months there has been a large increase in the number of consumers

telephoning Oftel with complaints and queries. Five additional staff were recruited in June and an action plan has been put in place to improve the service.

Temporary Employment

Mr. Pike: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what representations he has received about conditions of employment for workers on temporary employment contracts; what measures he proposes to introduce to improve the legal rights for workers on temporary employment contracts; and if he will make a statement. [93200]

Mr. Ian McCartney: The Department receives frequent correspondence from members of the public regarding different aspects of conditions of employment for temporary workers.

The Employment Relations Bill, currently before Parliament, will abolish provisions which currently allow employees working under specified fixed term contracts to waive their right to claim unfair dismissal at the end of the term. The Government will implement the recently adopted European Directive on Fixed-Term Work, which will ensure decent conditions for most classes of temporary worker. The deadline for implementing this Directive is July 2001.

Mr. Pike: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what improvements in conditions his Department has introduced for workers on temporary employment contracts since May 1997. [93199]

Mr. Ian McCartney: Temporary workers will benefit in the same way as those on indefinite contracts from the range of improved employment conditions we have introduced. The Working Time Regulations 1998 provide protection for workers from long working hours and the right to rest and paid leave; the qualifying period for general unfair dismissal claims has recently been reduced from two years to one; and the National Minimum Wage Act 1998, which took effect on 1 April, sets minimum wage rates for workers aged 18 or over. We are also consulting on updated regulations to protect the interests of those finding work through employment agencies. Proposals in the Employment Relations Bill, now in Parliament, will ensure that employees working under fixed term contracts cannot waive their right to claim unfair dismissal at the end of the term.

CARAD Programme

Mr. Pike: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what further extension he proposes to the CARAD programme. [93198]

Mr. Battle: The DTI Expenditure Plans Report (March 1999) confirmed CARAD funding for 1999–2000 at £20 million. A similar amount was also indicated for the following two years although the Secretary of State will continue to review the balance of funding across the whole range of DTI programmes.

Indonesia

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what was the value of exports and imports in respect of defence and security equipment and services between the UK and Indonesia in each year since 1995; and if he will classify such exports and imports under the headings of the International Trade statistics classification. [92232]

Mr. Wilson *[holding answer 23 July 1999]:* Information on exports of military equipment during 1997 was included in the Government's Annual Report on Strategic Export Controls published by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office on 25 March 1999. A survey of the relevant Tariff Codes was given in Appendix C of the Report. Information for 1998 will be included in the Government's next Annual Report which is currently being prepared.

Figures for UK imports and exports of services prior to 1997 could only be provided at disproportionate cost, and the international trade classification does not cover services.

Long-term Illness (Vale of Glamorgan)

Mr. John Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what is the percentage of the population experiencing limiting long-term illness in the Peterston Super Ely, Dinas Powys and Wenvoe Wards in the Vale of Glamorgan. [92791]

Mr. Wills *[holding answer 23 July 1999]:* This is a devolved matter for the Welsh Assembly.

Power Stations (Blyth)

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on National Power's plans to close its power stations at Blyth in Northumberland. [93247]

Mr. Battle: This is a matter for the company and the Director General of Electricity Supply.

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what assessment he has made of the impact of the closure of National Power's power stations at Blyth, on the continued need for new power lines running south through Yorkshire. [93246]

Mr. Battle: Development consents were granted for these lines in 1998 following exhaustive public inquiries and there is no statutory basis for now reviewing those consents. No reassessment of the situation has therefore been made by my Department.

Power Lines (Vale of York)

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (1) how many trees will be felled in the Vale of York in order to facilitate construction of the Lackenby to Shipton power lines; [93245]

(2) if he will make a statement on the requirements placed on the National Grid Company to disclose information on the number of trees to be felled in order to construct pylons in the Vale of York. [93244]

Mr. Battle: There are a number of planning conditions which the National Grid Company has to fulfil before it can commence work on the Lackenby to Picton to Shipton overhead line. Implementation of these is a matter for discussion between the company and the local planning

authorities. In the event of disagreement it falls to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State to determine if the company has complied with the particular condition.

Mergers

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what measures are being considered to ensure that, under proposals to transfer decisions on mergers from Ministers to independent competition authorities, those responsible will be accountable to Parliament and the electorate. [93362]

Dr. Howells: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry intends to publish a consultation document shortly to initiate a fundamental debate on the regulation of mergers, inviting views on all sides.

Multi-fibre Agreement

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what is his policy on the Multi-fibre Agreement; and if he will make a statement. [93367]

Mr. Wilson: The Government's policy is that, in accordance with the commitments that the Community entered into in the GATT Uruguay Round, quota restrictions maintained by members of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) on imports of textile and clothing products originating in other members of the WTO shall be phased out over a 10-year period ending on 31 December 2004.

Internet Consumer Gateway

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry which companies or organisations will be providing and updating the proposed Internet Consumer Gateway; and what is the estimated annual running cost. [93365]

Dr. Howells: The Consumer Gateway was launched at the same time as the "Modern Markets: Confident Consumers" White Paper. It links sources of consumer advice and information, and as such the estimated running costs of maintaining and operating the current site are minimal. My officials will be updating and improving the Gateway, taking note of any feedback we receive from users.

US Imports (Tariffs)

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will take into account tariffs on imports from the United States of America when determining the reasons for higher prices in the United Kingdom. [93364]

Dr. Howells: There are many reasons why prices differ between the UK and the USA, including tariffs on goods entering the UK. If the results of our research suggest that prices in the UK reflect anti-competitive behaviour, I shall refer the matter to the Director General of Fair Trading.

EU Car Sales

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many motor cars were purchased from countries of the European Union other than the United Kingdom by citizens of the UK for their personal use in 1998. [92006]

Ms Glenda Jackson: I have been asked to reply.

I will write to my hon. Friend and place a copy of my letter in the Library.

Rover-BMW

Mrs. Browning: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when his Department first submitted the proposal for Government financing of Rover-BMW to the Competition Commissioner. [89970]

Mr. Byers *[holding answer 6 July 1999]:* I will write to the hon. Member shortly and place a copy of the letter in the Library of the House.

Gender Impact Assessment

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list the subject of each gender impact assessment drawn up by his Department since June 1997, indicating in each case whether the outcome has been *(a)* put out to consultation and *(b)* published. [91997]

Mr. Byers: I will write to the hon. Member shortly and place a copy of the letter in the Library of the House.

Belize (Banking Regulations)

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry on what occasions since 1993 his Department has received written or oral approaches from the hon. Member for Hertford and Stortford (Mr. Wells) on matters relating to banking regulations in Belize. [92073]

Mr. Byers *[holding answer 20 July 1999]:* I will write to my hon. Friend shortly and place a copy of the letter in the Library of the House.

Departmental Expenditure (Leeds)

Mr. Hilary Benn: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list the programmes funded directly by his Department, relating to social exclusion, regeneration, community development, employment or education, currently operating in *(a)* the City of Leeds and *(b)* the Leeds Central parliamentary constituency, listing for each programme the amount of such funding for each of the last three years and the amount planned to be spent in each of the next three financial years. [92910]

Mr. Wills: The information requested is not held by my Department centrally. The Government Office for Yorkshire and the Humber (GOYH) has provided the following details. Information at a constituency level is not available.

Funding for core services of the Business Link in Leeds and the Local Competitiveness Challenge amounted to:

Year	*£*
1997–98	947,810
1998–99	985,627
1999–2000	1,200,722

National budgets for 2000–01 will not be known until late 1999 and therefore negotiation for Business Link budgets will not begin before January-March 2000.

Pump priming funding of £97,500 has been awarded to Business Link Leeds under the Information Society Initiative (ISI) programme for Business Local Support Centres, designed to encourage and support SMEs in the use of IT. BL Leeds has had a number of successful ERDF bids for projects to increase provision, cohesion and quality of service to the micro and small business and start up client groups, £445,575 has been awarded in the last three years.

SMART awards totalling £448,337 were given to Leeds based companies between 1997 and the present and it is projected that at least the same amount will be awarded for 1999–02.

There are 17 "IT for All" Centres in Leeds. IT for All is a DTI funded national programme designed to promote the wider use of IT among the general public.

There is no direct funding by DTI to individual centres.

Millennium Compliance

Mr. David Atkinson: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what assessment his Department has made of the results of the Business Link network's ComplY2K scheme offering computer millennium compliance tests to small businesses; and if he will make a statement. [92907]

Mr. Wills: ComplY2K is a risk assessment diagnostic tool offered by the National Computing Centre to enable businesses to address their millennium bug problems. It is one of a number of tools available for this task and some BLs are using it as part of their response to addressing Y2K issues with their client base. My Department has not made any specific assessment of the use of this particular package. However, Business Links continue to work closely with Action 2000 to ensure that they are providing appropriate Y2K support services. Action 2000 continue to monitor the national picture of the state of readiness of UK companies.

ComplY2K and other tools like it, when applied to an individual company, deliver a report which identifies areas of high risk and offers an action plan for addressing them. Some Business Links have developed their own packages and all have some structured approach or toolkit to engage their client base. These have been offered along with the DfEE's highly successful Bug Buster training programme. Business Links will assist with some action areas identified by these tools, perhaps project manage the process, and signpost to local suppliers who can address other specific items identified in the report.

Inward Investment (North-East)

Mr. Alan Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what estimate has been made of the value of inward investment projects into the area covered by the Government Office for the North-East in the last year for which figures are available. [93434]

Mr. Wills: The figure given is based on information provided by companies at the time of the announcement of their decision to invest in the UK. It is based on the companies' best estimate, at the time, of the capital expenditure involved.

There is no requirement to notify the Department of inward investments, so the figure includes only those projects where the Department's Invest in Britain Bureau and its regional partners were involved or which have come to their notice.

Estimated value of investment: £646,824,000.

Mr. Alan Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many jobs have been *(a)* created and *(b)* safeguarded by new inward investment projects in the area covered by the Government Office for the North East in the last year for which figures are available. [93433]

Mr. Wills: The figures given below are based on information provided by companies at the time of the announcement of their decision to invest in the UK. It is based on the companies' best estimate, at the time, of the capital expenditure involved.

There is no requirement to notify the Department of inward investments, so the figure includes only those projects where the Department's Invest in Britain Bureau and its regional partners were involved or which have come to their notice.

Year	*Number of projects*	*Number of new jobs*	*Number of safeguarded jobs*
April 1998–March 1999	35	2,304	6,953

Genetically Modified Cotton

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what steps he is taking to ensure importers of cotton are able to determine whether cotton has been genetically modified. [93150]

Mr. Wilson *[holding answer 26 July 1999]:* Under the "gmo" Directive (Directive 90/220/EEC) and the "novel foods" Regulation (Regulation (EC) 258–97), genetically modified cotton plants may not be cultivated in the EU, and products derived from such plants that enter the human or animal food chains may not be imported into the EU.

Raw cotton, cotton textiles and made-up cotton textiles derived from genetically modified cotton plants fall outside the scope of that legislation. In these circumstances it is for importers wishing to establish whether or not such products are derived from genetically modified cotton plants to do so in the course of their commercial dealings with the exporter.

Civil Servants' Expenses

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will place in the Library a list of the travel and subsistence expenses rates payable to senior civil servants in his Department. [92857]

Mr. Byers: I will write to my hon. Friend shortly and place a copy of the letter in the Library of the House.

Defence Export Credits

Ann Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will extend the commitment not to provide defence-related export credits to poor highly indebted countries to cover those *(a)* at risk of conflict and *(b)* engaged in post-conflict reconstruction. [93294]

Mr. Wilson: In 1997 the Chancellor announced a five-point plan to resolve the debt problems of poor countries and set them on a path to sustainable growth. This included an undertaking that export credits for poor, highly indebted countries would support only productive expenditure. This policy does not extend beyond the, so called, Highly Indebted Poor Countries (HIPCs).

Spanish Spent Reactor Fuel

Dr. Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list the *(a)* outstanding contracts and *(b)* contracts under negotiation for the import of irradiated spent research reactor fuel from Spanish reactors. [93613]

Mr. Battle: I understand that BNFL have no contracts either outstanding or under negotiation for reprocessing Spanish research reactor fuel. On 5 June 1998, *Official Report*, column *385*, I announced that UKAEA would not accept any new contracts for reprocessing spent nuclear fuel at Dounreay, so there are no contracts under negotiation with Spain or any other country. Nor does UKAEA have any outstanding contracts with Spain.

Public Interest Immunity Certificates

Sir Nicholas Lyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many public interest immunity certificates or equivalent documents have been provided by Ministers or officials in his Department since 3 May 1997; and at what level each such certificate or other document has been signed. [93532]

Mr. Byers: I will write to the right hon. and learned Member shortly and place a copy of the letter in the Library of the House.

Domestic Animal Skins

Dr. Palmer: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many *(a)* domestic dog and *(b)* domestic cat skins have been (i) imported to and (ii) exported from the United Kingdom in each of the last five years. [93618]

Mr. Wilson: The information requested is not available because the system of classification used to record trade does not separately identify domestic dog and cat skins.

Textphones

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, pursuant to his answer on 20 July 1999, *Official Report*, column *470*, concerning textphones, what assessment he has made of the signage and accessibility of the public textphone network. [93313]

Mr. Wills: The signage and accessibility of BT public textphones is a matter for the company itself and Oftel. Many of the public textphones currently installed are at sites owned by organisations such as Railtrack or the British Airports Authority, who control signage.

Generally, BT use a recognised, distinct, yellow and black textphone sign on public textphones themselves, which marks them out among a bank of conventional payphones. BT has also produced leaflets, available from the RNID and other interested bodies, giving public textphone locations.

Multinationals

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what is the definition of a multinational corporation used by his Department. [92557]

Mr. Byers *[holding answer 26 July 1999]:* I will write to my hon. Friend shortly and place a copy of that letter in the Library of the House.

Appointments

Joan Ruddock: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many appointments to public bodies were made by his Department in *(a)* 1997–98 and *(b)* 1998–99 by (i) gender and (ii) ethnicity; and if he will make a statement. [92564]

Mr. Byers *[holding answer 26 July 1999]:* I will write to my hon. Friend shortly and place a copy of that letter in the Library of the House.

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

National Air Traffic Services Ltd.

Mr. Anthony D. Wright: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he intends to proceed with the proposed public private partnership for National Air Traffic Services Ltd.; and if he will make a statement. [93540]

Mr. Prescott: The Government issued a consultation paper in October 1998 outlining our preferred option for a public private partnership (PPP) for NATS as set out in our White Paper on the future of transport. We are grateful to those organisations and individuals who responded to our consultation. Their views have been taken into consideration as part of the policy development process for this PPP.

NATS' operational strengths, and their safety record, are among the best in the world but they need a wider range of management skills, and access to capital, to meet the challenges of the future, in particular the ever-increasing rise in traffic. The Government want to build on NATS' strengths, bring in new management skills such as project management expertise, improve aviation safety, secure long-term investment of £1 billion over 10 years, including completion of Swanwick and the New Scottish Centre, and retain public accountability in a strategic industry.

We have a number of principal objectives for the PPP. These are:

to maintain and build upon the excellent record of aviation safety in the UK, which was reflected in the Select Committee's recent report;

to ensure that NATS has adequate funding for investment and to provide it with the commercial freedom to develop its business within a robust framework of economic regulation; and

to maintain effective civil/military joint working of the national air traffic system for the benefit of all users and to accommodate national needs in crisis, war and emergency.

The Government are also keen to ensure that best value is obtained for the taxpayer, that NATS' employees should have the opportunity to acquire an interest in the undertaking in which they are employed and to which they have contributed so much, and to preserve the pension rights of both existing and retired employees.

The Government have concluded that NATS should be separated from the Civil Aviation Authority (CAA), which will then become the independent, separate safety regulator of air traffic services. This separation will ensure that safety regulation and service provision are undertaken in separate organisations, as the Select Committee has recommended over many years. This will help to maintain and build on some of the most stringent safety standards in the world.

We intend to effect this new and innovative PPP through the introduction of a strategic partner who will acquire a controlling interest in NATS. The company will then become a New Partnership Company, structured to create a genuine partnership between the public and private sectors and involve the employees, airlines, and other stakeholders in a new Stakeholder Council. Subject to legislation, the PPP could be put in place by the end of the year 2000. Full details of our conclusions thus far are contained in the Government's report on the response to the public consultation, a copy of which has today been placed in the Library of the House.

Genetically Modified Crops

Mr. Alan Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how the controls on the marketing of genetically modified crops provided for in Part VI of the Environmental Protection Act 1990 are applied in the absence of a marketing consent issued thereunder. [85951]

Mr. Meacher: The commercial growing of genetically modified (GM) crops requires specific consents to be issued at the Community level under Directive 90/220/EEC. All member states have an input into this decision-making process. Once an approval has been issued, it may be used throughout the Community, provided any specific conditions on use, or on types of environment and geographical areas for release are complied with.

The controls on the marketing of GM crops in the UK provided for in Part VI of the Environmental Protection Act 1990 would apply to a consent issued by another member state in the same way as they would to a consent issued by the UK Competent Authority.

Mr. Brady: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the RSPB's recommendations on the plantation of genetically modified crops. [87937]

Mr. Meacher *[holding answer 1 July 1999]:* My Department takes very seriously the concerns of The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds regarding the commercial planing of genetically modified crops and has actively sought the advice and involvement of RSPB scientists to take forward recent initiatives to address biodiversity issues.

The RSPB have raised the concern that herbicide tolerant crops will lead to a rise in the use of broad-spectrum herbicides on fields, and that this in turn could decrease biodiversity in the fields and reduce food available to birds. My Department is spending £3.3 million on the 'farm-scale evaluation' research programme to study the effect of the management of GM crops on the abundance and diversity of farmland wildlife. This research programme began earlier this year and will last at least until 2002. The research is being overseen by a scientific steering committee that will ensure the research is scientifically robust. A scientist from the RSPB is present on this committee.

The RSPB have also raised the concern that the introduction of insect resistant crops could have an unacceptable impact on biodiversity. Again my Department takes these concerns very seriously. In October last year I announced that the industry had agreed not to introduce insect resistant GM crops into commercial agriculture in Britain for three years. Research is in place to ensure that risks posed by these crops to the environment are thoroughly investigated.

The RSPB note the possibility of GM crops cross-pollinating with wild relatives. Each application for the release of genetically modified crop is supported by a risk assessment, which is evaluated by Government experts and independent scientists on the Advisory Committee on Releases to the Environment (ACRE). ACRE consider in detail the potential for each GM crop to cross-pollinate with wild relatives and a GM crop will be granted consent only if ACRE are satisfied that the risks presented are negligible.

The RSPB hold a wider concern that the introduction of genetically modified crops could lead to landscape changes and/or changes in crop rotations. This potential wider impact of the commercial use of GM crops has been discussed in the recently published paper "The Commercial use of GM crops in the UK: the potential wider impact on farmland wildlife", published by the Advisory Committee on Releases to the Environment (ACRE). Following publication of this report the remit of ACRE has been widened with the setting up of a sub-group to discuss and advise on the issues raised. This includes representatives of English Nature and the RSPB. The sub-group will review the risk assessment of GMOs to include a greater consideration of the wider biodiversity impacts which have been made possible via the revision of directive 90/220/EEC on the release to the environment of genetically modified organisms.

We agree with concerns expressed about the wider impacts on wildlife of the large scale introduction of GM crops. Until GM crops are planted on a larger scale, it is

difficult to assess accurately all the effects which they may have on biodiversity. This process must be managed carefully. The Government have therefore reached agreement with the industry on a voluntary code of practice which will strictly limit the first farm-scale plantings and ensure that we are able to monitor any effects on the environment and, in particular, on populations of farmland wildlife and only if no damage has been found to the environment. Full-scale commercial planting will not take place until the results have been carefully assessed. If these results show that particular genetically modified crops harm the environment, we have the powers to withdraw their approvals for commercial planting and we will use them.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, pursuant to his answer of 5 July 1999, *Official Report*, column *367*, (1) if he will ensure that no further consents are issued which allow the products of a genetically modified crop trial to enter the food chain; and if he will take steps to establish the fate of the products of genetically modified crop trials where consents were given for them to enter the food chain; [91251]

(2) which company or companies were given consents to use the products of genetically modified crop trials as animal feed in *(a)* August 1994 and March 1997 in respect of genetically modified oil seed rape and *(b)* April 1996 in respect of genetically modified maize; what were the locations of these trials; and what information concerning these trials and the consents given to use their products as animal feed was made available to hon. Members and the public, prior to the crops being grown. [91252]

Mr. Meacher: No genetically modified (GM) crops are currently being grown for food, feed or processing in the United Kingdom. Any future applications for material of a GM Crop trial to be used as food or feed would be subject to a scientific assessment of risk carried out on a case-by-case basis.

The two consents in respect of GM oil seed rape mentioned in my earlier reply had approval for the meal from the trial crop to be used as feed, but the material was not in fact used in this way and did not therefore enter the feed chain. Both consents were issued to Plant Genetic Systems NV and the trials took place at NIAB, Cambridge in 1994–95 and at Inkwell, Bedfordshire in 1997–98.

The GM maize referred to in my earlier answer has Europe-wide approval under Part C of Council Directive 90/220/EEC for agricultural use leading to animal consumption. The consent for the trial was issued to Sharpes International Seeds Ltd. covering six sites: Boothby Graffoe, Lincolnshire; NIAB, Cambridgeshire, Dartington, Devon; CWS/Gainseed, Cheshire; NIAB, Winchester, Hampshire; and Great Dunmow, Essex. Of these, only material from the site in Cheshire was ensiled to use as animal feed.

All information on releases of GM crops, apart from that considered commercially confidential as set out in my reply to my hon. Friend the Member for Blaenau Gwent (Mr. Smith) on 5 May 1999, *Official Report*, column *390*, is available to the public on request.

Roadworks Management

Mr. Woodward: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he plans to consult on proposals to improve roadworks management standards. [91498]

Ms Glenda Jackson: In last year's Integrated Transport White Paper a commitment was made to consult on options for an incentive system, with penalties, to minimise disruption to road users, and to encourage improved co-ordination of street works. This commitment was re-affirmed by the then Minister for Transport, my right hon. Friend the Member for Hamilton, North and Bellshill (Dr. Reid), during the debate on roads policy on 18 March 1999, *Official Report*, column 1333, and the Government will be going to consultation soon.

Gender Impact Assessment

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the subject of each gender impact assessment drawn up by his Department since June 1997, stating in each case whether the outcome has been *(a)* put out to consultation and *(b)* published. [91684]

Mr. Meale: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given by my right hon. Friend the Minister for Public Health on 22 July 1999, *Official Report*, column *636*.

As part of the Government's commitment to ensuring that their policies are relevant to the lives that people live today, my Department is working closely with the Women's Unit to develop good practices for carrying out gender impact appraisal.

In May 1998, my Department relaunched its policy appraisal for equal treatment initiative. We are continuing to make use of consultations, research projects and disaggregated statistics to identify the impact of policy on women.

In parallel, we are developing a gender audit checklist to help transport operators and planners better understand and meet women's public transport requirements. The checklist is currently being finalised. Similarly, in housing, the Department (in association with the Women's Unit and the Department of Health) have commissioned a comprehensive package of research on 'Accommodation and Support for Households Experiencing Domestic Violence'. This study will examine a range of women's experiences of the accommodation and support provided in response to their needs, including those women who are assisted under the homeless legislation.

River Thames (Commuters and Freight)

Mr. Amess: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what representations he has received on the more effective use of the River Thames for commuters and freight. [92474]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The Government are committed to realising the potential of the River Thames as a transport artery. Our Thames 2000 initiative aims to revitalise passenger transport on the River through a programme of new piers and services and the establishment of London River Services Ltd. as the River arm of London Transport. We are also looking to maintain

and increase use of the River for transporting freight, including through planning policies and the award of freight facilities grants.

In connection with these and other initiatives, my Department is in regular contact with a wide range of people and organisations who wish to see fuller use of the Thames for passenger and freight transport.

Hastings

Mr. Michael Jabez Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what progress has been made on the Access to Hastings Study announced by his Department in July 1998; what the terms of reference are for *(a)* the study and *(b)* the steering group for the study; if the proposed steering group will have an agreed constitution or rules of operation; if the steering group will have autonomy in controlling the study, and what reserve powers his Department will have; if his Department will have a power of veto over the steering group's decisions; and what timetable is envisaged for completion of the report and his Department's decision upon it. [92294]

Ms Glenda Jackson: Progress is being made on the "Access to Hastings Multi Modal Study". There have now been two Steering Group meetings and there will be a third meeting in August.

Draft terms of reference for the Study have not yet been formally agreed, the main aims of the terms of reference are to develop a sustainable and integrated strategy for the Hastings area to promote competitiveness and the achievement of regeneration objectives. The Study should recommend a plan and measures to address problems associated with the A21 and the A259 trunk roads. A multi modal approach will inform all stages of the Study to provide a strategy promoting a safe, efficient, accessible and sustainable transport system and to protect both the built and natural environment.

The Steering Group will operate in a manner that is consistent with the multi modal studies methodology. The Steering Group owns the multi modal Study and will steer and oversee the development, progress and satisfactory completion of the Access to Hastings Study. The Steering group will advise on consultants' recommendations which, subject to views of SERPLAN, will then be submitted to Ministers. We anticipate that the Study will be let to consultants in the Autumn of this year and will take 12–15 months to complete.

Mr. Michael Jabez Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) what legal obstacles there are to visits by himself or his ministerial colleagues to Hastings to examine the adequacy of its roads infrastructure; [92293]

(2) if he or one of his ministerial colleagues responsible for roads will visit Hastings to examine the adequacy of its road infrastructure. [92292]

Ms Glenda Jackson: Pending the taking of final statutory decisions on the three A259 schemes near Hastings, that were the subject of the 1995–96 public inquiry, Ministers have to maintain a position of impartiality. In the circumstances it would not be appropriate for myself or any ministerial colleagues to visit Hastings.

Special Advisers

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, pursuant to his answer of 24 June 1999, *Official Report*, column *440*, on what dates special advisers from his Department travelled to the United States of America on official business; and how many meetings each special adviser held with members and officials of the United States Government during each visit to the United States of America, indicating *(a)* the date and location of each meeting, *(b)* the names of the special advisers and members and officials of the United States Government at each meeting and *(c)* the name of the United States departments to which they belong. [92252]

Mr. Prescott: Special advisers accompanied Ministers to the USA on official business on four occasions between 2 May 1997 and 31 March 1999. All Ministerial travel was accounted for in the answer given by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister to my hon. Friend the Member for Stalybridge and Hyde (Mr. Pendry) on 17 June 1999, *Official Report*, columns *196–97*.

Council House Sales

Mr. Heseltine: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what the total cash value of council house sales has been since the date of the enactment of the Housing Act 1980. [92920]

Ms Armstrong: Between April 1980 and December 1998, total capital receipts to local authorities in England arising from the sale of council homes for owner-occupation were estimated at £24.0 billion. The majority of the 1.560 million sales in this period were under the Right-to-Buy provisions of the Housing Act 1980, which came into effect in October 1980.

In the same period, it is estimated that local authorities had capital receipts of some £3 billion from over 310,000 other dwellings sales and transfers, including Large Scale Voluntary Transfers of housing stock, principally to Registered Social Landlords.

Croydon Tramlink

Mr. Ottaway: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the proposed fare structure for Croydon Tramlink; and what is the proposed fare for a single journey from New Addington to Croydon Town Centre. [93185]

Ms Glenda Jackson: This is a matter for London Transport and Tramtrack Croydon Ltd. I understand that the fare structure for Croydon Tramlink has not yet been decided.

Mr. Ottaway: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will set out the passenger projections for Croydon Tramlink for the years 2000–02. [93184]

Ms Glenda Jackson: This is a commercial matter for Tramtrack Croydon Ltd., the private sector consortium which holds the concession to build, operate and maintain Croydon Tramlink.

Air Pollution

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list, in respect of processes regulated under the Integrated Pollution Control Regulations, the number of *(a)* substantial air pollution incidents, *(b)* prosecutions resulting from air pollution incidents, *(c)* prohibition notices and *(d)* enforcement notices issued to prevent the risk of air pollution incidents in each Environment Agency region in (i) 1996–97 and (ii) 1997–98. [92922]

Mr. Meale: I will write to the hon. Member and place a copy of my letter, together with any attachments, in the Library.

Transport Initiative Bids

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many bids were received for each transport initiative launched since 1 May 1997 under which specific grants were allocated; and if he will list for each initiative, by financial year, those applications which were *(a)* successful and *(b)* unsuccessful, giving in each case the amount applied for and the amount allocated. [93147]

Ms Glenda Jackson *[holding answer 26 July 1999]:* The information is not available in the form requested. The table gives details, where available, of numbers of applications for specific grants and the grant allocation for successful bids in the year in question.

		Transport grant		
	Freight grants [1]	*Rural transport partnership fund* [2]	*Rural bus subsidy grant*	*Rural bus challenge*
1997–98				
Applications received	19	n/a	n/a	n/a
Successful:				
Number	19	—	—	—
Allocation (£ million)	15	—	—	—
Unsuccessful:				
Number	0	—	—	—
Allocation (£ million)	—	—	—	—
1998–99				
Applications received	34	23	[3]—	214
Successful:				
Number	34	23	—	46
Allocation (£ million)	21	3	33	11
Unsuccessful:				
Number	0	0	—	168
Allocation (£ million)	—	—	—	27
1999–2000				
Applications received	5	14	[3]—	[4]—
Successful:				
Number	5	14	—	—
Allocation (£ million)	5	2	33	—
Unsuccessful:				
Number	0	0	—	—
Allocation (£ million)	—	—	—	—

[1] Freight grants scheme commenced prior to May 1997, but has since been relaunched. Expenditure figures represent estimated scheme costs relating to grant approvals in the years in question

[2] Administered by the Countryside Agency on DETR's behalf. Allocations shown cover costs over three years

[3] Grant allocation determined on basis of rural population in 73 local authority areas

[4] No data shown for 1999–2000 as closing date for 1999 applications is 1 October 1999. Figure of £27 million for unsuccessful bids represents total sum applied for.

DVLA

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions under what circumstances DVLA release information concerning the ownership of vehicles to persons other than those with specific authorisation in law. [93077]

Ms Glenda Jackson *[holding answer 26 July 1999]:* DVLA records vehicle keeper information, not vehicle ownership. The Secretary of State has powers, which are delegated to DVLA, to disclose vehicle keeper information to the police, local authorities, and to anyone who can demonstrate "reasonable cause". The term is not defined in law and each request is considered on merit.

Most requests originate from insurance companies to investigate claims or, for example, to trace a driver who has failed to stop following an accident.

Memorials

Sir Richard Body: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what consultations he has held with the Confederation of Burial Authorities concerning the future of memorials; and if he will make a statement. [93270]

Mr. Meale: I refer the hon. Member to the reply I gave to the hon. Member for Bournemouth, East (Mr. Atkinson) on 26 May 1999, *Official Report*, column *171*.

Government Office for the North East

Mr. Alan Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many staff are currently employed by the Government Office for the North East. [93436]

Mr. Meale: Government Office for the North East (GO-NE) has a complement of 257 staff in the current year. As at 1 July 1999, there are 250.7 staff in post employed by GO-NE.

Mr. Alan Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what were the administrative costs of the Government Office for the North East in 1998–99. [93435]

Mr. Meale: The Administrative Costs of the Government Office for the North East in 1998–99 were £8.651 million.

New Deal (Injuries)

Mr. Healey: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many injuries to participants on the New Deal programme have been reported to the HSE, broken down by categories, under the reporting of Injuries, Diseases and Dangerous Occurrences Regulations 1995. [93440]

Mr. Meale: The Reporting of Injuries, Diseases and Dangerous Occurrences Regulations 1995 do not require employers to differentiate between participants on the New Deal programme and other employees when making a report to the HSE under these regulations. The information is therefore not available.

Motorway Noise

Mr. Bill O'Brien: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what proposals he has to assist residents who suffer from excessive noise from motorways; and if he will make a statement. [93277]

Ms Glenda Jackson: I will write to my hon. Friend and place a copy of my letter in the Library.

Mr. Bill O'Brien: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the responsibility for the measuring and monitoring of noise levels at properties where motorways have been built. [93203]

Ms Glenda Jackson: There is no requirement for noise levels to be monitored after a road has been built. But within six months of the final offers of noise insulation under the legislation applying to new or substantially altered roads, residents living within 300 metres of such a road who had not been offered insulation have an opportunity to appeal for the assessment to be reviewed. In such cases, it is not general practice to undertake noise measurements, but to calculate the statistical level of noise required by the Regulations from the flow of traffic and other relevant factors.

Mr. Bill O'Brien: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what studies his Department has carried out to identify high and unreasonable noise levels in properties where motorways were built before 1988; and if he will make a statement. [93276]

Ms Glenda Jackson: Following our announcement on 22 March 1999, *Official Report*, columns *50–51*, of a ring-fenced budget for the Highways Agency to undertake noise mitigation measures in the most serious and pressing cases on existing roads, a large number of locations where concern has been expressed about noise have been assessed against the stated criteria. Detailed studies are now required to determine the feasibility of providing measures at locations meeting the criteria where there are no plans to provide a quieter road surface as part of routine maintenance operations.

Mr. Bill O'Brien: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what proposals he has to assist people living near motorways on which there has been a significant increase in the volume of traffic above that forecast when the motorway was built. [93207]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The Government announced its proposals for dealing with the problem of noise arising from those roads for which the Secretary of State has responsibility, which include the majority of motorways, in "A New Deal for Trunk Roads in England". We announced the annual budget which was being ring-fenced for the provision of noise mitigation measures on 22 March 1999, *Official Report*, columns *50–51*, together with the criteria which would target the most serious and pressing cases, including locations affected by unexpectedly high levels of traffic growth.

Genetically Modified Seeds

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) what measures are in place to prevent the escape into the environment of GM seeds while in transit; [93148]

(2) what assessment he has made of the environmental impact resulting from the escape into the environment while in transit of GM seeds. [93177]

Mr. Meacher *[holding answer 26 July 1999]:* I will write to the hon. Member and place a copy of my letter in the Library.

Health and Safety Executive, Basingstoke

Mr. Alan Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions for what reasons improvement and prohibition notices or other material has been placed in the public viewing room of the HSE offices in Basingstoke since 1993. [93274]

Mr. Meale: Under the requirements of the Environment and Safety Information Act 1988 HSE maintains at its field offices, including the one at Basingstoke, public registers of information on improvement and prohibition notices having public safety or environmental implications. These registers have been kept since 1 April 1989 and notices remain on the public register for at least three years. Information on other notices is available on request.

HSE offices also keep public registers of hazardous sites such as sites licensed under the Explosives Act 1875 or those subject to the Control of Industrial Major Accident Hazards Regulations 1984, the Dangerous Substances in Harbour Areas Regulations 1987, the Fire Certificate Special Premises Regulations 1976.

Public access to other information held by HSE is made on request under the requirements of the "Code of Practice on Access to Government Information" or the Environmental Information Regulations 1992.

EU Landfill Directive

Charlotte Atkins: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what progress is being made on implementing the EU Landfill Directive; and when he plans to inform the waste industry of the terms of the legislation to implement the Directive. [93619]

Mr. Meale: The EC Landfill Directive entered into force on 16 July 1999, and member states have two years to introduce the provisions necessary to comply with the Directive.

Work on implementation is progressing well; a consultation paper on the formal mechanisms for implementing the biodegradable municipal waste targets in Article 5 of the Directive will be published later in the summer, with the results being reflected in the final version of the Waste Strategy. The Government's proposals for implementing the other requirements of the Directive will be the subject of further consultations early next year.

Final decisions relating to the legislation required to implement the Directive will be made in light of these consultation exercises.

Pollution Prevention and Control Regulations

Charlotte Atkins: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when the fourth consultation paper on the Pollution Prevention and Control Regulations will be issued. [93620]

Mr. Meale: We expect to issue this consultation paper during the week beginning 9 August with a deadline for comment of 8 October.

Charlotte Atkins: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when the Pollution Prevention and Control Regulations will come into force; and what period industry will have to prepare for the new regime. [93621]

Mr. Meale: The regulations are needed to transpose Directive 96/61 on Integrated Pollution Prevention and Control, which must be achieved by 31 October. Industry has been extensively consulted already and existing plant will have up to eight years before it is brought within the new regime.

Injurious Substances Regulations

Charlotte Atkins: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when the Environment Protection (Destruction of Polychlorinated Biphenyls and other Injurious Substances) Regulations will be published. [93638]

Mr. Meale: We are about to consult the Injurious or Hazardous Substances Advisory Committee, set up under section 140 of the Environmental Protection Act 1990. When we have received and considered the advice of that committee, we shall publish the necessary notice in the London Gazette under section 140(6) of that Act, and make the regulations publicly available.

Genetically Modified Organisms

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make it his policy not to grant approval for any GM plant under the Genetically Modified Organisms (Deliberate Release) Regulations 1992 as amended, where such plants contain antibiotic marker genes. [93208]

Mr. Meacher: Any application to release a genetically modified (GM) plant containing an antibiotic marker gene would be subject to a scientific assessment of risk carried out case-by-case on the basis of an environmental risk assessment. No consent would be given if the antibiotic marker gene in question would be harmful to human health or the environment.

The UK was instrumental in ensuring that the political agreement reached at the June Environment Council provided for the identification and phasing out of antibiotic marker genes which are harmful to human health and the environment.

National Countryside Access Forum

Mr. Bennett: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list those who attended the first meeting of the National Countryside Access Forum; and what arrangements are being made for industry and the trade unions to be represented in the forum. [93297]

Mr. Meacher: The National Countryside Access Forum has been established, at the Government's request, by the Countryside Agency. Those attending the first meeting on 21 July, as members of the Forum, were:

Professor Ian Mercer, Secretary General of the Association of National Park Authorities;

Mr. Hywel Davies, Chief Executive of the British Horse Society;

Mr. Iain McMorrin, Chair of the Access and Conservation Committee of the British Mountaineering Council;

Ms Kate Parminter, Director of the Council for the Protection of Rural England;

Sir Edward Greenwell, Vice Chair of the Executive Committee of the Country Landowners' Association;

Ms Pam Ashton, Chair of Campaigns and Policy Committee of the Cyclists Touring Club;

Mr. Peter Davidson, of Hertfordshire County Council representing the Local Government Association;

Air Commodore Simon Bostock, Moorland Association;

Mr. Tim Bennett, Deputy President of the National Farmers' Union;

Mr. Jo Burgon, Coast and Countryside Adviser for the National Trust;

Mr. Jerry Pearlman, Honorary Solicitor for the Ramblers' Association;

Mr. Gwyn Williams, Head of Species and Habitat Policy for the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds;

Ms Pamela Warhurst, Deputy Chair of the Countryside Agency, chaired the meeting.

Business and trade union interests will be represented on the Forum by independent members who will be appointed by the Countryside Agency in August.

M4 Bus Lane

Mr. Brady: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what contingency plans exist under which the M4 bus lane restriction may be lifted in the event of an accident causing a blockage to one or both of the other lanes of the eastbound carriageway. [93588]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The design of the M4 bus lane included the formulation of contingency plans for dealing with accidents and incidents on the section of motorway including the bus lane. These were agreed with and are operated by the police. The police opened the bus lane to all vehicles for a short time on the morning of 23 July, following an accident that closed the two other lanes.

London Underground

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will provide a detailed breakdown of the extra expenditure for London Underground in 2000. [93539]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The additional resources announced on 15 July 1999, *Official Report*, columns 600–11, for London Transport in 2000–01 will mean that investment in the core Underground network should be in excess of £500 million, including investment under the PFI. London Transport announced

details of this investment programme that the additional resources would help deliver on 22 July. I am arranging for London Transport's detailed breakdown to be placed in the Library of the House. This investment will lead to improvements across the network.

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the membership of the task force set up to monitor improvements to London Underground; when it will first meet and how often; how long it has been established; what penalties the task force will be able to impose for performance failures by London Transport; and if he will publish the terms of reference for the task force. [93541]

Ms Glenda Jackson: As already announced the task force will be led by my right hon. Friend the Minister for Transport and its terms of reference are to monitor improvements to London Underground. Its membership will include representation from DETR, the Government Office for London, the Treasury, and London Transport. The first meeting will take place later in the summer, and the task force will meet regularly thereafter.

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will publish details of the planned maintenance programme for London Underground per line over the next 12 months and details of line closures over the next 12 months. [93536]

Ms Glenda Jackson: Details of the planned Underground maintenance programme are a matter for London Underground.

For details of the temporary line closures London Underground are planning over the next 12 months, I refer to my reply of 2 July 1999, *Official Report,* column *291*, to the right hon. Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood).

Aviation

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he will publish the daughter document on aviation. [93537]

Ms Glenda Jackson: In last year's integrated transport White Paper (Cm 3950) we announced that we would prepare a White Paper on UK airports policy, and that we would commission a series of preparatory studies in Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland, the North of England, the Midlands and South West England. The then Minister of Transport, my right hon. Friend the Member for Hamilton, North and Bellshill (Dr. Reid), announced on 11 March 1999, *Official Report,* columns 360–61, a wide-ranging study of airport issues in the South East and East of England. He stated that we expect the studies to take around two years, and that the Government envisages that the results will be incorporated in the airports White Paper. We intend to make a further announcement about this in due course.

London Air Traffic Control Centre

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will publish overload statistics for LATCC for each of the last 36 months. [93538]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The details as recorded by the Civil Aviation Authorities Safety Regulation Group are:

Date	*1996*	*1997*	*1998*	*1999*
January	—	0	4	1
February	—	1	3	5
March	—	0	8	4
April	—	0	3	3
May	—	3	5	8
June	—	3	2	5
July	1	1	9	[1]8
August	3	1	3	—
September	0	3	8	—
October	2	2	6	—
November	2	0	3	—
December	2	0	2	—

[1] To 25 June

Overload reports record that more aircraft, in the controller's subjective opinion, are entering a sector than expected. There is rarely a loss of separation between aircraft during a reported overload, with only four occasions where a loss of separation was associated with an overload event since 1996.

Despite a reduction in the number of airproxes recorded in 1998, there was a noticeable increase in the number of overloads reported by controllers at London Air Traffic Control Centre. This was partly due to management encouraging staff to report such incidents so remedial action can be taken. All reports of overload incidents are investigated thoroughly by the Civil Aviation Authority and, wherever possible, action is taken to ensure that the lessons learned are implemented.

VDU Users (Eye Tests)

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what is his Department's estimate of the total number of employees that are entitled to an eye test provided by their employer under the Health and Safety (Display Screens Equipment) Regulations 1992. [93311]

Mr. Meale: A survey was conducted in 1995 on behalf of the Health and Safety Executive to evaluate the Health and Safety (Display Screen Equipment) Regulations 1992. The researchers estimated that about 5.5 million employees in Great Britain were entitled under the Regulations to an eye and eyesight test, to be provided by their employer at the employee's request.

Government Offices Transfers

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) to what extent changes in costs of mileage allowances arising from the transfer of Government offices are treated as a factor in the taking of decisions on such transfers; [93230]

(2) what powers he has to ensure full evaluations take place of the cost implications of the movement of offices by the North West Regional Development Agency. [93231]

Mr. Meale: Under the terms of their Financial Memorandum the Regional Development Agencies are responsible for decisions about their location.

They are required to carry out a full evaluation of the costs and benefits of any material changes in their accommodation requirements. That evaluation should take account of any significant effect on mileage allowances paid to staff alongside other factors.

North West Regional Development Agency

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what the experience and qualifications of Dr. Joan Firth are to carry out the role of independent assessor in the appointment of the Board of the North West Regional Development Agency. [93232]

Mr. Meale: Dr. Joan Firth, a former Grade 3, Deputy Director of Finance, in the Department of Health, was acting chair of Bradford NHS Trust at the time she acted as independent assessor in the appointment of the Board of the North West Regional Development Agency. She had had recent experience of appointing NHS Board Members in the North East.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if officers of the North West Regional Development Agency have discussed with board member the merit of projects and bids supported by that Agency where a board member has had what subsequently turned out to be a conflict of interest. [93446]

Mr. Meale: There is no record of any such discussions taking place.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many premises are owned by the North West Regional Development Agency on the Lakeland Business Park at Cockermouth; what is the total rent received per annum; and what is the total square footage. [93224]

Mr. Meale: There are seven premises (blocks) which are sub-divided into units and let to the list of tenants which is given in another answer to my hon. Friend today at columns 342–44.

	Area (sq. ft.)	*Rent (principal) (£)*
Block 1	5,135	NWDA
Block 2	4,459	20,025
Block 3	5,630	22,750
Block 4	4,816	19,521
Block 5	4,769	20,111
Block 6	4,885	9,616
Block 7	7,946	51,451
Total	37,640	143,474

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if, in the consideration of business by the North West Regional Development Agency, members of the board decided for themselves whether a conflict of interest exists. [93444]

Mr. Meale: In accordance with the North West Development Regional Agency Standing Orders, Board Members determine if they have an interest in any particular matter and declare it accordingly.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if the North West Regional Development Agency is supporting commercial developments in the North West of England which are in any way linked to the business interests of members of the North West Development Agency; and what is the value in pounds sterling of the support being provided in each case. [93442]

Mr. Meale: The North West Regional Development Agency inherited from English Partnerships a project under which Westmorland Motorway Services Limited are receiving a grant of £947,920 towards the Hills of the North Project.

Mr. John Dunning is the member with business interest linked to this project.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if, in the consideration of the SRB bids, any members of the board of the North West Regional Development Agency were required or offered to stand aside on the basis of conflict of interest. [93443]

Mr. Meale: When the North West Regional Development Board was discussing the proposed SRB bids, Members with an interest in any particular bid left the meeting prior to it being discussed. Each Board meeting agenda contains a reminder to this effect.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will publish the register of interests applicable in the case of the North West Regional Development Agency. [93228]

Mr. Meale: The Register of Members Interests is available for inspection at the Headquarters in Warrington and will be published in the North West Regional Development Agency's Annual Report.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many visits overseas have been made by officers of the North West Regional Development Agency since the establishment of the Agency; to which countries; and at what cost to the taxpayer. [93227]

Mr. Meale: Since 1 April 1999 there have been 10 overseas visits made by officers of the North West Regional Development Agency. The countries visited were: Belgium, Japan, Ireland, Austria, Germany, France, U.S.A. The cost of these visits totals £4,381.50.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) if he will permit access by hon. Members to the data held by the Government Office of the North-West relating to nomination to the Board of the North West Regional Development Agency; [93229]

(2) if he will list the persons Dr. Joan Firth interviewed for possible appointment to the Board of the North West Regional Development Agency. [93233]

Mr. Meale: Details of the appointees to the North West Regional Development Agency were made public in the press notice at the time of their appointment, in line with the Office for the Commissioner for Public Appointments', in line with the Office for the Commissioner for Public Appointments' guidelines. However, under exemption 8b (Public Employments,

Public Appointments and Honours) of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information, details of the other candidates cannot be released for reasons of confidentiality. This also applies to the details of those nominated by outside bodies.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many visits overseas have been made by board members of the North West Regional Development Agency since the establishment of the Agency; to which countries; and at what cost to the taxpayer. [93226]

Mr. Meale: The Chairman of the Board has made two overseas visits. They were to Japan (cost £3,573) and Brussels (£639).

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions on what dates since the appointment of officers to the Shadow North West Regional Development Agency and since the formal establishment of the North West Regional Development Agency, officers of the Agency have met members of Cumbria Tourist Board. [93445]

Mr. Meale: Since the North West Regional Development Agency was established in December 1998 there have been no formal meetings between officers of the Agency and members of the Cumbria Tourist Board in their capacity as members of the Board.

English Partnerships, Cockermouth

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what special circumstances arose in the case of the English Partnerships offices in Cockermouth which distinguish them from other offices in the department where valuations have been published in the last 10 years. [93234]

Mr. Meale: The North West Regional Development Agency, in keeping with its predecessor English Partnerships, does not publish valuations of individual properties. This information is commercial in confidence.

Lakeland Business Park

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the tenants of all premises on the Lakeland Business Park at Cockermouth. [93225]

Mr. Meale: Tenants of the premises on the Lakeland Business Park at Cockermouth are:

North West Regional Development Agency
Cumbria Inward Investment Agency
NFU Mutual Insurance Society Ltd.
CH Jeffries (Risk Management) Ltd.
North East Foster Care Associates Ltd.
Cumbria Training and Enterprise Council Ltd.
R. Day and G. Cummins (T/A Day Cummins)
L. Canfield (T/A One 2 One Beauty Salon)
GUS Home Shopping Ltd.
United Friendly Insurance plc
Countryside Alliance
Cumbria Tourist Board (T/A WC Tourist Information)
White Young Green Consulting Ltd.
Barker Shepley Ltd.
Servicegain Ltd.
North Cumbria Health Authority
Tarmac Construction Ltd. (T/A Crown House)
Alan Nichol (T/A Alan Nichol Agencies)
Rannerdale Ltd.
Kinlock Engineering Ltd.
Sales Direct Ltd.
Tagga Ltd.
G. Beattie (T/A Alpha Design Arch. Services).

Shipping

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions on which occasions since 1993 his Department has received written or oral approaches from the hon. Member for Hertford and Stortford (Mr. Wells) on matters relating to shipping since 1993. [93241]

Ms Glenda Jackson: I understand that the hon. Member for Hertford and Stortford (Mr. Wells) tabled one written Parliamentary Question on shipping, in September 1993.

Motorway Services

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what action he is taking in response to complaints about prices and standards of service at motorway service areas. [93360]

Ms Glenda Jackson: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given to my hon. Friend the Member for Cynon Valley (Ann Clwyd) on 13 July 1999, *Official Report*, column *127*.

Belmont Stables, Mill Hill

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when the Inspector completed his report into Belmont Stables, Mill Hill; and when he expects to announce his decision. [93223]

Mr. Caborn: The Secretary of State received the Inspector's report in June and expects to announce his decision shortly.

Strategic Rail Authority

Mr. Donohoe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what proposals he has for Scottish representation on the proposed strategic rail authority. [91624]

Ms Glenda Jackson: A Scottish representative will be appointed as member of the Strategic Rail Authority.

Thames Water

Mr. Efford: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what steps he will take to prevent Thames Water from requiring domestic water customers who have received planning permission for home extensions since 1990 to have a water meter; and if he will make a statement. [93544]

Mr. Meale: I understand that, in response to pressure, Thames Water have today announced a change of policy on this issue. They will no longer impose meters in these circumstances.

Street Lighting

Mr. Grieve: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what proportion of the budget of the Energy, Environment and Waste Directorate is allocated specifically to the promotion of energy-efficient street lighting on main trunk roads and motorways. [93359]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The Energy, Environment and Waste Directorate funds a number of programmes aimed at improving energy efficiency, including the efficiency of lighting. In particular the Energy Efficiency Best Practice programme has supported a research and development project aimed at developing new energy control equipment for street lighting.

Mr. Grieve: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) how much has been spent by local authorities on the maintenance of existing street lighting outside built-up areas in the past financial year; [93349]

(2) how much has been spent by local authorities on the maintenance of existing street lighting in built-up areas in the past financial year; [93350]

(3) how much has been spent by local authorities in providing new and additional street lighting outside built-up areas in the past financial year; [93353]

(4) what statistics his Department collects on the *(a)* installation and *(b)* maintenance of street lighting carried out by local authorities each year. [93343]

Ms Glenda Jackson: This information is not available centrally.

Mr. Grieve: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) what were the values of the contracts awarded to each manufacturer who has supplied street lighting equipment to his Department and local authorities in the past financial year; [93344]

(2) if he will list the manufacturers who have supplied street lighting equipment to his Department and local authorities in the past financial year. [93345]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The Highways Agency, the executive agency responsible for trunk roads in England, does not award contracts directly to manufacturers of lighting equipment.

On new schemes, street lighting is installed by sub contracts working to a main contractor.

On existing roads, street lighting is installed and maintained by our managing agents. We do not keep, centrally, records of their expenditure.

Information on local authorities contracts is not kept centrally.

Mr. Grieve: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) how much his Department has spent on the new and additional street lighting outside built-up areas in the past financial year; [93354]

(2) how much his Department has spent on the maintenance of existing street lighting outside built-up areas in the past financial year; [93351]

(3) how much his Department has spent on the maintenance of existing street lighting in built-up areas in the past financial year; [93352]

(4) how much his Department has spent on new and additional lighting of motorways outside built-up areas in the past financial year. [93355]

Ms Glenda Jackson: This information is not held centrally and could only be obtained at disproportionate cost.

Mr. Grieve: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list Government initiatives currently underway to correct existing poorly designed and installed street lighting in rural and urban streets. [93356]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The Highways Agency are to issue advice on the renovation of street lighting schemes and although written for trunk roads and motorways it will be equally applicable to local authority roads. Some central Government funding is available to local authorities, for new street lighting schemes under the Private Finance Initiative. Where local authorities apply for this funding, proposals should be appraised in line with the Department's "New Approach to Appraisal" to ensure that the benefits and costs (including the environmental and safety benefits) are presented in a consistent way.

Mr. Grieve: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans his Department has to promote the use of energy-efficient street lighting to local authorities. [93346]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The Department funds a number of programmes aimed at improving energy efficiency, including the efficiency of lighting. In particular the Energy Efficiency Best Practice programme has supported a research and development project aimed at developing new energy efficient control equipment for street lighting. Some central Government funding is also available, to local authorities, for new street lighting schemes under the Private Finance Initiative. Where local authorities apply for this funding, proposals should be appraised in line with the Department's "New Approach to Appraisal" to ensure that the benefits and costs (including running costs) are presented in a consistent way.

Lighting Guidelines

Mr. Grieve: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what evidence he has that local planning authorities, lighting professionals and members of the public follow the guidelines published in 1997 by his Department and the Countryside Commission in the report, Lighting in the Countryside: Towards Good Practice. [93357]

Mr. Raynsford: My Department has not undertaken specific research on this subject. The Department receives correspondence on the general issue of the effects of lighting but is not aware of concerns that the guidance is not being followed.

Mr. Grieve: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how the report Lighting in the Countryside: Towards Good Practice, jointly published by his Department and the Countryside Commission in 1997, is made accessible to local authorities, professionals and members of the general public. [93358]

Mr. Raynsford: On publication, copies were sent to a wide range of bodies, including local planning authorities in England, relevant local authority organisations and other professional bodies including RICS and the RTPI. Local authorities may make copies available to people in their area. The report continues to be available for purchase from the Stationery Office.

Non-UK Driving Licences

Mr. Jenkins: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the rules and restrictions governing the use of non-UK driving licences in the United Kingdom. [93338]

Ms Glenda Jackson: Licences issued by members of the European Economic Area (the EU plus Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway), other than those restricted to use within the member state issuing them, are subject to indefinite mutual recognition. The holder may use such a licence in the UK subject to the driving licence regulations but otherwise without restriction. There is no requirement to exchange the licence, except where there is a material change in entitlement.

Licences to drive vehicles up to 3.5 tonnes (cars and small vans) issued by the countries or territories which have been designated by order for recognition may be used for up to one year. After that the holder must exchange the licence for a British equivalent in order to continue driving. Countries designated for this purpose are: Australia, Barbados, British Virgin Islands, Canada, Republic of Cyprus, Gibraltar, Guernsey, Hong Kong, Isle of Man, Japan, Jersey, Kenya, Malta, New Zealand, Singapore, Republic of South Africa, Switzerland, Zimbabwe.

Holders of licences to drive larger vehicles from designated countries may only use such licences to drive vehicles which have been temporarily imported, but they must pass a British driving test for the category of licence if they wish to drive such vehicles permanently in the UK. This restriction on the driving of larger vehicles (whether lorry or passenger carrying) also applies to licences issued by non-designated countries.

Licences to drive vehicles up to 3.5 tonnes issued by non-designated countries may be used in the UK for up to one year continuously. The holder of such a licence who has been driving in the UK continuously for one year must obtain a British licence by taking a driving test in order to continue driving beyond that period.

Urban Task Force

Ms Oona King: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he expects to announce his decisions on implementing the recommendations contained in the Urban Task Force report; and if he will make a statement. [93300]

Mr. Meale: The Urban Task Force's recommendations, set out in its report "Towards an Urban Renaissance", published on 29 June 1999, are currently being considered by Government. The Urban White Paper will provide the main vehicle for the Government's response.

It may be appropriate to address some individual recommendations on a different timescale. On 30 June 1999, Liverpool Vision was launched as a pilot for the Task Force's recommendation on the creation of Urban Regeneration Companies. East Manchester have been invited to submit a proposal to be a further pilot for the recommendation.

Capital Receipts (Property)

Ms Oona King: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what proportion of capital receipts have been spent on *(a)* building new properties and *(b)* renovating existing properties since the capital receipts initiative was introduced. [93299]

Mr. Raynsford: The latest information is for 1997–98 and in that year local authorities spent 7.2 per cent. of their allocation of the Capital Receipts Initiative on building new dwellings and 92.1 per cent. on renovating or repairing existing dwellings. The small balance of expenditure was spent on non-housing items.

Urban and Rural White Papers

Ms Oona King: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he expects to publish White Papers on urban and rural policy; and if he will make a statement. [93306]

Mr. Meale: My right hon. Friend will publish the Urban and Rural White Papers when work has been completed. We expect this will be within the next 12 months.

Housing Policy

Ms Oona King: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he expects to publish the Green Paper on housing policy announced in the last Budget; and if he will make a statement. [93307]

Mr. Love: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he expects to publish the Green Paper on Housing Policy; and if he will make a statement. [93546]

Mr. Raynsford: We intend to publish a Housing Policy Green Paper later this year. The Green Paper will set out our policy options for delivering our objectives in housing to ensure that everyone is offered the opportunity of a decent home and to promote social cohesion, well-being and self-dependence.

Ms Oona King: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many responses he has received to the consultation paper, "Licensing Houses in Multiple Occupation-England";

when he expects to announce his decisions on the proposed new licensing scheme; whether those decisions will be included in the Green Paper on housing policy; when he plans to consult on the standards applicable to the licensing scheme; and if he will make a statement. [93305]

Mr. Raynsford: 475 consultation responses have been received to date. We are carefully analysing them and will announce our conclusions as soon as we are able to do so. The Government are currently considering the issues which should be included for consultation in the Green Paper. I cannot yet say when we will be in a position to consult on HMO standards.

Ms Oona King: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how much has been spent from the Single Regeneration Budget on *(a)* building new social housing, *(b)* renovating existing social housing and *(c)* private sector renovation schemes; and how much matching funding from other sources has been put into SRB schemes to be spent on (i) building new social housing, (ii) renovating existing social housing and (iii) private sector renovation schemes in each Regional Development Agency area for each year since the SRB was introduced. [93298]

Mr. Meale: The Single Regeneration Budget (SRB) currently funds over 500 (Rounds 1–4) regeneration schemes managed by local partnerships. A large number of these are likely to have multiple objectives, and cover a wide range of activities depending on local regeneration needs and priorities. It is not possible to break down expenditure to say how much has benefited one objective, therefore no information is available on the amount spent on building new social housing or on renovating social or private sector housing.

There is no specific matching funding requirement for SRB bids but partnerships are encouraged to maximise the leverage of private sector investment and funding from other public spending programmes. In the four Rounds to 31 March 1999, it is estimated that the total lifetime SRB allocation of £3.4 billion will lever in around £7.6 million of private sector investment over the same period.

Sussex Downs

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what meetings he has had with elected representatives, council officials and community groups from within the Brighton and Hove Unitary Authority area on the future management of the Sussex Downs. [93252]

Mr. Meacher: Ministers in this Department have met with a number of individuals and groups about the future management of the Sussex Downs. Those we have met include my hon. Friends the Members for Brighton, Kemptown (Dr. Turner) and for Brighton, Pavilion (Mr. Lepper); the Leader and Chief Whip of Brighton and Hove Council; and groups which are members of the South Downs Campaign, such as Friends of the Earth, which have a presence in Brighton and Hove.

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what factors underlie the delay in announcing proposals for the future of the Sussex Downs Conservation Board. [93256]

Mr. Meacher: Ministers are considering as a whole the various issues dealt with in the former Countryside Commission's advice on the future management of our areas of protected countryside. There are a number of considerations, including those relating to the planning system, financial provision, local government responsibilities and the possibility of legislation. We want to ensure the right solutions for the South Downs, for the New Forest and for AONBs generally.

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he will be in a position to make a firm announcement on the future of the Sussex Downs Conservation Board. [93251]

Mr. Meacher: I expect an announcement to be made later this year, as part of the Government's response to the advice on the future management of protected countryside which was produced by the former Countryside Commission. In the meantime, the Sussex Downs Conservation Board has a clear commitment of Government funding until March 2001.

Government Office of the South East

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions following the inauguration of the South Eastern Development Agency, what the role of the Government Office of the South East will be. [93253]

Mr. Meale: In common with the other regional Government Offices, GOSE manages programmes on behalf of DFEE, DTI and DETR, supports and facilitates effective linkages between partners and programmes, and informs the development of Departments' policies from a regional perspective. GOSE will work closely with SEEDA, as it does with other regional partners.

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many people are currently employed by the Government Office of the South East; and how many were employed in (i) 1998 and (ii) 1997. [93255]

Mr. Meale: There are currently 247.1 full-time equivalent funded posts in the Government Office for the South East. In 1998 there were 235.1 full-time equivalent funded posts, and in 1997 there were 227 full-time equivalent funded posts.

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what the estimated out-turn is of the Government Office of the South East for the current financial year. [93254]

Mr. Meale: At this stage of the Financial Year there is no reason to believe that the out-turn will not be the same as the budget of £501,861,000.

English Partnerships

Mr. Love: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what was the expenditure of English Partnerships in Greater London in each of the last five years for which figures are available. [93590]

Mr. Meale: Expenditure by English Partnerships within Greater London over the last five years is set out in the following table. The vast majority of this has been targeted at designated assisted areas.

Total expenditure	*£000*
1994–95	13,582
1995–96	20,888
1996–97[1]	43,331
1997–98[1]	65,162
1998–99[2]	127,113
Total	270,076

[1] Includes expenditure on the Greenwich Peninsula.
[2] Includes expenditure on the Royal Docks inherited from the London Docklands Development Corporation on 1 April 1998.

Mr. Love: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what has been the expenditure of English Partnerships in *(a)* the Objective 2 Area in Lee Valley, *(b)* Park Royal and *(c)* other assisted areas in Greater London in each year since their inception; and if he will make a statement. [93591]

Mr. Meale: I will write to my hon. Friend and place a copy of my letter in the Library of the House.

Child Safety (Cars)

Mr. Sheerman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what steps he is taking to ensure that children are carried safely in cars. [93600]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The surveys of seat belt/child restraint wearing carried out by the Transport Research Laboratory on my Department's behalf, show that wearing rates by all passengers in the front are as high as 94 per cent. Since the Department's rear seat belt wearing advertising campaign in the Summer of 1998, which was repeated at Easter 1999, seat belt wearing rates have been climbing and for children in the rear of vehicles now stands at 91 per cent. as at April 1999. The campaign is continuing with a version of the advert presently running in cinemas and on local radio stations. We also promote the use of child restraints in my Department's leaflet "Seat Belts and Child Restraints", copies of which were placed in the Library of the House.

Trans-Pennine Rail Communications

Mr. Sheerman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what further steps he is taking to improve trans-Pennine rail communications. [93599]

Ms Glenda Jackson: Under the terms of their franchise agreement Northern Spirit, which operates Trans-Pennine services, are planning to increase services on the route from May 2000 to at least four trains per hour for twelve hours a day Mondays to Saturdays. This commitment is subject to Railtrack approval.

The Shadow Strategic Rail Authority (SSRA) has been established to bring strategic focus to the railways and will be placed on a statutory basis if the Railways Bill attains Royal Assent.

The SSRA will be given the power to penalise train operators financially for poor performance much faster than at present and we have also announced that we are willing to re-negotiate some franchises in return for guarantees of better services for passengers.

Remand Provisions (Housing Act 1996)

Mr. Stringer: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the proposed timetable for bringing into force the commencement order for the remand provisions associated with section 155(2)(b) of and Schedule 15 to the Housing Act 1996. [91639]

Mr. Raynsford: I refer my hon. Friend to my reply of 5 July 1999, *Official Report*, column *381*. My Department is discussing with the Lord Chancellor's Department the best way forward on these provisions, and I will write to my hon. Friend as soon as we have reached our decision.

Narrowboats

Mr. David Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what is his policy on the charging of council tax on residential moorings for narrowboats; what estimate he has made of the number of such individual moorings in the United Kingdom; and if he will make a statement. [92524]

Mr. Meale: A mooring occupied by a boat which is somebody's sole or main residence is deemed to be a "dwelling" for council tax purposes and will therefore attract a council tax liability in the same way as other domestic types of property. The amount of council tax payable in respect of a mooring occupied by a boat will depend primarily on the valuation band to which the dwelling is assigned. We do not hold information on the number of moorings occupied by boats which are somebody's sole or main residence.

Coastguard Service

Mr. Wallace: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he expects to receive the report from Lord Donaldson on the review of future proposals of the Coastguard Service; and if he will make a statement. [93340]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions has now received Lord Donaldson's advice and is considering it.

Fox Control

Mr. Maclean: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what alternative methods of fox control he recommends to replace that provided by hunting. [93489]

Mr. Meacher: The fox is not a protected species and may be killed or taken by owners and occupiers of land using any method, for example, shooting or trapping, which is not prohibited by the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981.

Planning Inspectorate's Report

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he expects to publish the Planning Inspectorate's Annual Report and Accounts for 1998–99. [93697]

Mr. Caborn: The Planning Inspectorate's Annual Report and Accounts for 1998–99 was published yesterday. Copies have been placed in the Library.

Overall, the Inspectorate met seven out of 10 targets set for its work in England. Handling times for hearing and inquiry cases, although much improved, missed the target. For inquiries, this is partly due to an increase in refusals by parties of dates offered by the Inspectorate. It is important that all parties co-operate and observe the deadlines set to enable the Inspectorate to deliver further improvements in performance.

The unit cost for written representation cases has increased. This is mainly due to a programme of investment in IT—upgrading PCs, and developing systems to improve performance and customer service. The Inspectorate continues to meet its efficiency target.

The Inspectorate has also maintained the programme of development plan inquiries to a high standard, helping to create greater certainty for all involved in the planning process as more areas are covered by up to date development plans.

The Inspectorate's quality target was met and exceeded, with reduced numbers of justified complaints against decisions issued. Surveys continued to show that its decisions are widely respected. It has also produced an outstanding financial performance during the year. The Inspectorate is very much involved in initiatives to develop the Government's proposals for the modernisation of the planning system. In the climate of a rapidly changing environment it is always ready to take on new areas of work in dispute resolution.

Regional Chambers

Mr. Leslie: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what progress he has made in designating regional chambers. [93698]

Mr. Caborn: I am pleased to announce that we have today issued a direction to Yorkshire Forward—the development agency for the Yorkshire and the Humber region—designating the Regional Chamber for Yorkshire and Humberside as its regional chamber.

Regional chambers provide a mechanism through which the Regional Development Agencies can take account of regional views and account for their activities. We expect that each RDA will have regard to the chamber's view in preparing its strategy, consult the chamber on its corporate plan and give an account of its performance to the chamber. Working together through the regional chambers local authorities, business and other partners can provide a focused voice for their region.

There is now a designated regional chamber in each of the English regions outside London. This marks the completion of another stage of the Government's regional agenda. The full list of regional chambers (some of which call themselves regional assemblies) and development agencies is as follows:

Regional chamber	*Regional Development Agency*
North West Regional Assembly	North West Development Agency
North East Regional Assembly	One North East
Regional Chamber for Yorkshire and Humberside	Yorkshire Forward
West Midlands Regional Chamber	Advantage West Midlands
East Midlands Regional Assembly	East Midlands Development Agency
East of England Regional Assembly	East of England Development Agency
South West Regional Chamber Agency	South West of England Regional Development
South East England Regional Assembly	South East England Development Agency

Shipping Industry

Mr. Ivan Henderson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he will publish his response to the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs Committee's Twelfth report of Session 1998–99 into the Future of the UK Shipping Industry (HC 172); and if he will make a statement. [93700]

Mr. Prescott: We welcome the Committee's report which generally supported our policy paper "British Shipping: Charting a new course" which is designed to initiate the action required to reverse the decline in the UK's shipping industry. We are today publishing our formal response which has been laid before the House.

Greater London Assembly

Mr. McNulty: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, pursuant to his answer of 13 July 1999, *Official Report*, column *130*, what progress has been made with preparations for the London Mayor and Assembly since that answer. [93702]

Mr. Raynsford: Good progress continues to be made. The Head of Transition, Dr. Robert Chilton, is assembling a team of people with backgrounds in local government, the civil service, other parts of the public sector, and the private sector. They are developing plans to ensure that the Mayor and Assembly can get off to a good start, with suitable administrative and financial support in place. The team moved into their temporary accommodation in Romney House, Westminster last week. I hope to issue shortly a consultation document about the initial organisation of the Greater London Authority.

Mr. Alan Keen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has for a publicity campaign leading up to the elections for the Mayor and Assembly in London. [93799]

Mr. Raynsford: At the proposed elections on 4 May 2000, for the first Mayor and Assembly for London, the people of London will be facing a different and more complicated ballot than normal. For the first time, they will have a first and second choice when voting for the

Mayor. They will also vote for a constituency Assembly Member and for a party in the pan-London ballot which is the basis for electing the 'top-up' Assembly Members. The Government have decided therefore to run an information campaign to ensure that eligible Londoners know how the voting system will work at these very important elections for the future of their city.

As the Greater London Authority is a new form of governance, there will also be information available about the duties and responsibilities of the new Mayor and Assembly. This will be an information campaign and will in no way compete with any political campaigns candidates may run.

No expenditure will be committed on the campaign until the Greater London Authority Bill receives Royal Assent.

Trans-European Transport Networks

Mr. Stringer: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what will be the United Kingdom's share of the funds available in 1999 for priority projects and other schemes under the European Community's Financing Programme for Trans-European Transport Networks. [93704]

Mrs. Liddell: Two priority projects in the United Kingdom will receive some £27.8 million. £19.3 million will go towards the Channel Tunnel Rail Link and £8.5 million towards the West Coast Main Line. The UK will also receive over £4 million for other schemes, including £2.16 million for four projects to improve ground transport access to Birmingham, Manchester, London Luton and London City airports, and £1.6 million for a development study of satellite-based aviation and marine navigation systems.

Channel Tunnel Rail Link

Mr. Alan Keen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if the agreement between the Secretary of State and London and Continental Railways to build the Channel Tunnel Rail Link, known as the Development Agreement, will be made publicly available. [93800]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The Development Agreement between the Secretary of State and London and Continental Railways as signed in 1996 was revised this year by two supplemental agreements known as the 2nd and 3rd Supplemental Agreements to the Development Agreement. Annexed to the 2nd Supplemental Agreement is a print of the entire revised text. I have arranged for both Supplemental Agreements to be placed in the House of Commons Library.

Airport Transport Forums

Mr. Stringer: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when the final guidance on the setting up of airport transport forums, announced in the New Deal for Transport White Paper, will be published; and if he will make a statement. [93801]

Ms Glenda Jackson: Guidance on the setting up of Airport Transport Forums and the preparation of Airport Surface Access Strategies was published today, and copies have been placed in the House Libraries.

The Government's White Paper on the Future of Transport "A New Deal for Transport: Better for Everyone" (Cm 3950) stated that all airports in England with scheduled services should establish Airport Transport Forums and prepare Airport Surface Access Strategies to feed into Local Transport Plans.

On 31 March, we published draft guidance on what was required, and invited a wide range of interested parties, including airports, local authorities, planning bodies, transport providers etc. to comment. Responses to the consultation draft of this guidance were overwhelming supportive of the setting up of Airport Transport Forums and the preparation of Airport Surface Access Strategies. The guidance requires those airports which have 1,000 or more scheduled and charter passenger air transport movements per annum to set up Forums. It has been agreed that the requirement to set up Forums, and the guidance, will apply to Wales as well as to England. Separate guidance will be published in respect of Scotland.

A separate good practice guide, with illustrations of surface access improvements which meet the principles set out in the guidance and have already been implemented successfully at airports, is being prepared jointly with the Airport Operators Association and will be published later this Summer.

Electoral Review

Miss Melanie Johnson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he will confirm the arrangements he intends to follow to implement the periodic electoral review recommendations of the Local government Commission for England; and if he will make a statement. [93804]

Ms Armstrong: We have now considered the responses to the consultation, which I announced on 10 March 1999, *Official Report*, column *244*, on proposals for implementing periodic electoral reviews (PERs).

Our intention remains to implement the recommendations of the Local Government Commission for England as soon as practicable on a normal election date for councils. Our consultation has shown that there is no consensus on holding additional elections to implement PERs, and we have concluded that it would not be desirable to do so.

Accordingly, we intend to implement the Commission's recommendations as follows. For district councils that hold whole council elections and where final recommendations are received by July 2002, implementation is to be on the normal election day in May 2003. For district councils that elect by thirds, where final recommendations have already been received, implementation is to be on the normal election day in May 2000; where final recommendations are received between August 1999 and 2001, implementation is to be on the normal election day in May 2002; and where final recommendations are received no later than July 2002 on the normal election day in May 2003.

The Commission's recommendations for a county council are to be implemented only after recommendations have been made and implemented for all the district councils in a county area. Subject to this, where final recommendations for county councils are received no later than July 2000, they are to be implemented on the

normal election day in May 2001; subsequent final recommendations are to be implemented on the normal election day in 2005.

I am asking the Local Government Commission to consider their programme of PERs having regard to our intended approach to implementation and with a view to ensuring that all councils in England will have updated electoral arrangements in place by 2005.

Galvanised Steel Wall Ties

Miss Melanie Johnson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he is now in a position to report on the further research his Department commissioned on galvanised steel wall ties. [93805]

Mr. Raynsford: The then Energy Efficiency Minister announced on 19 January 1998, *Official Report*, column *374*, that as part of my Department's ongoing programme of research into rain penetration of cavity walls, she had asked for precautionary checks to be carried out on the condition of galvanised steel wire wall ties in a sample of houses with cavity walls filled with insulation. This followed the preliminary results of research at the BRE which indicated that there was a possibility that the life expectancy of green coloured galvanised steel wire wall ties might be shortened when used in conjunction with urea formaldehyde from cavity fill.

These checks have now been completed along with further experimental research and an independent review of the findings.

In the houses examined, there was no premature deterioration of galvanised ties with or without the green identification film in contact with urea formaldehyde foam cavity insulation.

The further experimental research was carried out on galvanised ties with and without the green identification film. The research comprised accelerated corrosion tests and chemical interactive tests with urea formaldehyde foam. Neither of these experiments indicated any discernible loss of galvanising.

With these results to hand and with the benefit of an independent review undertaken by consultants WS Atkins, BRE re-examined their earlier experimental findings. They have concluded that the accelerated corrosion observed under the experimental conditions could have been caused by vapour from the urea formaldehyde which under certain conditions of very high humidity can lead to very high rates of corrosion of galvanising. The conditions under which this could happen were present in the preliminary experimental research, but were unlikely to occur in houses.

The work concludes that there is no evidence that urea formaldehyde foam cavity wall insulation shortens the lifetime of galvanised wall ties.

Copies of these results have been placed in the House Library.

Recycling (Packaging)

Mr. Burgon: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what further advice he has had from the Advisory Committee on Packaging on progress towards meeting targets for increased recycling and recovery of packaging. [93821]

Mr. Meacher: I am grateful to the Committee for further advice, which among other things, seeks a more rigorous approach to implementation through introduction of quarterly compliance reporting and forward planning for increasing recycling and recovery of packaging waste. I shall be including these proposals in the consultation paper on inter sectoral share out and other matters which I hope to publish very shortly. Copies of both documents will be placed in the Library.

Green Ministers' Report

Mr. Burgon: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he expects to publish the Green Ministers' Report. [93822]

Mr. Meacher: "Greening Government: the first annual report of Green Minsters" will be published tomorrow. The report provides a comprehensive account of what Green Ministers have been doing—and will do in future—to promote sustainable development, to integrate the environment into policies and to green their Departments' operations. The Report introduces targets, action plans and strategies across the wide range of activities of Green Ministers: waste, energy, water, transport, training and awareness raising, integrating the environment into policy and involving associate bodies. Copies will be placed in the Library.

Housing Stock (Debts)

Mr. Pike: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) what is his policy on resolving problems relating to overhanging debt and early debt repayment premiums relating to the Housing Stock Transfer Programme; [93093]

(2) when he expects to publish the consultation paper on overhanging debt and early debt repayment premiums affecting the Housing Stock Transfer Programme; [93092]

(3) what the Chancellor of the Exchequer's policy is on the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Region's proposal for dealing with the problem of overhanging debt and early debt repayment premiums relating to the transfer of housing stock by Burnley Borough Council. [93091]

Mr. Raynsford: We aim to issue shortly a consultation paper setting out options for tackling the problem of overhanging debt which arises where the receipt from a housing transfer is insufficient to cover the authority's attributable housing debt.

London Transport

Mr. Woodward: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many of the Government's performance targets for *(a)* London Underground and *(b)* London Buses have been met in the last two years. [91528]

Ms Glenda Jackson: This level of performance reflects an investment backlog of around £1.2 billion on the Underground, and increased traffic congestion on the roads. This is one of the reasons we have decided to

allocate an additional £517 million of resources to London Transport, in addition to the £365 million of extra resources announced last year. This will enable them to deliver real improvements to passengers over the next two years.

Equal Treatment

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he has established a baseline for policy appraisal against which to measure progress on equal treatment. [93461]

Mr. Meale: As part of the Government's commitment to ensuring that their policies are relevant to the lives that people live today, my Department is working with the Women's Unit, Home Office and DfEE to develop good practices for ensuring that our policies meet the changing needs of all members of society.

"Policy Appraisal for Equal Treatment", published by the Cabinet Office, Home Office, DfEE and the Women's Unit in November 1998 has been circulated to staff within my Department to ensure that the effects of any policy changes on all sections of the population are considered at the earliest stage of policy development.

Road Lane Experiments

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many experiments the Highways Agency plans to undertake with *(a)* high-occupancy vehicle lanes, *(b)* bus and taxi lanes and *(c)* no-car lanes. [93372]

Ms Glenda Jackson: Four priority lane pilot schemes have been implemented to date. All are bus lanes. The Highways Agency is investigating where giving priority to certain types of traffic would be beneficial in tackling congestion in the context of the integrated transport policy. All such proposals will be monitored to ensure that the scheme objectives are realised.

Monitoring of the M4 bus lane and its associated speed limits have shown increased traffic capacity of the elevated section and improved journey times for all road users. Average savings to buses, coaches and taxis in the morning and evening periods are over 3 minutes. Other vehicles benefiting by average savings of 1 minute and 2½ in the morning and evening peaks respectively.

Rail Operators (Pricing Policy)

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will carry out an investigation into the pricing policies of rail operators in respect of *(a)* the solar eclipse and *(b)* the millennium holiday. [93701]

Ms Glenda Jackson: Plans for the millennium holiday have not yet been finalised but for the solar eclipse First Great Western (FGW) and other operators are planning to run more services to Cornwall. There are capacity constraints which limit the number of additional services which can be accommodated. Wales and West are planning to strengthen the services they run normally by adding extra vehicles.

Demand for transport to see the eclipse and over the millennium holiday may be such that there will not be spare capacity. Train operators may therefore feel themselves unable to offer discounted tickets that are normally used to fill otherwise empty seats. Regulated tickets, including Saver tickets, will be available.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Genetically Modified Crops

Joan Ruddock: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, pursuant to his answer of 16 June 1999, *Official Report*, columns *192–93*, on genetically modified foods, if the feeding studies on animals over the period 1994 to 1996 used crops treated with Round-up; and if he will make a statement. [92106]

Mr. Rooker: Following an extensive compositional analysis of Monsanto's genetically modified soya beans, the ACNFP concluded that treatment with glyphosate did not alter the composition of the soya beans themselves. The only difference seen when the GM soya beans are treated with glyphosate is a slightly greater level of the metabolite aminomethylphosphonic acid. The toxicity of glyphosate and its metabolites have been studied as part of the approval process for glyphosate and shown to be of low toxicity to humans. The ACNFP was thus satisfied that the safety of Monsanto's GM soya beans had been fully characterised and that the sacrifice of further animals in additional feeding studies using glyphosate treated soya beans was therefore unnecessary.

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what representations he has received on the effects of broad-spectrum herbicides applied to growing genetically modified crops; and how many research projects commissioned in the United Kingdom by his Department are currently under way to investigate the potential risks of genetically modified organisms. [92706]

Mr. Rooker: MAFF has received numerous representations from individuals and organisations concerning the use of broad-spectrum herbicides in the cultivation of genetically modified crops. Views have varied from those who support the technology for the potential benefits it can bring to those who express concern over the possible environmental or human health effects of the use of pesticides on such crops.

At present there are 29 MAFF-Commissioned projects (costing £1.7 million in 1999–2000) investigating food safety issues and possible risks to the environment arising from the introduction of genetically modified organisms.

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what recent reports he has received from the United States Department of Agriculture on *(a)* the yields of genetically modified crops grown in the United States and *(b)* the number of cases of spray drift damage to adjoining non-genetically modified crops. [92633]

Mr. Rooker: I have received no such reports from the US Department of Agriculture.

Joan Ruddock: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what plans SCIMAC has to review their guidelines for separation distances between GM and non-GM crops; and if he will make a statement. [92395]

Mr. Rooker: I understand that SCIMAC expect to review all the documentation describing their stewardship programme for the introduction of GM crops, including separation distances, at least once a year. Changes to the guidelines could also be made at any other time if information becomes available which would significantly affect the advice given.

Non-departmental Public Bodies

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will list the non-departmental public bodies in existence on 1 May 1997 that *(a)* have been disbanded, indicating when they were disbanded, *(b)* will be disbanded in the next 12 months, *(c)* have had their functions transferred to (i) another non-departmental public body and (ii) a democratically elected body, *(d)* have been renamed but continue to perform a similar role and *(e)* have been unchanged; if he will indicate in (c)(ii) the relevant successor body; what new non-departmental public bodies have been established since 1 May 1997; and how many non-departmental public bodies his Department currently is responsible for. [90673]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 19 July 1999]: (a)* The following non-departmental public bodies have been disbanded since 1 May 1997:

Body	*Date disbanded*
Nine advisory Regional Panels	28 May 1997
Consultative panel on Badgers and Bovine Tuberculosis	17 August 1998
Sugar Beet Research and Education Committee	30 March 1999

(b) None

(c) Nine of the MAFF non-departmental public bodies have had their functions transferred to:

(i) another non-departmental public body

(ii) a democratically elected body

(d) None of the MAFF non-departmental public bodies have been renamed but continue to perform a similar role.

(e) Details of all other non-departmental public bodies in existence on 1 May 1997 are listed in "Public Bodies 1997", which is available to Members in the Libraries of the House.

The Potato Industry Development Council (known as the British Potato Council) was established on 1 July 1997. The Council is funded by a levy on the industry.

The Advisory Committee on Animal Feeding Stuffs was set up, and the full list of members announced by my hon. Friend the Minister of State on 13 July 1999, *Official Report*, column *176*. The first meeting will be held in September.

My right hon. Friend is currently responsible for 33 non-departmental public bodies, of which three are multiple bodies.

The Government are committed to keeping the number of non-departmental public bodies to a minimum and to ensuring that those which remain are open, accountable and effective. Many of the new non-departmental public bodies established since 1 May 1997 are essential in helping the Government deliver their Manifesto commitments.

Agricultural Attaché

Sir Richard Body: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make it his policy that each British embassy in each EU member country has an agricultural attaché. [92433]

Mr. Rooker: All British Embassies in EU countries have Officers responsible for Agricultural matters. In four of these, Bonn, Paris, Rome and Madrid, the Officers are seconded from the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food. In the other 10, the Officers are members of Her Majesty's Diplomatic Service, covering other EU issues as well as agriculture. The UK Permanent Representative to the European Union in Brussels also has five MAFF officers covering agriculture.

Officials in my Department, in liaison with the territorial departments, ensure that Officers are kept up to date on all aspects of UK agricultural policy, through day-to-day contact and regular briefing meetings in London.

Agricultural Exports

Mr. Paice: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what representations he has made to the EU Commission to allow the export of *(a)* breeding cattle, *(b)* bovine semen, *(c)* bovine embryos and *(d)* breeding sheep. [92399]

Mr. Rooker: The export of bovine semen and breeding sheep from the UK is permitted.

We have not yet made any formal proposals to the Commission on lifting the export ban on embryos and breeding cattle. Up to now we have been concentrating our efforts on the Date-based Export Scheme which enables the resumption of British beef exports. Further relaxations in the export ban covering live cattle and embryos are steps foreseen in the Florence agreement. We need now to consider carefully, in the light of the views of the Government's scientific advisers, and in consultation with interested parties when to open negotiations on these.

Climate Change Levy

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what discussions his Department has had with the Treasury regarding an exemption for protected horticulture from the proposed climate change levy. [92299]

Mr. Rooker: MAFF officials have discussed the Climate Change Levy with the Treasury. MAFF and Treasury Ministers are aware of the concerns being expressed by the horticultural industry about the impact the Climate Change Levy might have on sectoral competitiveness.

Quarantine

Mr. Drew: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (1) when he plans to end the system of quarantine for animals arriving in the United Kingdom; and if he will make a statement; [91995]

(2) if he will make a statement on the means by which he will introduce pet passports. [91996]

Mr. Rooker *[holding answers 21 July 1999]:* My right hon. Friend the Minister announced the Government's plans to reform the rabies quarantine rules on 26 March 1999, *Official Report,* columns *649–60.* The new arrangements will be brought into operation by April 2001, with a pilot scheme as soon as possible (and in any event by April 2000). We will give more details in the near future.

Pigmeat Industry

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what steps he has taken to promote the use of United Kingdom produced pigmeat products by Government Departments, local authorities and other related agencies. [92625]

Mr. Rooker: To promote the benefits of British pig production practices, my right hon. Friend the Minister has written to his Cabinet colleagues in Departments with public procurement responsibilities. In these letters, the guarantees that British pigmeat can offer were underlined and attention was also drawn to the good story which the industry has to tell in respect of its efforts on quality assured and welfare friendly production practices. The responses received indicate that quality assured and welfare friendly production practices play a full part in the tender specifications laid down by public procurement bodies.

We believe that the most effective way to achieve change in the practices of reluctant authorities is for contact to be made at the local level, both by the industry and by local MPs. On those occasions where contact has been made, it seems to have had an effect and we hope this will continue. Indeed, to help it along, my right hon. Friend has decided to write to all MPs actively encouraging them to make contact with public authorities in their constituencies and discuss the procurement policies in respect of pork and pork products.

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make a statement on the current state of the British pig industry. [92705]

Mr. Rooker: Although market prices in the UK were static for a period in the late spring/early summer, there has been a recent modest price increase and I hope this continues. None the less, the Government are fully aware of the difficulties still facing the pig industry and will continue to do all they can to help while recognising that pigs are traded in a relatively free market with limited opportunity for direct Government involvement. I believe that the new MLC British Pig Executive and the imminent formation of the National Pig Association are important steps in bringing the industry together and will help it build a bright future.

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what recent representations he has received from representatives of the pigmeat industry on the cost to individual producers of offal disposal; and if he will make a statement. [92541]

Mr. Rooker: We have received a number of representations from the pig industry on the cost of offal disposal, both from individuals and from representative organisations. Also, this issue has been raised with my right hon. Friend the Minister by the Chairman of the MLC.

Beef

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if cattle which meet the requirements for export can also be sold on the domestic market. [92343]

Mr. Nick Brown *[holding answer 22 July 1999]:* Yes.

Dairy Industry

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many dairy firms went out of business in the last year; and what assessment he has made of the causes of those firms ceasing to trade. [92624]

Mr. Rooker: Information in the form requested is not available. The information available relates to the number of main holdings in the United Kingdom with dairy cows at the June agriculture census, which were estimated to be 36,300 at June 1997 and 35,300 at June 1998. Results from the June 1999 census are not yet available. Holdings can continue with the same activities even though they change ownership and conversely can change their activities while continuing in the same farming business.

Farmers

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many farmers there were in business *(a)* 10 years ago and *(b)* at the latest available date. [92717]

Mr. Rooker: The information available relates to agriculture holdings rather than farm businesses; some businesses operate more than one holding. The 1988 June agriculture census recorded 247,300 agriculture holdings in the United Kingdom. The equivalent figure for 1998, the latest available, was 237,900.

Fish-eating Birds

Mrs. Golding: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food when the results of his research studies into the effect of fish-eating birds on fisheries will be published. [92626]

Mr. Rooker: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply given by the Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, my hon. Friend the Member for Mansfield (Mr. Meale) on 29 June 1999, *Official Report,* column *92.*

Ministerial Travel

Mr. Baker: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food on what date he last used a train in the course of his official duties. [92655]

Mr. Nick Brown *[holding answer 23 July 1999]:* In accordance with the terms of the Ministerial Code, Ministers are required always to make efficient and cost-effective travel arrangements. The last time I used a train in the course of my official duties was on 23 July when visiting Pig Farmers in Yorkshire.

Pet Travel Scheme

Mr. Prosser: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what vaccines will be used in the new pet travel scheme and what laboratories will be able to

undertake testing; and if he will make a statement on the progress of the arrangements that are being put in place for the introduction of the pilot schemes next year. [93042]

Mr. Rooker: Pet cats and dogs taking part in the forthcoming Pet Travel Scheme must be vaccinated against rabies using an inactivated vaccine approved for the purpose by the authorities of the country in which the animal has been resident. There are two such vaccines currently authorised for use in the UK: Nobivac and Rabisin.

Details of the laboratories that may carry out blood tests for the Pet Travel Scheme will be announced shortly.

Mr. Prosser: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what representations he has received on managing the changeover from the present quarantine regulations to the new pet travel scheme. [93043]

Mr. Rooker: I have received representations from a number of individuals and from organisations representing pet owners and the owners of quarantine premises. A Pet Travel Scheme Advisory Group has been set up. This includes representatives from the quarantine industry and others with a direct interest in the Pet Travel Scheme. The Group provides the Government with advice on the Pet Travel Scheme, including managing the changeover from the present arrangements.

Live Animal Exports

Mr. Prosser: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food when he plans to introduce the new arrangements under which *(a)* he will nominate the certifying local veterinary inspectors to individual consignments of live farm animals destined for export and *(b)* he will pay the inspectors and recover the costs for this service through charges on the exporter; and if he will make a statement. [93041]

Mr. Rooker: We are currently considering the responses to the consultation exercise. We will announce our decision in due course.

Veterinary Surgeons

Mr. Paterson: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will publish details of the performance assessments of official veterinary surgeons and their inspection teams. [88281]

Mr. Rooker: Performance appraisals are conducted for all Meat Hygiene Service (MHS) staff, whilst contract appraisals are carried out for those Official Veterinary Surgeons (OVSs) and inspection staff contracted to the MHS.

Both types of appraisal are considered confidential and may contain commercial information relating to the workings of a particular plant. It would therefore be inappropriate for details of these assessments to be published.

GM Foods

Mr. Baker: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what is the *(a)* volume and *(b)* value of (i) GM soya and (ii) GM maize imported into the United Kingdom from the United States for each of the last three years. [93076]

Mr. Rooker *[holding answer 26 July 1999]:* Total imports of maize and soya beans from the USA for each of the past three years were as follows:

	Maize (unmilled)		*Soya beans*	
	Tonnes	*Value (£ million)*	*Tonnes*	*Value (£ million)*
1996	12,971	3.5	409,762	77.9
1997	7,206	2.9	474,226	86.2
1998	7,634	2.5	459,804	71.0

Trade statistics do not enable us to differentiate between GM and non-GM material.

Genetically Free Products

Joan Ruddock: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what discussions *(a)* he has had with European Environment Ministers, and *(b)* his officials have had with Commission officials on the definition of genetically free products for labelling purposes. [93192]

Mr. Rooker *[holding answer 26 July 1999]:* No such discussions have taken place with European Environment Ministers on this subject but European Commission officials have recently informed officials here that a Commission proposal on the labelling of GM free claims is planned for the autumn. This proposal will be widely circulated for comment when it is received.

Regulatory Capture

Mr. Baker: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what assessment he has made of the allegations of regulatory capture of US Food and Drugs Administration and the implication thereof for the forthcoming WTO discussions in Seattle. [93071]

Mr. Rooker *[holding answer 26 July 1999]:* None.

Mouse-breeding Facilities

Mr. Baker: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if his Department's mouse-breeding facilities conform to the requirements of the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986. [93074]

Mr. Rooker *[holding answer 26 July 1999]:* Yes. The Department's mouse-breeding facilities do comply with the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food for what reasons his Department has mouse-breeding facilities. [93075]

Mr. Rooker *[holding answer 26 July 1999]:* My Department has mouse-breeding facilities to generate mice for use in research projects approved under the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986.

Milk Marque

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what assessment he has made of the impact of his proposals for Milk Marque on the access of Milk Marque's members to CAP support measures. [93248]

Mr. Rooker: I would not expect there to be a significant impact in the foreseeable future on access to CAP support measures resulting from the recommendations of the Monopolies and Mergers Commission.

Belize

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food on which occasions since 1993 his Department has received written or oral approaches from the hon. Member for Hertford and Stortford (Mr. Wells) on matters relating to fruit production in Belize since 1993. [93240]

Mr. Rooker: The information requested needs to be researched. I will write to my hon. Friend during the first week of August.

Bees (Genetically Modified Crops)

Mr. Steen: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will issues guidance to bee-keepers about protection from contact with genetically modified material in cases where they wish to label their produce as organic and non-genetically modified; and if he will make a statement. [93201]

Mr. Rooker: Existing UK rules on organic honey production require that hives are not placed within four miles of conventionally farmed land, private gardens, or areas subject to inorganic pollution. Following the recent agreement on Community livestock standards, including rules on honey production, the United Kingdom Register of Organic Food Standards (UKROFS) will be re-examining existing UK standards to determine the changes that will need to be made. This is likely to include the issue of controls on possible GM contamination.

In the meantime, beekeepers are advised to contact the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions for details and location of experimental GM sites so that they may relocate their hives should they so wish.

Hunting

Mr. Maclean: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what provision he will make for veterinary supervision and carcase disposal in accordance with European directives, following the introduction of a ban on hunting. [93487]

Mr. Rooker: European Community legislation on the disposal of animal carcases is already implemented in Great Britain by the Animal By-Products Order 1999, which is primarily enforced by local authorities. There are no plans to amend the Order in connection with a ban on hunting.

Rabies

Mr. Maclean: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what assessment he has made of the effect of a ban on hunting on the risk of an outbreak of rabies in this country; and what arrangements he has made to review quarantine regulations governing the importation of animals. [93484]

Mr. Rooker: A ban on hunting would have no impact on the risk of an outbreak of rabies occurring in this country.

On 26 March 1999, *Official Report*, columns 649–60, my right hon. Friend the Minister announced that he is going to change the law to allow dogs, cats and some other species coming from European Union and certain other qualifying countries to enter the UK without quarantine, provided that they meet certain conditions. The new arrangements will be brought into operation by April 2001, with a pilot scheme as soon as possible, and in any event by April 2000.

Beef Imports (Specified Risk Materials)

Mr. Drew: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if there have been any recent cases of spinal cord discovered in imported beef. [93826]

Mr. Nick Brown: Since the beginning of June, a number of imported beef forequarters containing small sections of spinal cord have been discovered by Meat Hygiene Service and State Veterinary Service staff at a cutting plant in Great Britain. These forequarters all originated from slaughterhouses in the Republic of Ireland and have been destroyed.

In response to the Chief Veterinary Officer's request for urgent action by the authorities in the Republic of Ireland, the veterinary authorities there have undertaken to penalise the veterinary inspectors responsible for certifying the beef. They have also told the Irish Meat Association that any failure by a member company to implement the specified risk material (SRM) controls will result in the withdrawal of the Supplementary certification for export to the UK. Their unannounced inspections will also be stepped up. Meat Hygiene Service staff at licensed cutting plants and local authorities are being asked to pay particular attention to beef carcases imported from the Republic of Ireland.

Since March 1996, the State Veterinary Service's audit has found no spinal cord specified risk material in beef derived from animals slaughtered in Great Britain. The results of these audits are published in the monthly BSE Enforcement Bulletin.

Ministerial Visits

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (1) if he will list the countries visited by himself and his predecessor since 1 May 1997; [92804]

(2) when he intends to visit *(a)* Poland, *(b)* Hungary, *(c)* the Czech Republic, *(d)* Slovenia and *(e)* Estonia. [92690]

Mr. Nick Brown: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply given by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister on 17 June 1999, *Official Report*, columns *196–97*.

I plan to visit a number of the candidate countries this autumn.

Cattle Health Scheme

Mr. Blizzard: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, pursuant to his answer to the hon. Member for Waveney of 9 March 1999, *Official Report*, column *193*, on the Cattle Health Scheme, if he will provide an update on the future of the Cattle Health Scheme. [93926]

Mr. Rooker: Under new animal health trade rules agreed during the last UK Presidency of the EU Council, a case requesting designation of Great Britain as officially EBL-Free was submitted to the EU Commission in May. The Standing Veterinary Committee voted in favour of a Commission Decision granting the status to Great Britain on 2 July. It came into effect on 1 July. The Decision also retained EBL-Free status for Northern Ireland. From 1 July 1999 all herds in GB are to be regarded as officially EBL-Free unless the presence of the disease is suspected in a particular herd.

The Cattle Health Scheme attests herds as being individually free of EBL, so may not be needed now that GB freedom is achieved. Officials are writing to all members of the Scheme and to the cattle industry to consult them on the future of the Scheme. The formal acknowledgement of our EBL-Free status from the EU is good news for farmers and will reduce bureaucracy. We will of course maintain controls on cattle imports in accordance with EU rules.

"Commitment to Service"

Mr. Blizzard: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what progress his Department has made in meeting the service delivery targets set out in the paper, "Commitment to Service". [93892]

Mr. Nick Brown: The table sets out the performance achieved by the Regional Service Centres during 1998–99 against the targets published in the Charter document "Commitment to Service", second edition.

RSC performance data (%) for Financial Year 1998–99 [1]

Scheme		*Total*
Arable Area Payments Scheme	Main payments	99
Oilseeds	Advanced payments	99
	Final payments	99
Beef Special Premium Scheme	Advance payments (1998)	99
	Balance payments (1997)	99
	CID applications issued (1998)	99
	Premium paid CIDs issued (1998)	99
Suckler Cow Premium Scheme	Balance payments 1997	99
	Advance payments 1998	98
Hill Livestock Compensatory Allowances	Claims 1998	99
Sheep Annual Premium Scheme	Claims marketing year 1998	99
Environmentally Sensitive Areas	Applications	84
	Claims	96
Environmentally Sensitive Areas Conservation Plan	Applications	73
	Claims	84
Farm Woodland Premium Scheme	Applications	84
	Claims (1998)	98
Injurious Weeds	Complaints	99
New Nitrate Sensitive Areas Scheme	Applications (1998)	92
	Claims	99
Protection of Badgers Act 1992	Licence applications	98
Strychnine Permits	Applications	99
Agricultural Wage Inspections	Complaints	95
Wildlife and Countryside Act	Licence applications	98
Correspondence	Answered within 10 working days	97
Complaints	Numbers receiving response within 10 working days	87

[1] Unless otherwise specified

Notes:

1. The relatively high failure rate for the FWPS Applications was due to the diversion of staff resources in two of the RSCs to higher priority work.
2. The relatively poor performance for the ESA Schemes was primarily caused by uneven workloads, staff turnover and the introduction of a new computer system.
3. The 87 per cent. response rate to complaints to the RSCs is explained by the fact that often cases require referral to HQ or the National Scheme Management Centres and thus take some time to resolve. It must be stressed however that in all cases where the 10 day target was not met a holding letter was issued to the complainant.

General Notes:

(i) The total percentage has been calculated by setting the entire number of applications or claims cleared within the target time, against the total number received. Applications and claims not cleared due to reasons beyond our control (incorrect information supplied by applicant, etc.) are not included as failures to meet target.

(ii) The Farm Conservation Grant Schemes 1989 and 1991 Applications and Claims and Pilot NSA Claims have been omitted from the table since these schemes are now closed.

(iii) During the year 16 formal complaints were made to MAFF's central Complaints Adjudicator, of which two were referred elsewhere and three are still outstanding. Of the cases dealt with, six were determined in the complainants favour and five were not upheld.

Common Agricultural Policy

Mr. Stephen Twigg: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food when he will be consulting the farming industry on his proposals to implement the discretionary aspects of the reformed Common Agricultural Policy. [93602]

Mr. Nick Brown: The reform of the CAP decided at the Berlin European Council introduced a number of policy areas where member states were given discretion as to whether and/or how they would be applied. In the information notes I circulated to the farming industry and other interested parties following that agreement I undertook to consult widely on the Government's plans would be set in the context of an overall strategy for agriculture which takes into account the need for a competitive, flexible and environmentally friendly industry, which is responsive to consumer wishes and which contributes to the social and economic strengths of rural areas.

I intend accordingly to write to interested parties including farming industry representatives in the coming weeks setting out my ideas for such a strategy and how the discretionary aspects of the reformed CAP should be applied in this country to help set a new direction for the industry. My Department will also be conducting a series of regional consultants. Members of Parliament will be sent a copy of the consultation documents individually. We will consider responses carefully and announce final decisions during the Autumn.

Comparable action is being taken in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Veterinary Medicines

Mr. Blizzard: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food when he expects to receive a report from the Veterinary Products Committee on the safety of veterinary medicines other than sheep dips which have an organophosphorus compound as the active ingredient; and if he will make a statement. [93893]

Mr. Rooker: I have now received a report from the Veterinary Products Committee (VPC) and I have placed a copy in the Library of the House.

The Government have accepted the VPC's advice that, although there is no evidence that the products concerned are harmful if used in accordance with recommended precautions, marketing authorisation holders should provide additional data to demonstrate the safety of their products. If they are able to provide such date, the Government will take further advice from the VPC on appropriate regulatory action.

Compliance Costs

Mr. Chidgey: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what reductions were achieved in the compliance costs of regulation administered by his Department and its public bodies for the last year for which data is available; what mechanisms exist for monitoring the post-implementation cost of such regulation; and if he has established targets for reduction in the compliance costs of regulation administered by his Department and its public bodies. [92315]

Mr. Rooker *[holding answer 26 July 1999]:* Details of regulations which imposed compliance costs on, or achieved compliance savings to, business are published in the Department's regulatory impact assessments and laid in both Houses. Summaries are published in the six monthly Command Paper, and are available on a monthly basis on the Cabinet Office Regulatory Impact Unit's web site.

Regulations are regularly reviewed.

We have not set an arbitrary target for reducing the compliance costs of regulations. However, in line with Cabinet Office guidance, we assess the risks, costs and benefits of any regulatory proposal which has an impact on business before taking it forward. We always try to keep the burden imposed on business to the minimum necessary.

The Department published details on the quality and quantity of its regulatory activity in the departmental annual Report.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Gold Sales

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many representations his Department have received on the sale of excess gold reserves by the Bank of England; and from what sources. [92824]

Ms Hewitt: I have been asked to reply.

Representations have been received from a number of Governments, gold producers, gold traders, trade unions, Members of Parliament and members of the public.

Sudan

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what reports he has received of military action by the Government of Sudan in the Nuba Mountains region. [89522]

Mr. Hoon: I shall write to the hon. Member shortly and place copies of the letter in the Libraries of the House.

European Commission Staff

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if secondary employment by senior European Commission staff is required to be registered with the Commission; how many of those in senior grades have secondary employment; and if in all cases such employment is in fields unconnected with the Directorate-General in which they work. [91908]

Ms Quin: I shall write to the hon. Member shortly and place copies of the letter in the Libraries of the House.

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, pursuant to his answer of 21 June 1999, *Official Report*, column *276*, on European Commission staff, if he will request the Secretary General of the European Commission *(a)* to supply a breakdown of total numbers of employees (i) of each Directorate General and (ii) other parts of the Commission who have been given permission to take secondary employment,

(b) to supply a copy of the codes adopted by the Commission to determine whether such permission should be given and *(c)* to indicate at what administrative level such decisions have been made. [92033]

Ms Quin: For reasons of personal confidentiality, the Commission does not publish information about the secondary employment of officials below the level of Commissioner. Decisions on secondary employment are normally made by Director-Generals (or, if a Director-General is seeking permission, by the appropriate Commissioner) on the basis of the staff regulations mentioned in my answer on 21 June 1999, *Official Report*, column *276*. These state that permission to take secondary employment should be refused if the nature of the work would impair the official's independence or be detrimental to the work of the Communities.

Spanish Socialist Opposition Party

Mr. Maples: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when he or his staff last met the leader of the Spanish Socialist opposition party. [91935]

Ms Quin: I shall write to the hon. Member shortly and place copies of the letter in the Libraries of the House.

European Communities Working Groups

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will deposit in the Library a list of European Communities working groups, indicating the department responsible for supplying the seconded staff at UKREP. [91845]

Ms Quin: I shall reply to the hon. Member shortly and place copies of the letter in the Libraries of the House.

European Communities Secretariats (Documents)

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will request of the relevant European Communities secretariats the number of *(a)* instruments not published in the Official Journal, *(b)* routine management instruments valid for a limited time and *(c)* opinions given by comitology committees, in 1998. [91846]

Ms Quin: I shall reply to the hon. Member shortly and place copies of the letter in the Libraries of the House.

Prime Minister (Personal Representatives)

Mr. Maples: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list all overseas missions undertaken by personal representatives of the Prime Minister or himself since May 1997, where the representatives were neither Ministers nor officials. [90288]

Mr. Robin Cook *[holding answer 8 July 1999]:* As has been the practice for previous Administrations, if it is helpful to the UK Government individuals may be asked to carry messages or undertake particular tasks on behalf of the Prime Minister or the Foreign Secretary when they travel overseas. We do not maintain a comprehensive record of such occasions.

Ministerial Meetings

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many times Ministers in his Department held meetings with Ministers and officials of the Irish Government between 1 January 1998 and 31 December 1998, indicating the dates and locations of each meeting, the Ministers involved and the Irish ministers and officials at each meeting. [92273]

Mr. Robin Cook: I shall reply to the hon. Member shortly and place copies of the letter in the Libraries of the House.

Patents

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many patents have been registered by *(a)* his Department and *(b)* the Government Communications Headquarters since 1 January 1990. [92253]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: None.

Bilderberg Meetings

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if the members of the European Commission attending Bilderberg meetings have done so in their official capacity; and at what cost to public funds. [92864]

Ms Quin: I shall reply to the hon. Member shortly and place copies of the letter in the Libraries of the House.

Intergovernmental Conferences

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs in what circumstances the presidency is allowed access to tape recordings of intergovernmental conferences; and if he will list those occasions when such access has been provided. [92825]

Ms Quin: The Presidency does not have access to tape recordings of intergovernmental conferences. Recordings are made only to assist the Council Secretariat with its note taking.

Arms Brokers

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what consultation he has had with his European counterparts concerning the implementation of the German presidency proposal to control the activities of arms brokers. [92817]

Ms Quin: None. The German proposal is being discussed at working level in the CFSP Working Group on Conventional Arms Exports (COARM), which has not yet reached any conclusions.

Burma

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations he has received concerning the proposed anti-Government demonstrations in Burma on 9 September. [93045]

Mr. Hoon: We have not received any representations.

Kosovo

Mrs. Mahon: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what investigations KFOR is undertaking on the involvement of Hashim Thaci in the murders of Ilir Kanushevci, Ahmet Krasniqi, Agim Ramadani and Sali Ceku; and if he intends to refer this investigation to the International War Crimes Tribunal. [92719]

Mr. Tony Lloyd *[holding answer 23 July 1999]:* I shall reply to my hon. Friend shortly and place copies of the letter in the Libraries of the House.

Lord Levy

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what steps he has taken to ensure that there are no conflicts of interest between Lord Levy's business interests and his mission as an envoy for his Department. [93055]

Mr. Robin Cook *[holding answer 26 July 1999]:* Any invitation to Lord Levy to deliver messages from the Prime Minister will have taken account of the need to avoid conflicts of interest. I understand from Lord Levy that he has no business interests in Syria or Jordan.

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the security clearance of Lord Levy. [93056]

Mr. Robin Cook *[holding answer 26 July 1999]:* It is not the normal practice to comment on the security clearance of individuals.

Sellafield MOX Plant

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, pursuant to the reply to my hon. Friend the Member for Bury, North (Mr. Chaytor) of 19 July 1999, *Official Report*, column *429*, what plans his Department has to make a submission to the current MOX consultation. [93283]

Mr. Hoon: We have no plans to make a submission.

Exports (Licensed Goods)

Ann Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list the measures his Department takes to ensure that licensed goods are exported to the correct end-use destinations. [93511]

Mr. Tony Lloyd *[holding answer 26 July 1999]:* In accordance with our national export licensing criteria and those in the EU Code of Conduct on Arms Exports, when assessing relevant export licence applications we consider carefully whether there is a risk that the goods might be diverted or re-exported to an undesirable end-user.

All applications for Standard Individual Export Licences to export goods controlled for strategic reasons must be supported by appropriate End-User Undertakings, or, if the consignee is a Government body, a copy of the relevant part of the official purchase order or contract. We ask our overseas posts to carry out checks in cases where we wish to confirm the accuracy of the information contained in end-user documentation.

Wilton Park Executive Agency

Ann Keen: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how the Wilton Park Executive Agency performed against the targets agreed for 1998–99; and what are the agreed targets for the current year. [93803]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: Wilton Park exceeded all four of the agreed targets set for the 1998–99 financial year, for the number of conference participants, income, cost recovery and cost per head to the FCO overall.

1998–99 Targets:	
Income	£2,051K
Recovery of cost	81%
Number of Wilton Park conference participants	2,000
Cost to FCO per conference participant	£240

The following key targets have been agreed for the financial year 1999–2000:

1999–2000 Targets:	
To increase overall income to	£2,182K
To maintain cost recovery at	82.5%
To maintain the target for the overall number of Wilton Park conference participants at	2,000
To achieve an average cost to the FCO of each participant of	£232

Entry Clearance Interviews

Ann Keen: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs which post will be used as a trial for the tape recording of entry clearance interviews, as recommended in the Fourth report on the Foreign Affairs Committee of Session 1997–98 (HC 515). [93806]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: The entry clearance section at the British Deputy High Commission in Bombay will undertake this trial. The trial will run for a three month period from August until October this year. A further three months will be set aside to allow applicants time to register any observations arising from the trial. An evaluation of the trial should therefore be completed in February 2000.

Gracko

Mr. Winnick: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the killing of 14 Serbs at Gracko, Kosovo, on 23 July. [93808]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: We wholeheartedly condemn this massacre and strongly endorse the statement made yesterday by the President of the UN Security Council expressing shock and concern, calling for a speedy and thorough investigation to bring to justice those responsible, and expressing the Security Council's support for the efforts of KFOR and UNMIK to ensure peace and security for all the inhabitants of Kosovo.

UK members of KFOR are taking the lead in the investigation and we will do all we can to assist KFOR, UNMIK and the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia in their investigations.

With our partners in KFOR and UNMIK, we are committed to a democratic, multi-ethnic and peaceful Kosovo. Our aim is for Kosovo Serbs to stay in Kosovo, and for those who have left to return.

Millennium Compliance

Mr. David Atkinson: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what work has been undertaken by the OECD to ensure the millennium-readiness of the critical computer systems of member states and for the global economy; and if he will make a statement. [93531]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: I shall reply to the hon. Member shortly and place copies of the letter in the Libraries of the House.

Equal Treatment

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he has established a baseline for policy appraisal against which to measure progress on equal treatment. [93460]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: I shall reply to the hon. Member shortly and place copies of the letter in the Libraries of the House.

Export Control Reports

Mr. Berry: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what additional disaggregated information he plans to include in future strategic export control annual reports. [93524]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: We are considering the format and contents of future annual reports on strategic export controls in the light of responses to the first.

Iraq (Sanctions)

Ann Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what progress has been made on the United Kingdom sponsored draft UN resolution on possible criteria for suspension of sanctions against Iraq. [93512]

Mr. Hoon: The UK draft Security Council resolution provides for the suspension of the restrictions on exports from Iraq, if Iraq co-operates with a new disarmament mechanism for a sustained period and if Iraq completes key remaining disarmament tasks, to be identified by UNSCOM's successor. Suspension would end immediately if Iraq ceased co-operation, or was found to be reconstituting its weapons of mass destruction programmes. Discussions are continuing within the Council on the draft resolution.

Saddam Hussein

Ann Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if Her Majesty's Government will propose the establishment of a Commission of Inquiry at the General Assembly of the United Nations to investigate the crimes of Saddam Hussein. [93513]

Mr. Hoon: The Government support those who are working to bring Saddam Hussein and members of his regime to justice for the crimes they have committed. We applaud the work of the organisation INDICT in this regard.

Iraq

Ann Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make it his policy to seek the extradition of a responsible member of the Iraqi regime from a third country to face charges under the Genocide Act 1969 for persecution of the Kurds of Northern Iraq and the Marsh Arabs of Southern Iraq. [93510]

Mr. Hoon: While the Government would wish to see members of the Iraqi regime brought to justice for the appalling crimes they have committed, under the Genocide Act 1969, the Government do not have the right to prosecute individuals for crimes committed beyond the limits of national territory.

Arms Export Licences

Ann Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many arms export licences were issued between *(a)* 1 May 1997 and 10 May 1998 and *(b)* 10 May 1998 and 10 May 1999 to areas of high intensity conflict; and how many licence applications relating to such areas were refused in the same period. [93293]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: Details of the Government's export licensing decisions, broken down by country and type of equipment, were given in the Government's Annual Report on Strategic Export Controls for 1997 and will be given in the Report for 1998 which we intend to publish as soon as possible.

We do not break down our export licensing statistics on the basis of "areas of high intensity conflict" as we do not categorise specific countries or regions in this way.

Arms Control

Ann Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list the international agreements on arms control signed by Her Majesty's Government which include *(a)* the requirement to take into account the human rights record of the recipient states and *(b)* the potential which the equipment has to be used for internal repression. [93290]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: The UK Government are party to two sets of internationally agreed criteria governing the export of arms and defence equipment which include requirements to take into account the human rights record of the recipient states and the risk that the proposed export might be used for internal repression. These are the EU Code of Conduct on Arms Exports, adopted by EU member states in June 1998, and the principles governing arms transfers agreed by OSCE participating states in 1993.

Criteria Two of the EU Code states that member states will:

(a) not issue an export licence if there is clear risk that the proposed export might be used for internal repression; and

(b) exercise special caution and vigilance in issuing licences, on a case-by-case basis and taking account of the nature of the equipment, to countries where serious violations of human rights have been established by the component bodies of the UN, the Council of Europe or by the EU.

The OSCE principles provide that each participating State will, in considering proposed transfers, take into account the respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms in the recipient country, and will avoid transfers which would be likely to be used for the violation or suppression of human rights and fundamental freedoms or for the purpose of repression.

Conflict Prevention

Ann Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will establish a conflict prevention council to include representatives of other departments to report on countries of high conflict potential. [93295]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: The Government's work on conflict prevention is carefully co-ordinated. The Joint Intelligence Committee brings together all the relevant Departments and agencies to assess situations and issues of current concern. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office, Ministry of Defence and Department for International Development (and other Departments as appropriate) work closely together on conflict prevention policies both overall and in relation to individual regions and countries at risk.

Strategic Exports

Ms Drown: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if the next annual report on strategic export controls will contain details of *(a)* the amounts of weapons and equipment contained in each category, *(b)* the end-users for which the export licence was granted and *(c)* strategic exports supported by (i) the Disposal Sales Agency and (ii) the Crown Agents. [93480]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: We are considering the format and contents of future annual reports on strategic export controls in the light of responses to the first.

Ms Drown: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when the next annual report on strategic exports will be published; and if it will be made available through the Stationery Office. [93481]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: We will publish the second Annual Report as soon as possible.

We have not yet decided whether to make the annual report available through the Stationery Office. Copies of the first Annual Report have been placed in the Library of the House and are also available free of charge from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. The first Annual Report has also been published on the FCO website.

Public Interest Immunity Certificates

Sir Nicholas Lyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many public interest immunity certificates or equivalent documents have been provided by Ministers or officials in his Department since 3 May 1997; and at what level each such certificate or other document has been signed. [93533]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: I shall reply to the right hon. and learned Member shortly and place copies of the letter in the Libraries of the House.

Ministerial Visits

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what information is held by the United Kingdom Embassy in Tallinn about the dates of visits by Ministers of other EU countries to Estonia since the enlargement process began; and if he will make a statement. [92685]

Ms Quin: The United Kingdom Embassy in Tallinn does not hold information about the visits of all EU Ministers. However, a list of Heads of State, Head of Government and Foreign Ministers that have visited Estonia since 30 March 1998 has been compiled.

Tallinn

April 1998: Irish Prime Minister

July 1998: Austrian Foreign Minister

January 1998: Danish Foreign Minister

The Finns often visit. The most recent was 14 July 1999, when the Finnish Foreign Minister visited.

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what information is held by the United Kingdom Embassy in Budapest about the dates of visits by Ministers of other EU countries to Hungary since the enlargement process began; and if he will make a statement. [92687]

Ms Quin: The United Kingdom Embassy in Budapest does not hold information about the visits of all EU Ministers. However, a list of Heads of State, Heads of Government and Foreign Ministers that have visited Hungary since 30 March 1998 has been compiled.

Budapest

22–24 April 1998: Greek President

15 July 1998: Austrian Prime Minister and Foreign Minister

1 August 1998: German Foreign Minister

2 September 1998: Danish Crown Prince and Foreign Minister

4 September 1998: Austrian President Thomas Klestil

27–28 September 1998: Finnish President Ahtisaari

17–18 December 1998: French Foreign Minister

7 January 1999: German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer

19 January 1999: French Foreign Minister Hubert Vedrine

25 January 1999: Austrian Chancellor Viktor Klima

11 March 1999: Italian Prime Minister Massimo D'Alema

6–8 April 1999: Spanish Prime Minister Jose Maria Aznar

11–16 April 1999: Portuguese President Jorge Sampaio

6 May 1999: Council of Europe Foreign Ministers' meeting (50th Anniversary).

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what information is held by the United Kingdom Embassy in Ljubljana about the dates of visits by Ministers of other EU countries to Slovenia since the enlargement process began; and if he will make a statement. [92684]

Ms Quin: The United Kingdom Embassy in Ljubljana does not hold information about the visits of all EU Ministers. However, a list of Heads of State, Heads of Government and Foreign Ministers that have visited Slovenia since 30 March 1998 has been compiled.

Ljubljana

27 May 1998: Greek Foreign Minister Theodorus Pangalos

22 June 1998: Belgian Prime Minister Jean-Luc Dehaene

3 July 1998: Danish Foreign Minister Niels Helveg Petersen

6 July 1998: Austrian Foreign Minister Wolfgang Schuessel

7 September 1998: Luxembourg Prime Minister Jean-Claude Junker

18 September 1998: Austrian President Thomas Klestil

10 December 1998: Italian Prime Minister Massimo D'Alema

10 December 1998: Finnish President Martti Ahtisaari

31 January 1999: Belgian Foreign Minister Erik Derycke

10 April 1999: Portuguese President Jorge Sampaio

15 June 1999: Italian Prime Minister Massimo D'Alema.

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what information is held by the United Kingdom Embassy in Prague about the dates of visits by Ministers of other EU countries to the Czech Republic since the enlargement process began; and if he will make a statement. [92686]

Ms Quin: The United Kingdom Embassy in Prague does not hold information about the visits of all EU Ministers. However, a list of Heads of State, Heads of Government and Foreign Ministers that have visited the Czech Republic since 30 March 1998 has been compiled.

Prague

7 July 1998: Austrian Foreign Minister Schuessel

23 September 1998: Austrian President Klestil

18–19 November 1998: French Prime Minister Jospin

12–14 December 1998: Spanish Prime Minister Aznar

6–7 January 1999: German Foreign Minister Fischer.

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what information is held by the United Kingdom Embassy in Warsaw about the dates of visits by Ministers of other EU countries to Poland since the enlargement process began; and if he will make a statement. [92688]

Ms Quin: The United Kingdom Embassy in Warsaw does not hold information about the visits of all EU Ministers. However, a list of Heads of State, Heads of Government and Foreign Ministers that have visited Poland since 30 March 1998 has been compiled.

Warsaw

May 1998: Finnish President Ahtisaari

June 1998: German Chancellor Kohl

June 1998: Irish Foreign Minister Andrews

September 1998: Austrian President Klestil

September 1998: Portuguese Prime Minister Sampaio

September 1998: Swedish Queen Sylvia

October 1998: German Chancellor Kohl

October 1998: German Foreign Minister Fischer

October 1998: Finnish Prime Minister Lipponen

November 1998: German Chancellor Schroeder

November 1998: Greek Prime Minister Simitis with Foreign Minister Pangalos

November 1998: Austrian Chancellor Klima

January 1999: Finnish Prime Minister Lipponen

February 1999: Dutch Foreign Secretary van Aartsen

March 1999: Italian Prime Minister D'Alema

April 1999: German Foreign Minister Fischer

April 1999: German Chancellor Schroeder

May 1999: Belgian King Albert II

May 1999: Belgian Foreign Minister Derycke

May 1999: Dutch Prime Minister Kok

July 1999: French Prime Minister Jospin.

Entry Clearance (Children)

Fiona Mactaggart: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many children by nationality, have been refused entry clearance for settlement because their parent in the United Kingdom has not had the sole responsibility for their upbringing, under paragraph 297(e) of the Immigration Rules, in each year since May 1997. [93327]

Mr. Hoon: The information requested is not recorded centrally or at overseas posts and could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

Belarus

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if the United Kingdom will continue to recognise Mr. Lukashenko as President of Belarus after the expiry of his constitutional term on 27 July; and if he will make a statement. [92805]

Ms Quin: We recognise states rather than Governments. Therefore the question of recognition of President Lukashenko does not arise. In its declaration of 20 July, the EU made clear its view that President Lukashenko's mandate under the 1994 Constitution expired on that day.

Overseas Documents

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many applications by the Crown Prosecution Service for assistance in securing documents from overseas, pursuant to an investigation in the UK, he has *(a)* supported by making representations to foreign Governments and *(b)* declined to support in each of the last five years; and if he will make a statement. [93556]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: I shall reply to the hon. Member shortly and place copies of the letter in the Libraries of the House.

Correspondence

Mr. Winnick: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when the hon. Member for Walsall, North will receive a reply regarding his letter of 29 June concerning a constituent. (ref. GV100/51886). [93250]

Mr. Hoon: My noble Friend the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, Baroness Symons, replied to my hon. Friend on 26 July.

Visa Fees

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list (i) the

total receipts from fees for *(a)* visa, *(b)* settlement and *(c)* other immigration applications and (ii) the total cost of entry clearance operations, for 1998–99. [92906]

Mr. Hoon: Visa fee income is broken down into two categories only: settlement and non-settlement applications. The total receipts for the Financial Year 1998–99 were:

	£ million
Applications	
Non-settlement applications	55.7
Settlement applications	11.3
Total fee income	67.0

The provisional cost of the entry clearance operation for 1998–99 is £65.2 million. The final 1998–99 costs figure will not be available until the end of August.

Belize

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs on what occasions since 1993 his Department received written or oral approaches from the hon. Member for Hertford and Stortford (Mr. Wells) on matters relating to banking regulations in Belize. [92069]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: No Minister in this Department has received oral or written representations from the hon. Member for Hertford and Stortford (Mr. Wells) on this subject since the change of Government in May 1997.

Ordtech Ltd.

Mr. Maples: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when he, his Ministers, advisers or officials last met or had contact with any director of Ordtech Ltd. [92732]

Mr. Robin Cook: Neither myself nor other FCO Ministers nor FCO Special Advisers have had any official meetings with Mr. Paul or John Grecian of Ordtech Ltd. In the time available we have not been able to make an extensive check with regard to officials, but to the best of my knowledge there have not been any meetings with officials.

I understand that Mr. Grecian had access to the FCO in 1997 as he was employed by a contractor working here. While working in the FCO, he approached one of my advisers in the corridor and in the course of his work may have approached other officials.

TREASURY

Departmental Staff

Ms Roseanna Cunningham: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many staff are employed in Scotland *(a)* by his Department and *(b)* by executive agencies responsible to his Department; where these staff are located; and how many staff are employed in (i) England, (ii) London and the South East, (iii) Wales, (iv) Northern Ireland and (v) United Kingdom in total. [90562]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 13 July 1999]:* The statistics for the Chancellor's Departments and Agencies comprise:

HM Customs and Excise (HMC&E)
Inland Revenue (IR) including Contributions Agency (CA)
HM Treasury (HMT)
Debt Management Office (DMO)
Valuation Office (VO)
National Savings (NS)
Office for National Statistics (ONS)
Royal Mint (RM)
Government Actuary's Department (GAD).

The following tables summarise by Department and Agency the latest headcount figures available and include part-time staff and those employed on casual contracts. Changes following the recent merger of the Contributions Agency with Inland Revenue and the outsourcing of National Savings work have been reflected. Local Authority area groupings have been used to summarise the location of staff in Scotland except that figures are not yet available for Contributions Agency staff.

Staff employed in the Chancellor's Departments and agencies

Local authority area	*C and E*	*IR*	*CA*	*VO*	*NS*	*Total*
Scotland						
Aberdeen	194	182	—	11	—	387
Argyll and Bute	5	31	—	—	—	36
Borders	—	36	—	—	—	36
Dumbarton and Clydebank	28	23	—	—	—	51
Dumfries and Galloway	7	56	—	6	—	69
Dundee	139	133	—	—	—	272
East Renfrewshire	—	40	—	—	—	40
Edinburgh	261	1,643	—	33	—	1,937
Falkirk	52	30	—	—	—	82
Fife	—	131	—	—	—	131
Glasgow	393	619	—	24	7	1,043
Highlands	20	123	—	9	—	152
Inverclyde	127	38	—	—	—	165
Moray	16	15	—	—	—	31
North Ayrshire	—	38	—	—	—	38
North Lanarkshire	24	1,078	—	—	—	1,102
Perthshire and Kinross	—	28	—	—	—	28
Renfrewshire	130	46	—	—	—	176
Shetland	11	—	—	—	—	11
South Ayrshire	54	63	—	—	—	117
South Lanarkshire	—	1,628	—	—	—	1,628
Stirling	—	52	—	—	—	52
Total staff	1,461	6,033	202	83	7	7,786

Staff employed in the Chancellor's Departments and agencies—United Kingdom summary figures

Department	*England*	*London and South East*	*Wales*	*Northern Ireland*	*Scotland*	*United Kingdom*
HM C and E	21,989	13,501	587	616	1,461	24,653
IR (inc. CA)	50,187	14,410	3,906	1,326	6,235	61,654
HMT	900	900	—	—	—	900
DMO	29	29	—	—	—	29
VO	3,849	1,639	218	—	83	4,150
NS	115	107	—	—	7	122
ONS	2,395	1,621	895	—	—	3,290
RM	16	16	1,068	—	—	1,084
GAD	97	97	—	—	—	97
Totals	79,577	32,320	6,674	1,942	7,786	95,979

ISAs

Mr. Field: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what research he is undertaking to gauge the effectiveness of individual savings accounts in encouraging saving among those on low incomes. [93316]

Ms Hewitt: I refer my right hon. Friend to the answer I gave to the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Mr. Loughton) on 8 July 1999, *Official Report,* column *609.*

Departmental Travel

Mr. Brake: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many kilometres have been travelled on his Department's business in each of the last three years broken down by *(a)* foot, *(b)* bike, *(c)* bus, *(d)* train, *(e)* tram, *(f)* light-rail, *(g)* plane, *(h)* motorbike, *(i)* car, *(j)* taxi, *(k)* river-taxi and *(l)* other modes of transport; what plans and targets his Department has to reduce the kilometres travelled by private transport by his Department's employees; and if he will make a statement. [91025]

Ms Hewitt *[holding answer 13 July 1999]:* The information on business travel is not collected in the form requested. As published in the Integrated Transport White Paper in July 1998, the Government have set a target that all Government Department headquarters buildings and main buildings occupied by Executive Agencies and Government Offices for the Regions should have green transport plans by March 1999 and all other key buildings by March 2000.

The Chancellor of the Exchequer's departments have already made some significant progress, for example:

The Inland Revenue have put in place Green Transport Plans at six of their sites and are now working on the roll-out of a further 300 plans by 31 March 2000, in line with the White Paper target. The plans include measures to reduce both business and commuter travel and promote alternative travel arrangements. Environmental considerations are also being addressed by adopting a number of initiatives, including:

downsizing the cc of the Pool and Private Use Scheme car fleet;

piloting and promoting the use of bi-fuelled vehicles (LPG/Petrol);

with DSS, a joint tender programme to supply and install bunkered Liquid Petroleum Gas (LPG) taken on sites throughout the UK to encourage and support the use of this alternative fuel;

an appraisal of the use of electric cars;

providing defensive driver training which has a strong emphasis on better environmental driving techniques for 450 (50 per cent.) of our PUS drivers.

Customs and Excise have established Local Transport Plans in its headquarters sites. All other key sites will have established plans by the end of March 2000. Each plan forms the basis of a continuing programme of improvement to meet both the Government's commitments and to obtain the maximum benefits from local knowledge and experience, and covers:

strategic issues;

commuting;

business travel;

commercial/suppliers;

fleet.

The plans include measures to promote car sharing, public transport use, cycling and other solutions to reduce business travel (such as video conferencing) and raise awareness of the environmental and business issues associated with travel. Suppliers and contractors are required to support these plans.

HM Treasury introduced a Green Transport Plan in March 1999 covering its two buildings. The plans include, among other things, measures to:

set up a Bicycle User Group (BUG);

review travel and subsistence policy;

ensure all cars supplied under the Government Car and Despatch Agency contract are converted to run on alternative fuels by February 2000;

reduce car parking spaces to the standards laid down by Strategic Guidance for London Planning Authorities for Central London.

The National Savings Agency has completed a Green Transport Plan. The plan includes measures to minimise the environmental impact of travel on official business as well as facilitating employee use of public transport.

The Royal Mint has completed Green Transport Plans covering all key buildings in line with the targets set out in the White Paper. The plans include measures to reduce single-occupancy car use by employees.

The Office for National Statistics (ONS) has completed Green Transport Plans covering all its main buildings, both in London and nationwide, in line with targets set out in the White Paper. The plans include measures to positively encourage the use of public transport and to reduce single occupancy car use by employees for business.

Endowment Policies

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will estimate *(a)* the number of endowment policies that are surrendered each year and *(b)* the lapse rate for new endowment policies; and if he will list those aspects of the surrender of endowment policies to which the Financial Services Act 1986 regulatory regime applies. [92463]

Ms Hewitt *[holding answer 26 July 1999]:* There are no published figures available for the number of endowment policies discontinued each year.

In October 1998, the Personal Investment Authority (PIA) estimated that, for regular premium endowment policies sold in 1996, the most recent figures available, the percentage of policies discontinued during the first year is as follows.

Percentage

Sales channel	*Discontinued in year one*
Company representative	6.5
Independent financial adviser	4.5
Direct offer advertisement	4.5
Home service	13.0

Persistency generally improves during the lifetime of endowment policies. It is inaccurate to extrapolate these figures to subsequent years. Policies discontinued in early years are generally worthless on the traded endowment policy (TEP) market.

The surrender of endowment policies is not regulated under the Financial Services Act (1986).

Benefits Payments

Mr. Kirkwood: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) what level of weekly income for a family of two adults with two children aged 10 and four-years-old he has set as the level which must be exceeded for that family to be lifted out of poverty if the main earner is *(a)* in work and receiving no benefits and *(b)* out of work and receiving income support, after receipt of housing and council tax benefits; [93318]

(2) what level of income for a couple with the woman pregnant for the first time he has set as the level which must be exceeded for that family to be lifted out of poverty if the main earner is *(a)* in work and receiving no benefits and *(b)* out of work and receiving income support, after receipt of housing and council tax benefits. [93319]

Dawn Primarolo: The Government's welfare reform programme aims to tackle the root causes of poverty, help people to earn a decent income through work, and provide security for those unable to work. We have announced an ambitious programme of support for families including increases in child benefit, a new Children's Tax Credit, increase in the Working Families Tax Credit and Income Support, and a new Sure Start Maternity Grant of £200. By the end of this Parliament, we will be spending an extra £6 billion a year on children. The Working Families Tax Credit will benefit 1.5 million families who will receive an average of £24 a week more than Family Credit. It will provide a guaranteed minimum income of £200 a week for a family with someone in full-time work on the national minimum wage, and more for families with more than one child.

Families with children will, on average, be £740 a year better off as a result of measures in the last two Budgets. We estimate that 800,000 children will be lifted out of poverty as a result. The definition of poverty which underpins this statement was explained in the written answer which the Economic Secretary gave to the hon. Member for Northavon (Mr. Webb) on 14 April 1999, *Official Report*, column *244*.

Arms Control

Ann Clwyd: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will hypothecate the revenue received from defence export levies in order to fund arms control initiatives. [93296]

Mr. Milburn: No.

Inland Revenue (Bournemouth)

Mr. Chope: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer for what reason the Inland Revenue offices in Bournemouth are not within the area of responsibility of the Director of the Inland Revenue South West Region Executive Office. [93361]

Dawn Primarolo: The Inland Revenue offices in Bournemouth have been in the area of responsibility of the Director of the Inland Revenue South East Regional Executive Office since the Department was reorganised on a Regional basis in the mid-1970s.

Tobacco Smuggling

Dr. Fox: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimate the Government have made of the amount of tobacco smuggling into the United Kingdom, broken down by country, in the last year for which figures are available. [93219]

Dawn Primarolo: The provisional assessment of HM Customs and Excise based on their work in progress to monitor the scale of such smuggling (chiefly of cigarettes and hand-rolling tobacco) is that the total amount of revenue (excise duty and VAT) evaded through all forms of smuggling of tobacco products in 1998 was around £1.7 billion.

There are insufficient data on which to base a robust quantitative analysis of the amounts smuggled from individual countries.

VAT

Ms Oona King: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what plans he has to implement the recommendation of the urban Task Force to harmonise VAT rates at *(a)* zero and *(b)* 5 per cent. for new building and conversions and refurbishments; and if he will make a statement. [93301]

Dawn Primarolo: EC agreements mean that we cannot introduce any new zero rates or a reduced rate for work to existing buildings.

The Government share the urban Task Force's desire for an urban renaissance and is giving careful consideration to the report's recommendations. We will give our detailed response to the report in the forthcoming Urban White Paper.

Income Tax

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will list the annual average income of wage earners and the proportion of that income taken in direct tax on the basis of the single person's rate each year since 1986. [92683]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 26 July 1999]:* The information requested is as set out.

	Annual average earnings [1]	*Percentage of income taken in tax for a single person with average earnings* [1]
1986–87	8,811	21.3
1987–88	9,516	20.1
1988–89	10,405	18.7
1989–90	11,406	18.9
1990–91	12,384	19.8
1991–92	13,299	18.8
1992–93	13,985	18.1
1993–94	14,435	18.2
1994–95	14,877	18.2
1995–96	15,376	18.2
1996–97	16,016	17.4
1997–98	16,679	16.7
1998–99	17,372	16.7
1999–2000	[2]18,129	16.4

[1] Average earnings are median earnings for all full-time employees where pay was unaffected by absence, from the New Earnings Survey

[2] Based on the 1998 New Earnings Survey uprated in line with the 1999 Budget forecast.

World Trade

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what was the United Kingdom share of world trade *(a)* as a whole and *(b)* in manufactured goods in each year since 1970; and what was the value of (i) UK and (ii) world trade in each of those years. [92560]

Ms Hewitt *[holding answer 26 July 1999]:* Data for world and UK merchandise trade since 1970, both expressed in US dollars, can be found in the IMF's quarterly Direction of Trade Statistics publication.

Manufacturing Investment

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on the levels of investment in manufacturing industry since 1979. [92681]

Ms Hewitt *[holding answer 26 July 1999]:* The Government have clearly recognised that the UK has a long history of under-performance in investment. That is why they have put in place a comprehensive range of measures designed to tackle this weakness, including macroeconomic reforms to provide a stable environment and a tax framework to encourage investment, such as reducing the rate of corporation tax to its lowest level ever.

Interest Rates

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will give the nominal and real level of interest rates for each year since 1979. [92559]

Ms Hewitt *[holding answer 26 July 1999]:* Data on short and long-term interest rates, both in the UK and other OECD countries, are available in the publication 'OECD Economic Outlook' in Annexe tables 36 and 37 respectively. An estimate of the real level of interest rates can be calculated using the inflation data contained in table 16 of the same publication.

Tax Law Rewrite Project

Ms Lawrence: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what further developments there have been in the Tax Law Rewrite project. [93812]

Dawn Primarolo: I am pleased to be able to tell the House that the Tax Law Rewrite project is continuing to make good progress. The Inland Revenue will shortly publish the project's seventh Exposure Draft, which contains draft clauses on capital allowances for agricultural buildings, scientific research, mineral extraction and plant and machinery. Copies will be placed in the Libraries of the House.

This Exposure Draft is the third instalment in a series that will completely rewrite the capital allowances code. The rewritten legislation in this publication will form part of the first rewrite Bill next year.

Climate Change Levy

Mr. Caplin: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how fuel used in chemical reactions will be treated under the climate change levy. [93817]

Ms Hewitt: As indicated in the consultation document published by Customs and Excise on Budget day, coal and gas used in chemical reactions will not be subject to the levy. Officials at Customs are having useful discussions with industry about how to apply the exemption to fuels used both for chemical reaction and for heating, such as in the steel industry. In the light of the representations received on the treatment of electrolysis, we propose to extend this to electricity. We propose that electricity used for electrolysis, either for the production of chloralkalis or the primary smelting of aluminium, will be exempt from the levy to the extent that it is used in chemical reactions. Again, Customs will discuss precisely how this will work with the industries involved with a view to the revised treatment being included in the draft clauses to be published in the autumn.

Mr. Baldry: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what representations he has received in relation to the potential of the proposed climate change levy on certain fuels to increase carbon dioxide emissions. [92152]

Ms Hewitt *[holding answer 20 July 1999]:* The Chancellor of the Exchequer has received a number of representations in the course of the consultation on the climate change levy. These will be considered very carefully in determining the final design of the levy.

Civil Registration

Ms Lawrence: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what progress has been made regarding the review of civil registration in England and Wales announced on 7 December 1998. [93818]

Ms Hewitt: The first stage of the review is complete. A consultation paper will be published in early September which seeks the public's views on the future development of the registration service in England and Wales. A full three months will be allowed for responses.

Construction Industry (Tax)

Mr. Chope: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many *(a)* Construction Tax Certificates and *(b)* Subcontractors Tax Certificates under the new construction industry scheme have been issued; how many are awaiting processing; and how many approved applications will not be issued before 1 August. [92410]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 22 July 1999]:* The Inland Revenue keep statistics of the numbers of applications received on a monthly basis for both registration cards and tax certificates. The latest figures show that 120,000 applications have been received for certificates and that 14,155 Construction Tax Certificates have been issued and 82,978 Subcontractor Tax Certificates have been issued. In addition, the Inland Revenue has issued 391,630 registration cards to those who do not qualify for a certificate.

Mr. Chope: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many applications have been received for *(a)* Construction Tax Certificates and *(b)* Subcontractors Tax Certificates under the new construction industry scheme; how many have been approved; how many have been rejected; and how many are still being considered. [92409]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 22 July 1999]:* The Inland Revenue only keep details of the total number of certificate applications received; they do not keep details of how many of those applications are for either a CIS6 or a CIS5. The latest figures show that 120,000 applications have been received for certificates in total. The Inland Revenue have issued 97,133 certificates in total. Around 15 per cent. of applications fail to meet the criteria so the Inland Revenue currently anticipate issuing no more than 103,000 certificates. The Inland Revenue have also issued 391,630 registration cards to those who do not qualify for a certificate.

Mr. Chope: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer for what reasons no telephone number is available to enable callers to check with the processing centre in Liverpool about when construction tax certificates will be issued. [92412]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 22 July 1999]:* Tax offices are able to advise a subcontractor, from the computer records which are updated daily, whether their application has been authorised and, if so, whether their certificate has been issued or if their application is ready for processing. There is no need for any taxpayer to contact the processing office about their application form as the tax office will be able to give them all the available information. Subcontractors can also obtain some information from the subcontractors helpline which has been set up to provide general information about the scheme.

Mr. Chope: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many construction industry application forms for *(a)* construction tax certificates and *(b)* subcontractors tax certificates have been rejected by the Inland Revenue on the basis that part of the signature was outside the white box on page 2; and if he will make a statement. [92408]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 22 July 1999]:* The Inland Revenue do not keep details of the reasons why any particular application form may be rejected. All application forms are issued with guidance notes for completion but where a subcontractor has not completed the form correctly Inland Revenue staff will try to identify this when the application form is handed in to them. If the error is not immediately identified but is discovered, the applicant will be called back as soon as possible so that they can complete another form correctly.

EU Expenditure

Mr. Hawkins: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer, (1) pursuant to his answer of 29 June 1999, *Official Report*, columns *132–34*, what were the amounts involved in each of the budget lines *(a)* blocked initially, *(b)* now unblocked and *(c)* still frozen; and what are the implications for the UK Government's budget and financial planning of the European Court of Justice ruling of 12 May 1998; [92729]

(2) what legal implications for the UK arise from the European Court of Justice's judgment of 12 May 1998; and, pursuant to his answer of 29 June 1999, *Official Report*, columns *132–34*, what were the legal bases found for each of the budget lines unblocked. [92730]

Ms Hewitt *[holding answer 23 July 1999]:* The budget lines initially suspended by the Commission following the European Court of Justice ruling of 12 May 1998 were listed in my previous answer of 29 June 1999, *Official Report*, columns *132–34*. The amounts contained on each of these lines in the 1998 adopted budget can be found in the *Official Journal* of the European Communities, L44, Volume 41, published on 16 February 1998, which is available in the Library of the House.

The guidelines clarifying the funding of measures through the EU budget are set out in the Inter Institutional Agreement on legal bases and implementation of the budget, on which an explanatory memorandum (10893/98) was submitted in October 1998.

The Government welcomed the European Court of Justice ruling of 12 May 1998, which supports budget discipline. The ruling related specifically to expenditure by the Commission in the EU budget, and has no other legal implications for the UK.

Ministerial Travel

Mr. Baker: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer on what date he last used a train in the course of his official duties. [92656]

Ms Hewitt *[holding answer 23 July 1999]:* In accordance with the terms of the Ministerial Code, Ministers are required always to make efficient and cost-effective travel arrangements. Journeys in and around London, which account for the majority of the Chancellor's working week, will normally be made by Government car.

The Chancellor last used a train in the course of his official duties on 5 July 1999, when he travelled to Bournemouth for the TGWU conference.

Jobseeker's Allowance

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what assessment he has made of the extent to which the statement of jobseeker's allowance paid on Form 604 enables accurate deduction of income tax for the year in question. [92310]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 22 July 1999]:* Neither the Inland Revenue nor the Benefits Agency issue a Form 604 in connection with the jobseeker's allowance.

Departmental Contracts

Mr. Alasdair Morgan: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many contracts of a value greater than £10,000 his Department has with companies in *(a)* London, *(b)* South East England, *(c)* England, *(d)* Scotland, *(e)* Wales and *(f)* Northern Ireland; and what is the total value of such contracts for each area. [90835]

Ms Hewitt *[holding answer 14 July 1999]:* Since 1 April to date, the Treasury had or has contracts of a value of greater than £10,000 in the following areas:

Area	*Number of contracts*	*Value (£)*
London	111	10,800,000
South East England	162	7,500,000
England	148	7,900,000
Scotland	2	49,000
Wales	2	311,000
Northern Ireland	0	—

DEL Scheme

Ms Lawrence: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will list the entitlements for 1999–2000 resulting from the carry forward of underspends allowed under the DEL end year flexibility scheme. [93819]

Mr. Milburn: Subject to parliamentary approval of the necessary Supplementary Estimates, individual departmental DELs, running costs limits and external finance limits will be increased when entitlement is taken up.

The increase in DEL resulting from the take up of end year flexibility will be charged to the DEL Reserve and £700 million, representing the underspend in 1998–99 on programmes within DEL, is being carried forward into the 1999–2000 DEL Reserve for this purpose. A list of entitlements will be placed in the Library.

Ministerial Meetings

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many times Ministers in his Department have held meetings with Ministers and officials of the Irish Government since 1 January 1998, indicating the dates and locations of each meeting, the Ministers involved, and the names of the Irish Ministers and officials at each meeting. [90404]

Ms Hewitt: The Chancellor of the Exchequer has met his Irish counterpart, Charlie McCreevy, on a number of occasions in the margins of meetings of European Finance Ministers. In addition they had a meeting on 12 March 1998 in London.

Tax Credits

Mr. Webb: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if those categories of income excluded from taxation with effect from 6 April by the Finance Bill 1999 will be similarly excluded in the calculation of income for the purposes of the Working Families Tax Credit with effect from October 1999. [91835]

Dawn Primarolo: The rules for the categories of income which are to be excluded from the calculation of the Working Families Tax Credit build on those for Family Credit. They can be found in the Family Credit (General) Regulations 1987, and the draft Tax Credits (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulation 1999 published on 5 July.

Mr. Webb: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer by what date staff in the Inland Revenue inquiry offices will be trained to make better-off calculations for inquirers considering taking up employment; and if the Inland Revenue will advise Family Credit claimants whether they would be better off waiting to claim Working Families Tax Credit rather than renewing or making a claim for Family Credit for the first time. [91833]

Dawn Primarolo: Advice on Family Credit and transition to WFTC will continue to be available from the Family Credit Unit Helpline. The training to enable existing IR staff, including those in IR inquiry offices, to tell potential applicants how much WFTC might be due if they made a claim will begin on 31 August.

Mr. Webb: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer when the Inland Revenue will first accept and begin to examine claims for the Working Families Tax Credit and the Disabled Person's Tax Credit. [91831]

Dawn Primarolo: Working Families Tax Credit and Disabled Person's Tax Credit awards will begin from 5 October. The Inland Revenue will accept applications and have procedures in place in advance of this date to ensure that payments are made as soon as possible after 5 October.

Mr. Webb: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what plans he has to ensure that before employers are involved in the administration of the Working Families Tax Credit and Disabled Person's Tax Credit in April 2000, the lessons learned from the practical experience with the new forms and procedures for those credits in Autumn 1999 will be taken into account. [91834]

Dawn Primarolo: The joint Inland Revenue/Benefits Agency Project Team will be drawing on the practical experience of the October 1999 changes in finalising the arrangements for April 2000. Inland Revenue officials will continue to consult employer representatives on the details of the scheme.

Mr. Webb: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer by what date training for staff will be completed in the Inland Revenue inquiry offices on the working families tax credit and the disabled person's tax credit. [91832]

Dawn Primarolo: Help and advice will continue as now, to be available in Benefits Agency and Employment Service offices. The initial training of all Inland Revenue staff who may expect to deal with inquiries about working families tax credit and disabled person's tax credit will take place in September and October 1999 so as to ensure that sufficient numbers of trained staff are in position to deal effectively with such inquiries.

Own Resources

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on the Commission proposal on own resources at ECOFIN on 12 July. [92830]

Ms Hewitt: The Berlin European Council agreed that a new Own Resources Decision should be introduced under which the UK abatement will remain; the ceiling on EU own resources is kept at 1.27 per cent. of EU GNP; and contributions related to VAT and "traditional" own resources are reduced in favour of fairer payments linked to member states' GNPs. At ECOFIN on 12 July the Commission made a short presentation of their draft of that Decision. I shall shortly be submitting an Explanatory Memorandum on it to the Scrutiny Committee.

European Anti-fraud Office

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will place in the Library the presidency reports on the implementation of the European anti-fraud office approved at ECOFIN on 12 July. [92829]

Ms Hewitt: The Presidency made an oral report on progress on the implementation of the European anti-fraud office and tabled two documents. The first concerned the appointment of the Members of the Supervisory Committee and was deposited for scrutiny on 21 July. The second was a draft Council decision concerning implementation. I will send this to the Chairman of the Scrutiny Committee for information when I receive a copy of the final decision which was approved.

EIB Loans

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if the ECOFIN Council of 12 July endorsed increased commitments to EIB loans to third countries. [92871]

Ms Hewitt: The ECOFIN Council of 12 July agreed to renew the Community guarantee for EIB lending in third countries for a further seven years from 1 February 2000. The guarantee will cover average annual lending of up to euro 2,630 million during this period. This is an increase on the volume of lending under the existing guarantee which covers an average of approximately euro 2,450 million a year (over a three year period).

Income Statistics

Mr. Rogers: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will list for each county in England and for the relevant areas in Wales and Scotland the number and percentage of taxpayers with taxable incomes over *(a)* £50,000, *(b)* £60,000, *(c)* £70,000, *(d)* £100,000 and *(e)* £150,000. [93120]

Dawn Primarolo: The table shows approximate estimates of the number and percentage of taxpayers with taxable incomes above the levels requested in 1996–97, the latest year for which there is information available. These estimates are based on a sample survey and the sample size is not large enough to allow estimates to be made for the majority of unitary authorities in Wales and Scotland.

Table showing numbers and percentages of taxpayers with total incomes greater than £50,000, £60,000, £70,000, £100,000 and £150,000 by county

County/country	More than £50,000		More than £60,000		More than £70,000		More than £100,000		More than £150,000	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
Greater London	135,400	4.5	99,300	3.3	77,900	2.6	44,300	1.5	24,300	0.8
Greater Manchester	16,000	1.6	9,900	1.0	6,800	0.7	3,500	0.3	1,740	0.2
Merseyside	7,000	1.4	4,900	1.0	3,700	0.7	1,600	0.3	[1]—	[1]—
South Yorkshire	5,600	1.1	3,400	0.7	2,600	0.5	1,200	0.2	[1]—	[1]—
Tyne and Wear	4,000	1.0	2,500	0.6	1,800	0.4	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—
West Midlands	12,700	1.3	8,300	0.8	5,500	0.6	2,400	0.2	982	0.1
West Yorkshire	14,200	1.6	9,300	1.0	6,600	0.7	3,400	0.4	1,560	0.2
Former County of Avon	9,100	2.0	5,300	1.2	4,000	0.9	1,800	0.4	[1]—	[1]—
Bedfordshire	5,500	2.2	3,800	1.5	2,600	1.1	900	0.4	[1]—	[1]—
Berkshire	18,500	5.0	11,900	3.2	8,100	2.2	3,700	1.0	1,540	0.4
Buckinghamshire	18,900	6.0	13,300	4.2	9,800	3.1	4,700	1.5	2,250	0.7
Cambridgeshire	9,000	3.0	5,400	1.8	3,700	1.2	1,500	0.5	[1]—	[1]—
Cheshire	13,000	2.9	8,500	1.9	6,100	1.4	3,100	0.7	1,340	0.3
Former County of Cleveland	1,400	0.7	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—
Cornwall and Isles of Scilly	2,200	1.1	1,500	0.7	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—
Cumbria	2,800	1.3	2,100	1.0	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—
Derbyshire	7,300	1.7	5,100	1.2	3,200	0.7	1,200	0.3	[1]—	[1]—
Devon	8,000	1.8	4,500	1.0	3,300	0.8	1,400	0.3	[1]—	[1]—
Dorset	6,900	2.1	4,600	1.4	3,900	1.2	2,500	0.8	[1]—	[1]—
Durham	2,400	1.0	1,600	0.7	1,100	0.5	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—
East Sussex	9,600	2.7	6,300	1.8	4,900	1.4	2,200	0.6	1,100	0.3
Essex	24,900	3.7	16,800	2.5	11,700	1.7	6,200	0.9	2,770	0.4
Gloucestershire	6,400	2.3	3,800	1.3	2,700	1.0	1,300	0.5	[1]—	[1]—
Hampshire	22,100	2.9	14,400	1.9	9,900	1.3	4,400	0.6	1,760	0.2
Hereford and Worcester	7,200	2.2	5,300	1.6	4,100	1.2	1,500	0.5	[1]—	[1]—
Hertfordshire	24,900	4.8	16,400	3.1	11,500	2.2	5,800	1.1	2,750	0.5
Former County of Humberside	6,500	1.7	4,500	1.2	3,200	0.8	1,900	0.5	[1]—	[1]—
Former County of Isle of Wight	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—
Kent	18,700	2.6	13,300	1.9	9,400	1.3	4,500	0.6	2,160	0.3

Table showing numbers and percentages of taxpayers with total incomes greater than £50,000, £60,000, £70,000, £100,000 and £150,000 by county

County/country	More than £50,000		More than £60,000		More than £70,000		More than £100,000		More than £150,000	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
Lancashire	9,300	1.5	5,800	0.9	4,200	0.7	2,000	0.3	[1]—	[1]—
Leicestershire	8,800	2.0	5,000	1.2	3,800	0.9	1,500	0.3	[1]—	[1]—
Lincolnshire	4,300	1.6	3,100	1.2	2,200	0.8	1,100	0.4	[1]—	[1]—
Norfolk	6,400	1.7	4,300	1.2	2,900	0.8	1,300	0.4	[1]—	[1]—
Northamptonshire	7,100	2.6	5,000	1.8	3,300	1.2	1,600	0.6	[1]—	[1]—
Northumberland	3,900	3.0	2,300	1.8	1,800	1.4	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—
Former County of North Yorkshire	10,000	2.9	6,200	1.8	4,800	1.4	2,200	0.6	1,000	0.3
Nottinghamshire	7,300	1.6	4,600	1.0	3,300	0.7	1,400	0.3	[1]—	[1]—
Oxfordshire	12,000	4.2	7,200	2.5	5,400	1.9	2,700	0.9	1,120	0.4
Shropshire	4,800	2.4	3,100	1.5	2,000	1.0	1,000	0.5	[1]—	[1]—
Somerset	4,000	1.6	2,300	0.9	1,700	0.7	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—
Staffordshire	7,000	1.5	4,500	1.0	3,300	0.7	1,300	0.3	[1]—	[1]—
Suffolk	6,300	2.2	4,500	1.6	3,500	1.2	1,500	0.5	[1]—	[1]—
Surrey	36,400	6.9	26,600	5.1	20,000	3.8	10,700	2.0	5,180	1.0
Warwickshire	7,800	3.3	5,100	2.1	3,800	1.6	1,500	0.6	[1]—	[1]—
West Sussex	13,200	3.4	8,900	2.3	5,900	1.5	2,800	0.7	1,150	0.3
Wiltshire	8,600	2.7	6,100	1.9	3,000	1.0	1,500	0.5	[1]—	[1]—
Wales	13,200	1.1	8,900	0.8	5,600	0.5	2,100	0.2	840	0.1
Cardiff UA	2,000	1.5	1,600	1.2	1,000	0.7	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—
Scotland	42,400	1.8	25,300	1.1	17,800	0.8	7,200	0.3	3,150	0.1
Aberdeen City UA	3,600	3.2	2,400	2.1	1,600	1.4	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—
Aberdeenshire UA	3,400	3.1	2,000	1.8	1,300	1.2	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—
East Dunbartonshire UA	1,500	2.1	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—
East Renfrewshire UA	3,000	6.7	1,900	4.2	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—
Edinburgh, City of UA	7,400	3.4	4,700	2.2	3,500	1.6	1,400	0.7	[1]—	[1]—
Fife UA	2,300	1.3	1,400	0.8	1,000	0.6	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—
Glasgow City UA	2,200	1.0	1,100	0.5	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—
Perthshire and Kinross UA	1,500	2.3	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—
South Lanarkshire UA	2,400	1.7	1,400	1.0	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—

[1] Sample size too low to allow estimates to be made

Source:

1996–97 Survey of Personal Incomes, Inland Revenue

Pensioners

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what representations he has received concerning the rate of income tax paid by pensioners who undertake part-time employment. [92547]

Dawn Primarolo: Treasury Ministers have received a number of representations on income tax matters, including matters relating to pensioners.

Pensioner Incomes

Mr. Field: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer, pursuant to his answer of 12 July 1999, *Official Report*, column *83*, if he will estimate the number of pensioners with effective rates of deduction from gross income of *(a)* between 50 and 60 per cent., *(b)* between 60 and 70 per cent., *(c)* between 70 and 80 per cent., *(d)* between 90 and 100 per cent. and *(e)* above 100 per cent., taking into account the effects of tax rates and benefit withdrawal rates, and the rules regarding deemed income from capital. [91659]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 20 July 1999]:* I shall write to my right hon. Friend shortly and place a copy in the Library of the House.

Duty Free

Mr. Nigel Jones: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what assessment he has made of the impact on *(a)* revenues and *(b)* jobs caused by the duty differential between the United Kingdom and the rest of the European Community. [93140]

Ms Hewitt: Duty differentials are not the only factor involved in the legal and illegal cross-border trade in excise goods between the UK and other EU member states. Other factors involved include pre-tax price, manufacturers' and retailers' margins, and transportation costs. It is not possible to isolate the effect of duty differentials alone.

HM Customs and Excise estimates of revenue lost through cross-border shopping and smuggling are set out in their technical paper deposited in the House of Commons Library on 19 November 1998. HM Customs and Excise does not have any assessment of the impact of such activities on UK employment.

Statistics

Mr. Gorrie: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what plans he has to ask the Office of National Statistics to increase the size of the samples it uses, in order to provide more reliable statistics for Scotland and Wales. [93268]

Ms Hewitt: Officials in the Office for National Statistics are holding discussions with their counterparts in Scotland and Wales to consider their requirements for enhanced samples. As a result of these discussions it has been established that samples in many cases are sufficient, while some other samples have already been enhanced, particularly in the area of business statistics. I expect these discussions to continue.

Gold Sales

Mr. Pike: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what representations have been received from overseas Governments with regard to the sale of part of Britain's gold reserves; and if he will make a statement. [93622]

Ms Hewitt: We have received representations from South Africa, the Southern African Development Community (also representing Angola, Botswana, DRCongo, Lesotho, Malawi, Mauritius, Mozambique, Namibia, Seychelles, Swaziland, Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe), Ghana and Peru.

Inheritance Tax

Ms Drown: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how much inheritance tax is raised from non-UK domiciled persons *(a)* in total and *(b)* who invest in unit trusts and open-ended investment companies. [93587]

Dawn Primarolo: I regret that the information is not available centrally and could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Working Families Tax Credit

Mr. Love: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimate he has made of the increased take-up of the working families tax credit resulting from the Government's advertising campaign; and if he will make a statement. [93609]

Dawn Primarolo: The Working Families Tax Credit is central to the Government's aim of making work pay. It will benefit nearly 1.5 million families, providing a minimum guaranteed income for a family with a full time worker of £200 per week. Together with the national minimum wage, increases to child benefit, and reform of tax and national insurance, it will lift around 800,000 children out of poverty.

It is vital that the right people get the information they need to apply for the tax credits they are entitled to. The Government are, therefore, launching a major advertising campaign to provide clear, targeted and comprehensive information. The Government's aim for the campaign is to encourage all those who are eligible for WFTC to apply.

Ms Buck: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many households he estimates will be removed from housing benefit *(a)* totally and *(b)* in part in each region in England and Wales following the introduction of the working families tax credit; and if he will estimate the average loss of housing benefit per household. [93067]

Dawn Primarolo: I shall write to my hon. Friend shortly and place a copy of my letter in the Library of the House.

Russia (Debt)

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimate he has made of the amount of *(a)* Soviet era debt and *(b)* subsequent debt which the Russian Federation has defaulted upon to date; what is the amount of that country's current debt awaiting service; and if he will make a statement. [91761]

Ms Hewitt: There are no publicly available official estimates of Russia's total debts or of its arrears. At the Koln Summit G8 Heads welcomed the outline agreements recently reached by Russia with the IMF and the World Bank and looked forward to their speedy implementation as a further important step in Russia's reform program. They also encouraged the Paris Club to act expeditiously to negotiate a debt rescheduling agreement with Russia once an IMF agreement was in place.

Savings

Mr. Alan Campbell: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what percentage of the tax benefits for pensions and retirement savings currently goes to families earning *(a)* more than £100,000, *(b)* between £50,000 and £100,000, *(c)* between £25,000 and £50,000 and *(d)* less than £25,000 per year. [93430]

Dawn Primarolo: The distribution of tax relief for contributions to occupational and personal pension schemes by household earnings is not available.

Credit Unions

Mr. Love: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer when he intends to publish the final report of the Task Force on Credit Union Development; and if he will make a statement. [93543]

Ms Hewitt: I received it a few days ago and am studying it with interest. I will decide how best to take it forward in due course.

Betting Duty

Mr. Roy: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what plans he has to review the rate of General Betting Duty. [93656]

Mrs. Roche: The Government keep the revenue yield from General Betting Duty under constant review.

Mr. Roy: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how much General Betting Duty *(a)* was raised in 1998–99 and *(b)* is forecast to be raised in (i) 1999–2000 and (ii) 2000–2001. [93657]

Mrs. Roche: In 1998–99, revenue raised from General Betting Duty was £479.8 million. The forecast for total betting and gaming receipts (including General Betting Duty, Pools Betting Duty, Gaming Duty Amusement Machine Licence Duty, Bingo Duty and Lottery Duty) in 1999–2000, published in the March 1999 Financial Statement and Budget Report, is £1.5 billion. No forecast has been published for 2000–2001.

Treasury Building

Ms Lawrence: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what progress has been made on the proposal to refurbish the Treasury building under the private finance initiative. [92529]

Mr. Milburn: Ministers have now approved plans for the refurbishment of the Treasury building under the terms of an innovative PFI deal with Exchequer Partnership plc (EP), the Treasury's Private Sector Partner. This flagship PFI project at the heart of Whitehall confirms the Government's commitment to PFI in the accommodation sector. On completion, the project will

bring together the whole Department in one modern, efficient office building fit for the 21st century. It is the first to follow the recently published Treasury Task Force PFI Standard Contract Guidance. It is also the first project where the service provider, in partnership with the Treasury, will put debt financing out to competition.

This will be the first, major refurbishment of a building nearly a century old. While it needs some remedial work, the building's services also require major updating, and more flexible and efficient use needs to be made of the space within it to meet business needs. The project will achieve both, as well as providing very good value for money for the taxpayer. Work on site is expected to commence in the spring of 2000 and take two years to complete. The Department will remain at the eastern (Whitehall) end of the building while its new accommodation at the western (St. James's Park) end is refurbished. The move is scheduled to take place in Spring 2002, and the Treasury will then be occupying just under half of the building. The Treasury will pay as and when its accommodation needs are delivered to specified standards.

Under the terms of the PFI deal, EP are responsible for securing town planning permission and listed building consent. It is also for EP to let the non-Treasury space to another public sector tenant.

Debt Management Office

Ms Lawrence: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement about the UK Debt Management Office's annual administrative accounts. [93816]

Ms Hewitt: The DMO's accounts for 1998–99, its first year of operation, are being published today. Copies have been placed in the Libraries of the House.

Pooled Pension Investment

Ms Lawrence: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer when the pooled pension investment will be available; and what investments will be eligible for inclusion. [93814]

Ms Hewitt: The Government have decided to introduce pooled pension investments (ppis) in April 2001, to coincide with the introduction of stakeholder pensions.

The joint Treasury and DSS consultation paper "Helping to deliver stakeholder pensions: flexibility in pension investment" suggested that ppis could help the successful launch of stakeholder pensions. Most responses to the paper agreed, and many pressed for a joint introduction. Also, financial services firms are still dealing with year 2000 compliance, and many will be introducing change freezes around the millennium period. It therefore makes good practical sense to introduce the two reforms together.

The Government will allow ppis to hold units in

authorised unit trusts,

open-ended investment companies,

investment trusts with separate custodians and gearing at or below 50 per cent., and

single gilts.

These investments offer appropriate security and risk spreading for savers. They also give the flexibility required to match investments with the length of time from retirement. Again this is consistent with the responses from consultation, and strikes the right balance between minimising investment risk and allowing choice and innovation.

Office for National Statistics

Mr. Caplin: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how the Office for National Statistics performed against its key targets in 1998–99. [93815]

Ms Hewitt: The Office for National Statistics' performance is described in the Agency's Annual Report and Accounts which is being laid before the House and published today. Copies have been placed in the Libraries of the House.

ONS's performance against its key targets was good and in the case of the compliance plan and efficiency savings both targets were exceeded. In a few cases the target was missed marginally. Targets for 1999–2000 are set out in the ONS Business Plan 1999–2002, which was published in March. Copies of the Business Plan are in the Library.

Simon de Danser

Mr. Caplin: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement in connection with the independent inquiry, announced on 11 February, by Sir Gerald Hosker KCB QC, into the actions of HM Customs and Excise officials in relation to the seizure of the Simon de Danser vessel. [93813]

Dawn Primarolo: Sir Gerald has completed his independent inquiry and has submitted his report. My commitment was to make available to the House a summary of the report and its recommendations but I have decided to go further and to place a copy of Sir Gerald's full report in the Library of the House.

The Chairman of Customs has accepted his conclusions and recommendations in full. The Commissioners are taking action as a matter of priority to implement the report's recommendations in order to remedy the failings identified.

Land Settlement Association

Sir Nicholas Lyell: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many former tenants of the Land Settlement Association are still being pursued for tax by the Inland Revenue in respect of their settlement of litigation with the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food in 1982. [93535]

Dawn Primarolo: I shall write to the right hon. and learned Gentleman shortly and place a copy of my letter in the Library of the House.

Annual Incomes

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on the relationship between the annual incomes of the top decile and those of the bottom decile, and between the top quartile and the bottom quartile in each year since 1986; and if he will

give the same figures for *(a)* Germany, *(b)* France, *(c)* the United States of America, *(d)* Australia and *(e)* New Zealand over the same period. [92558]

Ms Hewitt *[holding answer 26 July 1999]:* I shall write to my hon. Friend shortly and place a copy of my letter in the Library of the House.

Belize

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer on what occasions since 1993 his Department received written or oral approaches from the hon. Member for Hertford and Stortford (Mr. Wells) on matters relating to banking regulations in Belize. [92068]

Ms Hewitt *[holding answer 20 July 1999]:* I shall write to the my hon. Friend shortly and place a copy of my letter in the Library of the House.

Shipping Taxation

Mr. Gray: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer when he expects to receive Lord Alexander's report on Shipping Taxation; and if he will publish it. [91563]

Dawn Primarolo: I shall write to the hon. Gentleman shortly and place a copy of my letter in the Library of the House.

European Communities Working Groups

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will list the European Communities working groups which met over the last 12 months with a representative from his Department in attendance; if he will list the number of times each met; if he will indicate the nature of the Government's representation; and if he will make a statement. [88475]

Ms Hewitt: Treasury officials regularly attend meetings of Council working groups. The Treasury is occasionally represented by officials from the United Kingdom's Permanent Representation to the European Union. I list the working groups principally involved.

Working Group	*Meetings over last 12 months*
Financial Counsellors Group	5
Working Party on the Staff Regulations	10
Tax Policy Group	2
Financial Questions Group	2–3 per month
Code of Conduct Group	18
Working Party on Economic Questions	29
Working Party on Consumer Protection and Information	6
Advisory Committee on Own Resources	4
Budget Committee	2 per week
Protection of Financial Interests in the Community	2
Ad-hoc anti-fraud group	6

Special Advisers

Mr. Caplin: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on travel on Government business by the Treasury's special advisers. [93925]

Mr. Tyrie: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer, pursuant to his answer of 30 April 1999, *Official Report*, column *300*, for what reasons he withheld the information requested by the hon. Member for Chichester on the number and total cost of visits abroad made in an official capacity by special advisers in the Treasury, since 2 May 1997. [89578]

Ms Hewitt: All travel by Treasury Ministers and special advisers is conducted in line with the principles set out in the Ministerial Code and the Civil Service Management Code. Details have been placed in the Library of the House.

WALES

Gender Impact Assessment

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will list the subject of each gender impact assessment drawn up by his Department since June 1997, stating in each case whether the outcome has been *(a)* put out to consultation and *(b)* published. [91681]

Mr. Michael: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given on 22 July 1999, *Official Report*, column *636*, by my right hon. Friend the Minister for Public Health.

NHS Costs

Mr. Rogers: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what was the administrative cost of the NHS in Wales as a percentage of its total budget for each year since 1989. [93105]

Mr. Jon Owen Jones: The information is contained in the following table:

NHS administrative costs since 1989

	Administration clerical and management staff (£ million)	*Net expenditure (£ million)*	*Percentage of net expenditure*
1989–90	73.3	1,324.4	5.5
1990–91	86.9	1,490.6	5.8
1991–92	98.5	1,710.1	5.8
1992–93	116.9	1,912.9	6.1
1993–94	141.6	1,986.6	7.1
1994–95	149.3	2,076.6	7.2
1995–96	160.6	2,178.3	7.4
1996–97	162.7	2,293.0	7.1
1997–98	155.9	2,350.0	6.6

Source:
Annual audited accounts of NHS trusts and Health Authorities

Education Funding

Mr. Rogers: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what recent representations he has received regarding the future funding of further and higher education institutions. [93123]

Mr. Hain: One recent representation arrived in my office before 1 July. This is now a matter for the National Assembly for Wales.

GDP Statistics

Mr. Rowlands: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what is his estimate of the GDP per capita of the West

Wales and the Valleys Objective 1 area status as a percentage of *(a)* the United Kingdom average and *(b)* the European Union average. [92924]

Mr. Hain: According to figures released by Eurostat, GDP per capita of the West Wales and the Valleys area during the period 1994–1996 was estimated to be:

(a) 72 per cent. of the UK average

(b) 71 per cent. of the European Union average.

Departmental Finance

Mr. Rogers: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what has been the value of grants and financial support *(a)* disbursed and *(b)* administered by the Welsh Office for each year since 1990. [93122]

Mr. Jon Owen Jones: Total expenditure excluding central administration costs within the Secretary of State's responsibility over the period in question has been:

£ million

	(a) Disturbed (actual outturn expenditure)	*(b) Administered (planned expenditure)*
1989–90	3,742	3,737
1990–91	4,388	4,404
1991–92	5,247	4,864
1992–93	5,936	5,748
1993–94	6,240	6,248
1994–95	6,474	6,578
1995–96	6,650	6,712
1996–97	6,745	6,733
1997–98	6,723	6,824
1998–99	6,906	6,879

The years 1997–98 and 1998–99 do not include expenditure on the Capital Receipts Initiative or Welfare to Work programmes which are UK wide initiatives.

Appointments (Quangos)

Mr. Singh: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how many appointments to quangos he made between *(a)* 1 June 1997 and 31 May 1998 and *(b)* 1 June 1998 and 31 May 1999; and in each case of those how many were members of Britain's (i) Asian and (ii) ethnic minority communities. [92143]

Mr. Michael: The number of appointments I made to quangos *(a)* between 1 June 1997 and 31 May 1998 was 121 and *(b)* between 1 June 1988 and 31 May 1999 was 131. Information as to how many of those appointees were members of Britain's Asian and ethnic minority communities cannot be divulged since disclosure would risk identifying individuals without their consent, in accordance with standard practice.

Correspondence

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales when he plans to reply to the letters concerning the Owens-Corning factory, Deeside, of 28 May and 9 July from the right hon. Member for Alyn and Deeside. [92724]

Mr. Hain *[holding answer 23 July 1999]:* I met my right hon. Friend and a delegation from Owens Corning on 30 June to discuss his concerns and I plan to write to him shortly on the issues arising from that.

Housing

Mr. Rogers: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what was the local reference rent for *(a)* a self-contained one bedroomed flat and *(b)* a single room in a shared accommodation for each local authority in Wales on 1 April. [93128]

Mr. Jon Owen Jones: Data are compiled by the DETR on behalf of the eight Rent Registration Areas in Wales which are largely based on the former county council areas. The latest published figures from that source are for quarter ended September 1998.

The following data have been compiled as at 1 April by direct reference to the eight Rent Offices in Wales and have been provided as a guide only. The information is not collected in the way it has been requested.

Information for flats is not separately available, therefore the details provided relate to all two room accommodation (ie one bedroom and one living room).

The Local Reference Rent is specific to an individual property and is meant to reflect the general level of rent for properties of the same size in the locality. In order to arrive at a single figure, an average has been calculated.

Rent Officers are required to determine rents based on the size and type of accommodation in a locality which may be different to a local authority area and localities could also cross local authority boundaries. The information has, therefore, been estimated to cover local authority boundaries.

£

Local authority area	*Two living-roomed accommodation*	*Single room in shared accommodation*
Blaenau Gwent	52.50	38.00
Bridgend	61.20	40.00
Caerphilly	57.50	40.50
Cardiff County	71.50	39.50
Carmarthenshire	58.50	42.50
Ceredigion	70.00	42.50
Conwy	62.50	37.50
Denbighshire	60.00	38.75
Flintshire	62.00	42.50
Gwynedd	57.50	36.00
Merthyr	54.00	37.00
Monmouth	68.00	42.50

Mr. Rogers: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what was his estimate on 1 April of the total number of homes for rent from *(a)* local authorities, *(b)* housing associations and *(c)* other registered social landlords in Wales. [93126]

Mr. Jon Owen Jones: The latest information relates to March 1999 when the estimates were:

Homes for rent	
Local Authorities	197,400
Housing Associations	52,500
Other registered social landlords	nil

Mr. Rogers: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what estimate his Department made in April of the total

number of houses in multiple occupation in Wales and the total number of occupants of such accommodation, using the categories used in the licensing of multi-occupied houses. [93130]

Mr. Jon Owen Jones: This information is not collected centrally.

Council Homes

Mr. Rogers: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will list the total number of council homes sold *(a)* under the right to buy legislation and *(b)* otherwise in each local authority area in Wales in the periods (i) 1979 to 1985, (ii) 1984 to 1987, (iii) 1988 to 1992 and (iv) 1993 to 1996. [93121]

Mr. Jon Owen Jones: I will write to my hon. Friend as soon as possible and place a copy of my reply in the House.

GPs

Mr. Rogers: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how many general practitioner fundholders in Wales went over budget in the last five years broken down by the amount of overspend. [93116]

Mr. Jon Owen Jones: For the last five years Health Authorities have been responsible for monitoring GP Fundholder performance and this information is not held centrally.

Mr. Rogers: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will list the number of full-time general practitioners by trust area in Wales, in each year between 1992 and 1998. [93117]

Mr. Jon Owen Jones: Information on general medical practitioners (GMPs) is collected on a health authority (or prior to 1997 Family Health Service Authority) basis. Information on the number of full-time unrestricted principals is given in the following table.

Unrestricted GMPs—Number who are full time at 1 October

	1992	*1993*	*1994*	*1995*	*1996*[1]	*1997*	*1998*
Family Health Service Authority							
Clwyd	207	208	203	204	204	—	—
Dyfed	192	199	199	200	198	—	—
Gwent	221	220	218	217	215	—	—
Gwynedd	146	147	147	148	148	—	—
Mid Glamorgan	287	282	282	273	270	—	—
Powys	76	74	73	73	72	—	—
South Glamorgan	212	208	203	198	197	—	—
West Glamorgan	186	189	187	186	188	—	—
Wales	1,527	1,527	1,512	1,499	1,492	—	—
Health Authority							
Bro Taf	—	—	—	—	—	343	342
Dyfed Powys	—	—	—	—	—	269	264
Gwent	—	—	—	—	—	278	274
Morgannwg	—	—	—	—	—	259	257
North Wales	—	—	—	—	—	344	340
Wales	—	—	—	—	—	1,493	1,477

[1] As at 1 April data for 1 October could not be split by the new Health Authorities.

Mr. Rogers: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will list the amounts retained by general practitioner fundholders by health authority at the end of each financial year since the introduction of general practitioner fundholding in Wales. [93111]

Mr. Jon Owen Jones: The information requested is given in the table:

General practitioner fundholder savings since the introduction of the scheme

£000

Family Health Service Authority	*Cumulative savings to 1993–94*[1]	*1994–95*	*1995–96*
Clwyd	567	548	472
Dyfed	191	501	760
Gwent	912	1,841	1,383
Gwynedd	0	469	375
Mid Glamorgan	317	458	599
Powys	831	1,005	546
South Glamorgan	207	1,070	490
West Glamorgan	250	996	736
Total	3,275	6,888	5,361

£000

Health authorities	*1996–97*	*1997–98*	*1998–99*	*Total of GPFH savings as at 1 April 1999*
Bro Taf	1,072	133	(514)	2,674
Dyfed Powys	887	(344)	(332)	2,655
Gwent	1,409	390	(734)	4,040
Morgannwg	769	(10)	510	1,752
North Wales	471	(241)	(625)	1,614
Total	4,608	(72)	(1,695)	12,735

[1] Family Health Service Authority savings are not available on an annual basis until 1994–95

Source:
Audited Annual Accounts to 1997–98, unaudited accounts 1998–99

GPs (Trainees)

Mr. Rogers: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how many trainee general practitioners there were in each training centre in Wales for each of the last five years; and how many places were available. [93115]

Mr. Jon Owen Jones: I will write to my hon. Friend as soon as possible and place a copy in the Library of the House.

Cottage Hospitals

Mr. Rogers: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will list the number of cottage hospitals closed in the last 10 years and planned to be closed in the next two years; and if he will make a statement on the future of cottage hospitals in Wales. [93133]

Mr. Jon Owen Jones: Information on the closure of cottage hospitals is not held centrally.

The future of cottage hospitals is a matter for the National Assembly for Wales.

Climate Change Levy

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what representations he has had in relation to the impact of the Climate Change Levy on *(a)* the steel industry, *(b)* aluminium smelting, *(c)* intensive energy use farming and *(d)* the sector of the tourism industry which is dependent on LPG for energy in Wales; and if he will make a statement. [93611]

Mr. Hain: The Climate Change Levy is a matter for my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer. However, representations have been received from individual companies in the steel and aluminium smelting industries and their representative bodies. We have made the Chancellor aware of the concerns expressed.

Ministerial Meetings

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how many times Ministers in his Department have held meetings with Ministers and officials of the Irish Government since 1 January 1998, indicating the dates and locations of each meeting, the Ministers involved, and the names of the Irish Ministers and officials at each meeting. [90412]

Mr. Michael: My predecessor and my ministerial colleague the Under-Secretary, my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff, Central (Mr. Jones), met the Irish Consul General Mr. Conor O'Riordan on 13 October 1998 at the Welsh Office, Cardiff. I met Mr. David Andrews, the Irish Minister for Foreign Affairs, Mr. Edward Barrington, the Irish Ambassador and Mr. O'Riordan on 27 May at the Welsh Office, Cardiff.

Single Currency

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how much expenditure his Department *(a)* has incurred to date and *(b)* expects to incur in the future, on preparations for possible United Kingdom entry into the European single currency; and if he will make a statement. [91878]

Mr. Michael: Following the publication of the Government's Outline National Changeover Plan, my Department is considering what preparations may be necessary.

Oral Questions

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will make a statement on his Department's policy in respect of transferring oral questions to other Departments; and in what ways it has changed since 1 July. [93242]

Mr. Michael: My policy has always been to be as helpful as possible to right hon. and hon. Members and to supply as full a reply as is possible in the light of the nature of the question and the extent to which it touches wholly or partly on my responsibilities. I am considering this approach for the future in the light of Madam Speaker's ruling in the House on 12 July.

Labour Statistics

Mr. Rowlands: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what is his estimate of the number of jobs within the West Wales and the Valleys area covered by Objective 1 status; and what target he plans to set for the number of jobs in *(a)* 2002, *(b)* 2006 and *(c)* 2010. [92919]

Mr. Hain: According to the 1997 Annual Employment Survey, there were an estimated 552,000 employee jobs within the West Wales and the Valleys area in September 1997 (this excludes the majority of employee jobs in agriculture). In addition, according to the 1997 Labour Force Survey Annual Database, covering the period March 1997-February 1998, there were an estimated 105,000 self-employed people.

Future targets are a matter for the National Assembly for Wales.

Mr. Rowlands: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what estimate he has made of the total number of people of working age who are economically inactive within the West Wales and the Valleys area covered by Objective 1 status. [92923]

Mr. Hain: According to the 1997 Labour Force Survey Annual Database, covering the period March 1997–February 1998, an estimated 295,000 people of working age were economically inactive within the West Wales and the Valleys area.

Doctors and Nurses (Vacancies)

Mr. Rogers: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how many doctors and nurses have been employed in NHS hospitals in Wales since 1990; and how many vacancies for doctors and nurses in Wales remain unfilled at present. [93110]

Mr. Jon Owen Jones: Information on the whole-time equivalent numbers of hospital doctors and nurses is given in the following table. Information on hospital nurses is available in a comparable form only for the last three years.

Current vacancies for doctors and nurses in Wales are a matter for the National Assembly for Wales.

Staff in post at 30 September (whole-time equivalents)

	Hospital doctors	*Hospital nursing staff*
1990	2,440	—
1991	2,491	—
1992	2,624	—
1993	2,751	—
1994	2,858	—
1995	2,972	—
1996	3,059	17,751
1997	3,168	17,809
1998	3,314	18,155

Council Tax Benefit Subsidy

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what assessment he has made of the effect on the finances of the National Assembly for Wales, and on council taxes in Wales, of his proposals included in the Statement on Funding Policy for the National Assembly for Wales, that adjustments in respect of council tax benefit subsidy for Wales should be based on relative percentage changes in council tax; and by what means the Barnett Formula will provide the necessary additional funding for Wales for these purposes. [82879]

Mr. Michael *[holding answer 30 April 1999]:* In future years, local authorities in Wales and the National Assembly will determine the level of local authority self-financed expenditure, including council tax.

The precise effect of council tax benefit subsidy on the finances of the National Assembly will depend on individual local authorities' budgeting decisions and the Assembly's decisions on how and whether to use its reserve powers to control council tax increases. The detailed rules have yet to be finalised, but it is currently estimated that each percentage point difference between the relative change of council tax in Wales and that in England will require a balancing adjustment to the Assembly's Departmental Expenditure Limit of approximately £1 million. Any adjustment to the Assembly's funding in respect of council tax benefit subsidy will not directly effect council tax.

Departmental Hospitality

Mr. Rogers: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what the hospitality budgets were for his Department for each year since 1989. [93112]

Mr. Michael: The information requested is not available prior to 1991–92. The figures for that and subsequent years is as follows:

1991–92: £36,000 (including CADW)
1992–93: £38,000 (including CADW)
1993–94: £27,000
1994–95: £29,000
1995–96: £22,000
1996–97: £21,000
1997–98: £15,000
1998–99: £19,000.

Public Health Laboratory Service

Mr. Rogers: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what plans existed to privatise the Public Health Laboratory Service in Wales prior to 1 May. [93135]

Mr. Jon Owen Jones: There were no plans in place to privatise the Public Health Laboratory Service in Wales prior to 1 May.

Tuberculosis

Mr. Rogers: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how many TB notifications there were for each trust area in Wales in each of the last five years. [93104]

Mr. Jon Owen Jones: Information on the number of cases of TB (excluding chemprophlaxis) in each of the last five years is given in the following tables. As NHS trusts during this time did not have unique geographical areas the data are shown by local authority for 1994 and 1995 and then unitary authority for 1996 to 1998.

Local authority	*1994*	*1995*
Aberconwy	5	—
Alyn and Deeside	1	3
Arfon	5	7
Blaenau Gwent	8	3
Brecknock	2	2
Cardiff	29	32
Carmarthen	2	4
Ceredigion	3	1
Colwyn	3	2
Cynon Valley	3	—
Delyn	3	4
Dinefwr	5	3
Dwyfor	3	4
Glyndwr	—	5
Islwyn	1	4
Llanelli	9	10
Lliw Valley	8	2
Meirionnydd	1	1
Merthyr Tydfil	3	2
Monmouth	3	2
Montgomeryshire	—	—
Neath	7	4
Newport	5	9
Ogwr	9	6
Port Talbot	3	4
Preseli	1	6
Pembrokeshire	—	—
Radnorshire	—	—
Rhondda	10	5
Rhuddlan	2	5
Rhymney Valley	4	7
South Pembrokeshire	3	—
Swansea	10	9
Taff Ely	9	9
Torfaen	2	3
Vale of Glamorgan	8	9
Wrexham Maelor	8	8
Ynys Mon (Isle of Anglesey)	3	5
Wales	181	180

Unitary authority	*1996*	*1997*	*1998*
Blaenau Gwent	1	—	—
Bridgend	12	7	7
Caerphilly	1	4	1
Cardiff	32	33	38
Carmarthenshire	22	19	13
Ceredigion	4	5	6
Conwy	4	5	9
Denbighshire	3	11	3
Flintshire	4	5	4
Gwynedd	10	6	17
Isle of Anglesey	3	7	3
Merthyr Tydfil	5	4	4
Monmouthshire	—	—	2
Neath Port Talbot	8	11	24
Newport	2	5	2
Pembrokeshire	8	12	8
Powys	7	7	5
Rhondda, Cynon, Taff	12	29	15
Swansea	7	3	2
Torfaen	1	—	—
Vale of Glamorgan	6	14	2
Wrexham	9	8	7
Wales	161	195	172

Hospital Waiting Times

Mr. Rogers: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will make a statement on hospital waiting times in Wales, by hospital and by specialty. [93136]

Mr. Jon Owen Jones: This is a matter for the National Assembly for Wales.

Dental Caries

Mr. Rogers: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will list the incidence of dental caries of five-year-old children in each trust area of Wales, in each year since 1989. [93119]

Mr. Jon Owen Jones: I shall write to my hon. Friend and place a copy in the Library of the House.

Accident and Emergency Units

Mr. Rogers: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what was the number of attenders at accident and emergency units in each of the last five years in Wales. [93106]

Mr. Jon Owen Jones: The total number of attendances at accident and emergency or casualty units in Wales was as follows:

Year	*Number*
1994–95	960,572
1995–96	995,841
1996–97	975,322
1997–98	997,944
1998–99	[1]982,012

[1] Provisional

Mr. Rogers: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how many casualty units there were in Wales in each year since 1989. [93107]

Mr. Jon Owen Jones: The number of accident and emergency/casualty units which were open at some point during the year in question is given in the following table.

Year	*Number*
1989–90	70
1990–91	71
1991–92	67
1992–93	68
1993–94	66
1994–95	68
1995–96	66
1996–97	65
1997–98	64
1998–99	63

Mr. Rogers: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will list the number of attenders at casualty/accident and emergency departments in each acute trust for each of the last five years in Wales. [93109]

Mr. Jon Owen Jones: I will write to my hon. Friend as soon as possible and place a copy in the Library of the House.

Intensive Care Beds

Mr. Rogers: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how many beds there were in intensive care units in Wales on 1 April, broken down by hospital. [93127]

Mr. Jon Owen Jones: The average daily number of available beds in intensive therapy units during the quarter ending 31 March 1999 is given in the following table.

Hospital	*Beds*
Bronglais General	2.0
Cardiff Royal Infirmary	3.8
East Glamorgan	6.0
Glan Clwyd	6.0
Llandough	5.0
Morriston	12.0
Neath General	8.0
Nevill Hall	7.0
Prince Charles	5.0
Prince Phillip	6.0
Princess of Wales	5.0
Royal Gwent	6.4
Singleton	16.0
University Hospital of Wales	15.9
West Wales General	6.0
Withybush	3.0
Wrexham Maelor	5.0
Ysbyty Gwynedd	7.0
Wales	125.0

External Consultants

Mr. Rogers: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how much *(a)* his Department and *(b)* the NHS trusts in Wales, spent on external consultants in each year since 1989. [93108]

Mr. Jon Owen Jones: *(a)* The figures for the Welsh Office on external consultancies are as follows:

Year	*£*
1992–93	1,550,000
1993–94	1,550,000
1994–95	843,000
1995–96	1,212,000
1996–97	600,000
1997–98	700,000
1998–99	[1]835,000

[1] Forecast outturn

Figures for years prior to 1992–93 are available only at disproportionate cost.

(b) The figures for the NHS Trusts in Wales, including external contract staffing and consultancies service are as follows:

Year	*£*
1992–93	230,000
1993–94	554,000
1994–95	2,017,000
1995–96	7,949,000
1996–97	1,859,000
1997–98	3,292,000
1998–99	2,107,000

There are no figures prior to 1992–93 as NHS Trusts have been operational only since 1 April 1992. The 1998–99 figures are taken from unaudited accounts and are provisional.

Following the Transfer of Functions on 1 July 1999, these are now matters for the National Assembly for Wales.

Local Government Pensions

Mr. Rogers: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what guidelines he issued to local authorities concerning the management of their pension funds prior to April. [93131]

Mr. Jon Owen Jones: None. This is a matter for the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions.

District Nurses and Health Visitors

Mr. Rogers: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how many *(a)* district nurses and *(b)* health visitors there were in each health authority in Wales in each of the last five years. [93114]

Mr. Jon Owen Jones: I will write to my hon. Friend as soon as possible and place a copy in the House Library.

Dental Fillings

Mr. Rogers: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how many dental fillings per child were made in each trust area in Wales, in each month in *(a)* 1996, *(b)* 1997 and *(c)* 1998. [93118]

Mr. Jon Owen Jones: I will write to my hon. Friend as soon as possible and place a copy in the Library of the House.

Written Answers to Questions

Tuesday 19 October 1999

DEFENCE

Millennium Compliance

Mr. David Atkinson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement of progress on the millennium readiness of his Department's computer systems, and those for which it is responsible in the provision of public services; if contingency plans are in place; and what slippage has occurred since the July quarterly report to the House. [93567]

Mr. Spellar: My Department's Year 2000 programme is nearing completion. As reported in September, work on critical systems is almost complete and front-line systems are ready for the Millennium. Contingency plans have been developed and tested.

The Meteorological Office, which provides services to the public, reports that all of its systems are now compliant and contingency plans have been developed.

Details of MOD progress in tackling the Millennium problem are set out in our quarterly reports. These are available in the Libraries of the House and are published on the Internet. The overall MOD programme completion dates have not changed since the July report to the House.

Within this programme, two critical systems showed some slippage in their completion dates, but both of these have now been certified as compliant. A small slippage has been reported in one non-critical system.

The results of the October monthly review of progress of Government Departments and Agencies in tackling the Millennium problem are due to be announced shortly by the President of the Council.

Kosovo

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when the assessment of damage inflicted on Serbian military vehicles in Kosovo by air power will be completed. [94138]

Mr. Hoon: General Clark, the Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR), gave his battle damage assessment to the North Atlantic Council on 15 September. This was made public at a NATO press conference on 16 September. A copy of the transcript has been placed in the Library of the House and can also be obtained from the NATO website at http://www.nato.int/kosovo/press/p990916a.htm.

But, as my predecessor made clear in his reply to my hon. Friend the Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell) on 30 June 1999, *Official Report*, column *160*, the measure of the campaign's success lies in the fact that it resulted in withdrawal of Milosevic's troops from Kosovo, the entry of KFOR and the return of refugees.

Menwith Hill

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what reviews the United States National Security Agency has carried out of security practices and breaches of security at RAF Menwith Hill since 1993; and on what dates his Department received copies of the reports arising out of each review. [93939]

Mr. Spellar: Two reviews of security have been conducted by the National Security Agency at RAF Menwith Hill since 1993. As the then Minister for the Armed Forces stated in his answer of 11 March 1998, *Official Report*, columns *196–97*, a review was conducted in April 1997. The second review was undertaken on site in January 1998 and was finalised by the US authorities at the end of March that year. My Department was made aware of the contents of both reports at the time.

Departmental Publications

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the titles of the in-house publications and newsletters which were produced for the staff of his Department, excluding non-departmental public bodies and agencies, in the past five years, specifying the dates on which each title was first produced, the frequency with which each title is produced and the current secrecy classification of each title. [93851]

Mr. Kilfoyle: Information is not available in the form requested, not least because of the number of changes in the organisation of my Department since 1995. However, the main corporate in-house journals currently published, and their frequency, are set out below:

	Frequency	*Subject Matter*
MOD-wide		
Focus	Monthly	Main Corporate Journal
MOD 'OnLine'	Daily	Electronic news service
Money Matters	Quarterly	Financial Management
Paper Clips	Monthly	Civilian Personnel Policy
PM World	Monthly	Civilian Personnel Management Issues
Capital	AD hoc	Resource Accounting and Budgeting
Royal Navy		
Navy News	Monthly	Main RN Corporate Journal
Broadsheet	Annual	RN Annual Review
People Matters	2 a year	RN Personnel Policy
Army		
Soldier	Monthly	Main Army Corporate Journal
British Army Review	3 a year	General Army Matters
Sixth Sense	Weekly	Newspaper for all Forces serving in Germany
RAF		
RAF News	Fortnightly	Main RAF Corporate Journal
Air Power Review	Quarterly	Air Safety and Air Power

All titles are unclassified. In addition, there are many newsletters and other internal publications on specific subjects, such as the redevelopment of MOD's Whitehall HQ, or specific to individual management areas. The vast majority of military units also produce newsletters or magazines of their own for their personnel and for the benefit of Service families.

Mr. Maclean: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list his Department's spending on official publications since May 1997. [93687]

Mr. Kilfoyle: The costs of production of MOD's principal official publications are borne by the Stationery Office, as with all Command Papers, House of Commons papers and Statutory Instruments.

Married Quarters

Mr. Blunt: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what was the average annual expenditure per Defence Housing Executive administered married quarters on repairs and maintenance for the year 1997–98. [94064]

Mr. Kilfoyle: In the Defence Housing Executive (DHE) 1999 Corporate Plan, the action plan sets out a key target relating to the unit cost of housing and aims to achieve a figure of less than £5,400 per property. A figure for 1998–99 was given on 26 July 1999, *Official Report*, column *56*. For 1997–98, the calculation is similar—i.e. by dividing the total cost of the DHE (£343,429 million including some £100 million rental payment to Annington Homes Ltd) by the average number of properties occupied (including those which are Substitute Services Families Accommodation—52,832). The equivalent figure for FY 97–98, uprated for inflation, is £5,473.10 per property. The cost of the upgrade programme is not included as this is outside the routine cost of housing provision.

Nuclear Weapons

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what assessment his Department has made of the suitability for making nuclear weapons of the material currently being transported to Japan by BNFL. [93828]

Mr. Spellar: My Department has made an assessment of the suitability for making nuclear weapons of the material currently being transported to Japan by BNFL. The assessment was that the risk of this material being so used is very low.

Anti-Personnel Mines

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what plans his Department has to review current and future stocks of munitions to ensure that they do not have the capacity to act as anti-personnel mines; and if he will make a statement. [94642]

Mr. Spellar: All UK weapons systems and munitions have been checked for compliance with the provisions of the Ottawa Convention. There are no weapons or munitions in the UK inventory which fall under the Ottawa definition of an anti-personnel mine. The UK is fully committed to a complete global ban on anti-personnel mines and will never again use these weapons.

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many mines have been retained for training purposes; and which anti-personnel types have been retained. [94668]

Mr. Spellar: The UK is permitted to retain the minimum necessary amount of anti-personnel mines for training and testing in de-mining techniques, as permitted under Article 3 of the Ottawa Convention. As of 1 August 1999, these comprised 2088 Ranger mines, 1056 C3 Elsie mines, and 434 HB 876 sub-munitions to the JP233 weapon system. As of 1 August 1999, the UK also held 859 anti-personnel mines of foreign manufacture for the development of and training in mine detection, mine clearance, or mine destruction techniques, as provided for in Article 3 of the Convention.

Asbestos

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on progress made on the review of compensation arrangements for service and ex-service personnel suffering from asbestos-related illnesses caused by exposure to asbestos prior to 1987. [94427]

Mr. Spellar: The review to which my hon. Friend refers is nearing completion. I hope to be able to meet him and other interested colleagues soon to discuss the findings.

Regimental Insignia

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence, pursuant to his answer of 18 June 1999, *Official Report*, column *263*, on what date this year the *Daily Mail* sought permission to use the insignia of the Parachute Regiment; and what royalties or fees have so far been received. [93827]

Mr. Spellar: The *Daily Mail* has not, this year, sought permission from the Ministry of Defence to reproduce the insignia of the Parachute Regiment, and no royalties or fees have been received. Dispensation from royalties and fees is generally given for the publication of Crown Copyright material in newspapers and magazines, in the interest of good public relations.

Defence Evaluation and Research Agency

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if existing intellectual property rights will be transferred with the assets of DERA on privatisation; and if he will make a statement. [93662]

Mr. Kilfoyle: No decisions have been made on the nature of a Public Private Partnership (PPP) for DERA, and it is too early to speculate on the precise form it will take, or how intellectual property rights will be treated.

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what measures he will take to ensure the continued availability of informed independent advice to Ministers after the privatisation of DERA. [93667]

Mr. Kilfoyle: No decisions have been made on the nature of a Public Private Partnership (PPP) for DERA. The need for continued access to informed and impartial scientific services and advice is a key tenet of the MOD's consideration of the future of DERA and is defined in the "MOD Customer Needs Statement" and laid down in Figure 1 of the DERA PPP Consultation Document, a copy of which was placed in the Library on 5 May 1999. Ministers will want to ensure each of these customer requirements is addressed when making a decision on the final PPP solution for DERA.

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence on what basis collaboration with allied powers by DERA will continue after privatisation. [93668]

Mr. Kilfoyle: The detailed mechanisms under which DERA would collaborate with allies will not be known until we have decided upon the precise PPP solution to be adopted. However, DERA's participation in collaborative activities with allied powers, following the adoption of a PPP solution, would be governed by the government to government arrangements agreed with our allies.

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if liabilities arising from the exposure of staff to hazardous working conditions will be transferred to the purchaser following the privatisation of DERA; and if he will make a statement. [93664]

Mr. Kilfoyle: No decision has been made on the nature of a Public Private Partnership (PPP) for DERA, and it is too early to speculate both on the precise form it would take and how commercial and legal issues, including liabilities, will be handled. The MOD study team, which is taking forward the work on the DERA PPP, is supported by legal experts who will provide advice during the implementation stage on the future treatment of liabilities.

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what provision will be made to fund the transfer of DERA employee pension entitlements from the Civil Service Pension Scheme into a private scheme following his proposals for privatisation; and if he will make a statement. [93669]

Mr. Kilfoyle: No decisions have been taken on the form of a PPP for DERA, and it is therefore too early to be specific about pension arrangements for staff or how they will be funded.

Sandhurst (Staff College)

Mr. John D. Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when the former Staff College at Royal Military Academy, Sandhurst, was vacated; what proposals there are for its future use; and if he will make a statement. [94453]

Mr. Kilfoyle: The former Staff College at the Royal Military Academy, Sandhurst, was vacated in September 1997. Options for the future of the former Staff College Buildings at Camberley are being investigated by the Army. No proposals have yet been put to Ministers.

Defence Research Programme (Technology Audit)

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what was the nature and purpose of the technology audit of the defence research programme which was discussed at the Defence Research Committee on 31 March 1998; when this audit was started and ended; what were the conclusions of this audit; and if he will place a copy of the report arising out of this audit in the Library. [93863]

Mr. Kilfoyle: Since about 1991, the Defence Scientific Staff, in providing support for the work of the Defence Research Committee, have undertaken an ongoing review of technology aspects of the defence research programme. The paper entitled "technology audit", discussed at the Committee on the 31 March 1998, dealt with the internal processes by which this ongoing review is carried out. I am withholding this document in accordance with exemption 2 of the "Code of Practice on Access to Government Information".

Ministerial Meetings (United States)

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what meetings he held with members and officials of the United States Government during his visit to the United States on 2–3 June 1997; and if he will list the date and location of each meeting, and the names of the members and officials of the United States Government at each meeting. [93949]

Mr. Hoon: During his visit to the US from 2 to 3 June 1997, my predecessor's only formal meeting was with Mr. William Cohen, the US Secretary for Defense. General John Shalikashvili, the then Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, was present during part of the discussions. This meeting took place in the Pentagon on Tuesday 3 June 1997.

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when his Department started discussions with the United States Government on the decision to invest in the US National Ignition Facility; with which US Departments these discussions have been held; to which United States Department, and on what date, his Department notified the decision to invest in this facility; whether the decision to invest in this facility will be covered by a memorandum of understanding; when his Department expects to formalise the decision in a contract with the US; and with which United States Department this contract will be signed. [93932]

Mr. Kilfoyle: Discussions between officials of my Department and the US Department of Energy on the possibility of optimising National Ignition Facility (NIF) technology began in September 1998. Written confirmation of the United Kingdom's decision to invest in the NIF was conveyed to the US Department of Energy on 9 June 1999. The US Department of Defense was also made aware of out intentions. The arrangements, which are being made under the aegis of the 1958 UK-US Mutual Defence Agreement, will be formalised in a number of contracts covering the procurement process between my Department and the US Department of Energy.

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many United States personnel have visited the Atomic Weapons Establishment (Aldermaston) since 1 January; and from which United States Departments and establishments these visitors have come. [93944]

Mr. Kilfoyle: A total of 381 United States personnel have visited AWE Aldermaston between 1 January and 30 September 1999. The visitors represented the following:

Department of Energy

Department of Defense

Defense Threat Reduction Agency

Los Alamos, Lawrence Livermore and Sandia National Laboratories

Kaiser-Hill

Mason & Hanger, Pantex

Westinghouse Savannah River

Chew & Associates Inc

Allied Signal, Kansas City Division

Lockheed Martin, Y-12 Plant

Lockheed Martin Missiles Systems

ITT SSC

Lovelace Respiratory Research Institute

University of California

McCrone Associates

Battelle Pacific Northwest Laboratories

Applied Research Associates Inc.

Electronic Test Facility

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what representations his Department has received from the Irish Government with regard to the Ministry of Defence's Electronic Test Facility formerly sited at the British Nuclear Fuels Ltd. site at Capenhurst, Cheshire, since 1 July; when these representations were received; and from which Irish Departments. [93856]

Mr. Spellar: The Ministry of Defence has not received any representations from the Irish Government with regard to the Electronic Test Facility.

Anthrax Vaccine

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the companies from which his Department has procured anthrax vaccine since 1 January 1995. [93840]

Mr. Kilfoyle: The Department's only supplier of anthrax vaccine is the Centre for Applied Microbiological and Research, which is the executive arm of the Microbiological Research Authority, a Special Health Authority sponsored by the Department of Health.

Operational Requirements

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is the purpose of operational requirements which are issued by his Department; which section of his Department is responsible for issuing operational requirements; how many operational requirements have been issued since 31 December 1998; and how many of these operational requirements are currently unclassified. [93933]

Mr. Kilfoyle: "Operational requirement" is a generic term used to describe the detailed documentation setting out a military requirement for equipment, in preparation for possible procurement action. It is prepared by staff reporting to the Deputy Chief of the Defence Staff (Equipment Capability), in consultation with others in my Department, and may, when appropriate, be made available to industry during the procurement process. Since 31 December 1998, work has been initiated on some 196 new operational requirements. There is no central record of the numbers of operational requirements issued to industry. Since such documents give details of our planned future military capability, they are almost invariably classified.

Bombs

Mr. Wyatt: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is the size of the existing surplus of 500lb bombs in this country; and what the cost *(a)* has been to manufacture and *(b)* will be to destroy this surplus. [94051]

Mr. Kilfoyle: There are currently no surplus 500lb bombs in this country. However, a number of 500lb bombs which had reached the end of their initial service life, and which subsequent testing had shown to be defective, were destroyed earlier this year at a cost of around £135K.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Millennium Compliance

Mr. David Atkinson: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement of progress on the millennium readiness of his Department's computer systems, and those for which it is responsible in the provision of public services; if contingency plans are in place; and what slippage has occurred since the July Quarterly report to the House. [93562]

Mr. Battle: Details of the Department's progress in tackling the bug are set out in our quarterly monitoring returns. These are available in the Libraries of the House and are published on the internet. The results of the October monthly review of progress of Government departments and agencies in tackling the bug are due to be announced shortly by the President of the Council. It will show that the Department's business critical systems will be compliant by 31 October as scheduled and that work on non critical systems is well advanced. The Foreign and Commonwealth Business Continuity Plan and Millennium Operating Plan will also both be completed and tested by 31 October on schedule. All our posts have prepared and tested their own Business Continuity Plans.

Falklands

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when his Department expects to clear the anti-personnel mines that remain in the Falkland Islands. [94641]

Mr. Battle: We are fully committed to the Ottawa Convention, which entered into force in the UK on 1 March 1999. It requires us to clear all anti-personnel mines from the Falkland Islands within 10 years of entry, unless we can show good reasons why an extension should be granted. Such reasons may include humanitarian, environmental and technical considerations. Mine clearance in the Falkland Islands is both difficult and dangerous and we should be keeping these points in mind.

The Ministry of Defence estimate that 14,000 anti-personnel mines were laid by the Argentines in the Falkland Islands in 1982. The Argentine Government have offered to assist in mine clearance. During President Menem's visit to the UK in October 1998, we agreed as a first step to work together with Argentina to evaluate the feasibility and cost of clearing the land mines still present in the Falkland Islands. Work on a Memorandum of Understanding setting out how this feasibility study

will be carried out is underway. Both Governments re-affirmed their commitment to co-operate on mine clearance in the Joint Statement of 14 July 1999.

Yugoslavia

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what response there has been to the report of Mr. Jiri Dienstbier, the UN's Special Rapporteur on Human Rights for Yugoslavia, on sanctions against former Yugoslavia. [94711]

Mr. Hain: Mr. Dienstbier's most recent report was submitted to the UN Commission on Human Rights on 20 January 1999. It makes no reference to sanctions. I understand that, following his visit to the region in early October 1999, Mr. Dienstbier will shortly be submitting a further report to the General Assembly. The Government have not seen the report, which has yet to be published.

Missing Israeli Servicemen

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations the Government *(a)* has made and *(b)* proposes to make, over the missing Israeli servicemen, Ron Arad, Zachary Baumel, Zvi Feldman and Yehuda Katz. [R] [94410]

Mr. Hain: We regularly raise the issue of the missing Israeli servicemen with those who might have knowledge of their fate. The late Derek Fatchett met the families of the missing servicemen when he visited Israel in January 1998. Other suitable opportunities will be taken advantage of as they arise.

Honorary British Consuls

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what stipend or other emoluments are paid to honorary British consuls. [94712]

Mr. Hain: Honorary British Consuls receive an honorarium, currently set at a ceiling of £1,835, and reimbursement of necessary expenses.

Iraq (Papal Visit)

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations were made, by which *(a)* Ministers and *(b)* officials, to the Holy See about the Pope's planned visit to Iraq. [94360]

Mr. Hain: Ministers have not made any representations. Foreign Office officials have discussed the proposed Papal visit to Iraq with officials from the Holy See. We have expressed concern that the visit will be manipulated by the Iraqi government for propaganda purposes and represented as evidence of Papal support for Saddam Hussein's regime and its policies.

Hong Kong War Pensions

Mr. Oaten: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many former prisoners of war currently benefit from the Hong Kong War Memorial Pension Scheme. [93831]

Mr. Battle: As at 31 August 1999, there were 661 pensioners under the Hong Kong War Memorial Pension Scheme, of which 467 were single widowed persons and 194 were married. None of these are British ex-servicemen. No distinction is made between those who were prisoners of war and others who qualify under the scheme.

Mr. Oaten: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what contribution was made by the Government to the Hong Kong War Memorial Pension Scheme in 1991. [93830]

Mr. Battle: Under Section 5 of the Hong Kong War Memorial Pensions Ordinance of 1991, pensions were paid from the general revenue of the then Hong Kong Government. They are now paid by the Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region.

Turing's Treatise on the Enigma

Mr. John D. Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, pursuant to the answer of 31 March 1999, *Official Report*, column *689*, on Government Codes and Cypher School, if GCHQ holds a complete copy of Turing's Treatise on the Enigma to be released to the Public Record Office; and if Turing's Treatise on the Enigma has been released to the United States National Archives. [93961]

Mr. Robin Cook: GCHQ holds Turing's Treatise on the Enigma and will shortly release it to the PRO. A facsimile is available in the United States National Archives.

International Criminal Court Treaty

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what timetable he has adopted in respect of the drafting of legislation to enable the signing of the International Criminal Court Treaty. [93675]

Mr. Hain: The legislation to enable ratification of the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court will be introduced as soon as the Parliamentary timetable permits. Detailed work to prepare this legislation is going forward. We are strongly committed to the Court and intend to be among the first sixty States to ratify.

SOLICITOR-GENERAL

Serious Fraud Office

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Solicitor General what proportion of cases brought by the Serious Fraud Office have resulted in conviction. [94156]

The Solicitor-General: Since its inception, the Serious Fraud Office has prosecuted 197 cases involving 442 defendants. Of the 442 defendants, 300 were convicted or pleaded guilty, an overall conviction rate of 68 per cent.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Millennium Compliance

Mr. David Atkinson: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will make a statement of progress on the millennium readiness of his Department's computer systems, and those for which it is responsible in

the provision of public services; if contingency plans are in place; and what slippage has occurred since the July Quarterly report to the House. [93569]

Mr. Chris Smith: All DCMS computer systems have been tested and are now millennium ready. My Department provides no public services via any computer systems for which it is directly responsible. A millennium contingency plan has now been completed and will be tested shortly.

No slippage occurred following the July statement to the House. My Department's Year 2000 programme was completed at the end of July 1999. We will though continue to monitor the position until the end of the year.

Stonehenge

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport in each year since the establishment of English Heritage, how much *(a)* his Department and its predecessors, *(b)* English Heritage, *(c)* other departments and *(d)* other agencies have spent on (i) public consultations, (ii) conferences, (iii) public exhibitions, (iv) public relations, design and other consultancy fees and (v) legal fees in connection with (1) the Stonehenge World Heritage Site, (2) proposals for a new visitors centre and (3) proposals for roads in the vicinity. [94153]

Mr. Alan Howarth: Prior to 1990–91, English Heritage incurred no expenditure in respect of Stonehenge beyond that arising from its normal day-to-day responsibilities. Between 1990–91 and 1997–98, English Heritage spent some £3.7 million in relation to proposals for a new visitor centre and for improving the setting of the monument. However, the total expenditure cannot at this stage be readily apportioned to specific aspects of the project. From 1 April 1998 to date, English Heritage expenditure has been as follows:

	£
Stonehenge World Heritage Site Management Plan	
Public consultation	47,678
Public relations, design and other consultancy fees	58,803
Proposed new visitor centre	
Public exhibitions	24,304
Public relations, design and other consultancy fees	48,966
Legal fees	96,237

Prior to 1 April 1996, the only expenditure by the Highways Agency that can be attributed solely to the Stonehenge element of the A303/Amesbury—Berwick Down scheme relates to a public consultation exhibition in 1993 costing £32,000 and a conference and exhibition in 1994 costing £78,000. Since then, they have spent £794,945 on the design of the Stonehenge part of the scheme. In addition to this, they mounted a public exhibition earlier this year (1999) at a cost of £48,000.

My Department, the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions and their predecessor Departments have not incurred any directly attributable costs in connection with Stonehenge. It is not possible meaningfully to apportion the cost of official time spent in respect of consultations and correspondence.

Library and Leisure Services

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will list the levels of spending on *(a)* library services and *(b)* leisure services per head of the population in each county of England in each year since 1995–96. [94314]

Mr. Cash: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will list the levels of spending on *(a)* library services and *(b)* leisure services per head of population in (i) Staffordshire and (ii) each other county of England (1) in the current year and (2) in each of the last three years. [94017]

Mr. Alan Howarth: The requested information is set out in the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy's annual publications "Public Library Statistics" and "Leisure and Recreation Statistics", which can be consulted in the House Library.

Royal Armouries Museum

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will make a statement about the *(a)* financial situation at the Royal Armouries Museum, *(b)* public funds made available to the museum and *(c)* the future of the museum and its management. [94381]

Mr. Alan Howarth: Following the restructuring of the PFI arrangement at the end of July which enabled the Royal Armouries Museum in Leeds to remain fully open, DCMS Ministers are keeping the financial situation under close scrutiny. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has made an additional £1 million per annum available to the Royal Armouries, a 25 per cent. increase in its grant support. The additional grant support is conditional on improvements in management and efficiency which are essential to the future well-being of the Royal Armouries Museum in Leeds.

Performing Arts

Mrs. Organ: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will make a statement on provision for performing arts for young people. [94428]

Mr. Alan Howarth: Ensuring all children have access to the arts and to quality arts education opportunities are key departmental priorities. We are working closely with the Department for Education and Employment, the Arts Council of England and other partners on a range of policies to deliver this.

Airport Tax

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what recent assessment he has made of the impact of the level of airport tax on the tourism industry in the United Kingdom. [94160]

Janet Anderson: My Department has made no systematic assessment of the impact of Air Passenger Duty (APD). APD was introduced in November 1994, and there were 20.8 million overseas visits to the UK in 1994. In 1998, there were almost 26 million overseas visits to the UK.

I am, however, aware of the travel and tourism industry's concerns about the APD and have passed these on to ministerial colleagues in the Treasury.

HOUSE OF COMMONS

Millennium Compliance

Mr. David Atkinson: To ask the President of the Council if she will make a statement of progress on the millennium readiness of her Department's computer systems, and those for which it is responsible in the provision of public services; if contingency plans are in place; and what slippage has occurred since the July quarterly report to the House. [93575]

Mrs. Beckett: The Privy Council Office (PCO) computer systems are part of the Cabinet Office network, which is millennium compliant. These systems are encompassed in the Cabinet Office returns.

PCO's own computer and other electronic hardware have been tested and are compliant. PCO has recently relocated to new premises, which have also been tested and are compliant. There has been no slippage in PCO's millennium bug programme.

PCO does not provide services to the general public.

PCO is in the process of finalising its business continuity plan and millennium operating regime and will be bound by the targets I set other Departments and Agencies of having robust and tested plans in place by the end of October.

Oral Statements

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the President of the Council if she will list *(a)* the reports published by her Department and its associated bodies, *(b)* the reports received from bodies set up by her Department, *(c)* the decisions her Department has taken and *(d)* events in the UK and elsewhere, since 27 July, which satisfied the criteria she uses for deciding whether to apply to make oral statements to the House when the House is sitting. [93981]

Mrs. Beckett: Paragraph 27 of the Ministerial Code makes it clear that when Parliament is in session, Ministers will want to bear in mind the desire of Parliament that the most important announcements of Government policy should be made, in the first instance, in Parliament. This is considered in the light of other parliamentary business under consideration in the same week. It is therefore not possible to say with certainty whether any particular decision would be announced in an oral statement even when the House is sitting.

During Parliamentary recesses, the business of Government continues and outside events often require ministerial decisions which cannot await the end of recess. Many of the significant reports published and decisions made during the recess will come before Parliament in other ways—such as the annual reports of agencies or statutory instruments—and are laid on the day the House returns. A full list of these will appear in the Votes and Proceedings for Tuesday 19 October.

In relation to my own responsibilities, monthly statements of progress on tackling the Millennium bug in central Government and the wider public sector were sent to all Members in August and September. Information was also made available in the Libraries of the House. When the house is sitting, these announcements are made by oral statement.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Rwanda

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what assistance is being given to Rwanda to help improve its educational infrastructure. [94387]

Clare Short: Education is identified as a key sector for DFID support in our recently published Country Strategy Paper for Rwanda. Since 1998, we have provided short-term planning advice and, together with the World Bank, have been helping the Government of Rwanda carry out a Public Expenditure Review of education and other key social sectors aimed at identifying strategic priorities which are affordable and sustainable. In addition, we have provided direct budgetary support aimed at increasing the proportion of Government expenditure in the social sectors.

Over the next three years, we plan to build on this work as our partnership with the Government of Rwanda deepens. We are at the early stages of planning a sector support programme in education to be implemented in collaboration with the World Bank and other interested donors. In addition to providing much needed institutional strengthening and further strategic planning support, the programme would target infrastructure and training priorities.

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what assessment she has made of the current humanitarian situation in Rwanda. [94388]

Clare Short: Unrest in the north-west of Rwanda in the latter part of 1998 led to the displacement of over 600,000 people. Since November 1998, we have provided over £1.7 million in humanitarian assistance to the most vulnerable groups. A degree of stability has now returned to the north-west, but we stand ready to respond to any further humanitarian crises in Rwanda as needs are identified.

Departmental Publications

Mr. Maclean: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will list her Department's spending on official publications since May 1997. [93681]

Clare Short: We publish a wide range of material, both centrally funded and as part of individual programmes such as those covering knowledge and research work. We spent around £1.3 million on official publications since May 1997, which includes the costs incurred in publishing, preparation, production and purchase of copies for official use. It excludes the costs of publications produced for internal use and as part of individual programmes of research.

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will list the titles of the in-house publications and newsletters which were produced for the staff of her Department, excluding non-departmental public bodies and agencies, in the last five years, specifying the dates on which each title was first produced, the frequency with which each title is produced and the current secrecy classification of each title. [93850]

Clare Short: The Department for International Development (DFID) has three main in-house publications for its staff:

'North & South', a bi-monthly staff newspaper produced since February 1991.

'What's happening?', a bi-monthly newsletter on management initiatives published since June 1997 under its present title, and from November 1996 to May 1997 as 'Management Matters'.

'Weekly Office Notices', an electronic newsletter of staff postings, and other events of general interest.

A number of individual departments also produce periodic newsletters for some or all staff. While it would be disproportionately expensive to provide an exhaustive list of these, examples include:

'European News', a monthly newsletter issued in print and electronic form by the European Union Department since 1997.

'NR News', a quarterly newsletter issued electronically by Rural Livelihoods and Environment Division since June 1996.

'Infoload', a monthly newsletter issued electronically by DFID's Library since 1997.

None of these in-house publications have any secrecy clarification. Several are only sent electronically to staff with an acknowledged interest in a particular subject, or to members of staff of the issuing department.

Western Kenya (Malaria)

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what aid her Department is providing for Kisii, in Western Kenya, in relation to a malaria epidemic. [94390]

Clare Short: My Department gave technical advice to the Government of Kenya following the outbreak of this malaria epidemic. One of our regional health team based in Nairobi joined two Government/donor teams sent to the District to assist the local health authorities in the management of the crisis and helped to co-ordinate inputs from the European Commission, WHO, and UNICEF. DFID also drew up emergency treatment protocols in collaboration with colleagues from the WHO country office which were adopted and used.

DFID has provided around £1.3 million over the last two years for emergency malaria work in Kenya, including one year's supply of the new first-line drug for malaria treatment, Sulphadoxine-Pyrimethamine (SP). The availability of this drug was a major factor in reducing the impact of the epidemic. We are also helping the Government of Kenya to prepare epidemic preparedness guidelines which should strengthen the response to future outbreaks.

Millennium Compliance

Mr. David Atkinson: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement of progress on the millennium readiness of her Department's computer systems, and those for which it is responsible in the provision of public services; if contingency plans are in place; and what slippage has occurred since the July quarterly report to the House. [93577]

Clare Short: Details of the Department's progress in tackling the Millennium Bug are set out in our quarterly monitoring returns. These are available in the Libraries of the House and are published on the Internet.

All of the key business critical systems have been tested and put back into service. Work is also complete on non-critical systems, telecommunications systems and embedded chips.

The Millennium Operating Regime has been completed and presented to Ministers. The Business Continuity Plans for all IT business critical systems have been dry-tested. Contingency arrangements on some non-IT aspects of the business covered by the Business Continuity Plans will be tested as appropriate in the next few weeks.

The results of the October monthly review of progress of Departments and agencies in tackling the bug are due to be announced shortly by the President of the Council.

In order to ensure that the projects are effective, they are appraised before approval and monitored during implementation.

Mine Clearance Projects

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what countries have received direct support from the UK Government since 1997 for mine clearance projects; and if she will make a statement about the effectiveness of the projects. [94667]

Clare Short: My department had funded projects to clear anti-personnel mines and other unexploded ordnance since 1997 in the following countries:

Afghanistan, Albania, Bosnia, Cambodia, Croatia, Egypt, Georgia, Iraq (Northern), Jordan, Laos, Mozambique, Yugoslavia (Kosovo province).

The projects address urgent humanitarian needs in the context of post-conflict resettlement. They improve access for rural or urban poor to land and services and thus promote sustainable livelihoods.

In order to ensure that the project are effective, they are appraised before approval and monitored during implementation.

Special Advisers

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development on what dates special advisers from her Department have visited the United States of America on official business since 1 May 1997; which of her special advisers took part in each visit; and if she will list the meetings which these special advisers held with members and officials of the United States Government during each visit, specifying the date and location of each meeting and the names of the US members and officials at each meeting. [93943]

Clare Short: Since 1 May 1997, no Special Advisers from my Department have visited the United States of America on official business.

CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

Employment Contracts (Clergy)

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the hon. Member for Middlesbrough (Mr. Bell), representing the Church Commissioners, what plans the Church Commissioners have to issue formal employment contracts for clergy. [93275]

Mr. Stuart Bell: The Archbishops' Council has set up a staff group to explore what can and should be done to give the clergy the rights they could and should expect.

The great majority of clergy are office holders without contracts of employment. For National Insurance purposes only, they are deemed to be employees of the Church Commissioners.

Giving clergy formal employment contracts would raise questions about the current arrangements over patronage, parochial appointments practices, selection for ordination training and clergy discipline, and would require complex and protracted legislation with great problems in defining the employer.

The Minister for Trade has indicated that there would be extensive consultation were he to exercise the powers conferred on him by Clause 23 of the Employment Relations Act in respect of the faith communities.

Clergy (Housing)

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the hon. Member for Middlesbrough, representing the Church Commissioners, what plans the Church Commissioners have to review the estimated value of the housing clergy receive. [94040]

Mr. Stuart Bell: The Archbishops' Council, in its annual report as central Stipends Authority, provides an assessment of the value of the amount clergy would have to earn if they were to have to provide and maintain domestic accommodation (excluding office space) for themselves and their families.

The clergy remuneration package (including the value of provided housing) will be considered by the group set up by the Archbishops' Council to review clergy stipends. The group will make a preliminary report to the Council in November 2000.

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the hon. Member for Middlesbrough, representing the Church Commissioners, what plans the Church Commissioners have for changing the housing situation of retired clergy as regards obtaining their own property. [94052]

Mr. Stuart Bell: There are currently no plans to change the retirement provisions for clergy. The level of clergy pensions and retirement lump sums recognise the need for retired clergy to meet the cost of their housing.

The Church of England Pensions Board operates a scheme for assisting with the actual provision of retirement housing. Under the scheme, applicants with some resources can be granted value-linked mortgage loans to enable them to purchase a property. Those with very limited resources may occupy a property owned by the Board, for which they pay a maintenance contribution. Most of the finance for the scheme is provided by the Church Commissioners.

Millennium Celebrations

Mr. Cummings: To ask the hon. Member for Middlesbrough, representing the Church Commissioners, what plans the Church Commissioners have for celebrating the millennium. [93653]

Mr. Stuart Bell: The Church of England is working in close partnership with the other Christian Churches, with the overall goal of encouraging a wide range of activities and projects which seek to celebrate and explain the Christian faith. Hundreds of local congregations are also making plans for activities and events under the three themes of a New Start with God, a New Start at Home, and a New Start for the World's Poor. The Faith zone of the Millennium Dome will also celebrate the nation's Christian heritage. The Archbishop of Canterbury will lead the nation in prayer during the opening ceremony at the Dome on New Year's Eve and the Churches' Millennium Resolution, set to music by John Taverner, will be sung. Later in the year, the main focus of the Churches' celebrations will be Pentecost Sunday, June 11, when a large range of events have been planned.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Electoral Procedures

Mr. Linton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he intends to publish the final report of the Home Office Working Party on Electoral Procedures. [94816]

Mr. Straw: I have today placed a copy of the Working Party's Report in the Library and it will also be published on the Home Office's internet website.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Knowsley, North and Sefton, East (Mr. Howarth), now Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, and all the members of his Working Party, on a report that will be a major landmark in this country's electoral history. The existing procedures have served us well but are now well over a hundred years old and do not fully reflect modern conditions of life and work. The Working Party has gone out of its way to ensure that the integrity and openness of our electoral system will still be maintained into the next century.

I am very pleased to see the cross-party consensus that was achieved within the Working Party as this is essential to any aspect of electoral legislation.

I commend the Working Party's report to the House. The majority of its recommendations will require primary legislation, and I shall be seeking the earliest practical opportunity for a Bill. I look forward to cross-party co-operation that will ensure a swift and smooth passage for this excellent set of proposals.

Millennium Compliance

Mr. David Atkinson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement of progress on the millennium readiness of his Department's computer systems, and those for which it is responsible in the provision of public services; if contingency plans are in place; and what slippage has occurred since the July Quarterly report to the House. [93564]

Mr. Straw: Details of the Home Office and its agencies' progress in tackling the bug are set out in our quarterly monitoring returns. These are available in the Library and are published on the Internet.

In the latest published return, up to the end of August, out of 28 business critical Information Technology systems in the Home Office and its Agencies, 25 had been declared Year 2000 compliant. The remaining three systems completed their work during September. In the Home Office all Business Critical systems (Information Technology, Telecommunications and Embedded Systems) have now completed their Year 2000 work.

My department will complete work on all non-critical systems slightly later. 86 per cent. of non-critical Information Technology systems are complete, with full completion due during November. 80 per cent. of all non-critical embedded systems are compliant, with all work due to complete during December. Non-critical telecommunications work is scheduled to finish during this month. It should be noted that none of these non-critical systems affect the key services provided by my Department.

In Home Office Agencies, with the exception of one building management system, whose functions can be performed manually, all non-critical systems are compliant.

The results of the October monthly review of progress of Government departments and agencies in tackling the bug are to be announced shortly by the President of the Council.

The Home Office has policy responsibility for the police, fire, prison and probation services, the Police Information Technology Organisation and the Forensic Science Service. The results of the latest independent assessment of these sectors will be announced at the National Infrastructure Forum (NIF) on 21 October. This will show that good progress has been made since the previous NIF on 13 July, with all areas expected to report a Blue grading, meaning no material disruption is expected.

All key services provided by the Home Office will have business continuity plans in place by the end of October. 16 of the 19 services have already completed this work. My Department's Millennium Operating Regime will be completed by the end of this month and will be effective from November 1999.

Two Home Office business critical systems reported minor slippage during August, although these have since been declared compliant. The Forensic Science Service also reported that embedded systems at one site were not yet compliant. Negotiations are continuing with the landlords and the necessary compliance work is expected to be completed shortly.

Schengen

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will deposit in the Library a copy of the Commission recommendation concerning the UK application to join elements of Schengen. [94139]

Mrs. Roche: The Opinion of the European Commission on the United Kingdom's application to participate in certain provisions of the Schengen acquis was deposited for Parliamentary scrutiny on 9 August 1999. At the same time a copy was placed in the Library.

Asylum Seekers

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many immigration posts have run-out of forms SAL1 and SAL2 in the last year; how many have been using form IS96 for the wrong purpose in the last year; what assessment he has made of the effects of this on *(a)* fraud and *(b)* inconvenience to asylum seekers; what plans he has to issue more consistency of supply; and if he will make a statement. [93732]

Mrs. Roche: In the 12 months ending on 12 July 1999, because of printing problems, four immigration ports of entry exhausted their supplies of form SAL1 on various dates between 29 June and 12 July 1999 but no port of entry exhausted its supply of form SAL2. As a temporary measure, the Immigration Service, after liaising with the Benefits Agency, issued alternative confirmation that applicants who were not issued with form SAL1 had arrived in the United Kingdom and sought asylum on entry. There is no record that during the same period any port used form IS96 for the wrong purpose.

There are no indications that these measures had any bearing on fraud or that there was significant inconvenience to asylum seekers.

There are now adequate stocks of forms SAL1 and SAL2 available and future orders will be placed earlier.

Drug-related Crime

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what is the age distribution of individuals who commit drug-related crime on Merseyside. [94517]

Mr. Charles Clarke: This information is not centrally collated. However, some research bearing on the Merseyside area, is currently being analysed as part of the New England and Wales Arrestee and Drug Abuse Monitoring (NEW-ADAM) programme for interviewing and drug testing arrestees. It is hoped to publish the next set of full results, including those for Merseyside, in the first half of next year.

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what range of national initiatives Her Majesty's Government have employed to reduce drug-related crime since 1997. [94523]

Mr. Charles Clarke: One of the four Key Aims of the Government's drug strategy is to protect communities from drug-related crime. National initiatives introduced since 1997 include the piloting of the new Drug Treatment and Testing Order, for which around £60 million has been earmarked for national roll-out next year, an additional £60 million for the provision of new treatment services in prison and up to £20 million over the next two years to assist in the development of arrest referral schemes to get drug misusing offenders into treatment.

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how much expenditure has been committed to reducing drug-related crime on Merseyside, for each year since 1995. [94522]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The total expenditure of the relevant agencies involved in tackling drug-related crime on Merseyside is not held centrally.

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what range of initiatives have been taken by Her Majesty's Government since 1997 on Merseyside to reduce drug-related crime. [94516]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The responsibility for local delivery on Merseyside of the Government's drugs strategy, including the key aim of protecting communities from drug-related crime, rests with the four Drug Action Teams in Liverpool, Sefton, St. Helens and Knowsley and Wirral. In addition, Liverpool is one of the three locations in the country where the new drug treatment and testing order is being piloted under the Crime and Disorder Act 1998.

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how much expenditure has been committed to reducing drug- related crime within the United Kingdom in each year since 1995. [94521]

Mr. Charles Clarke: It is not possible to identify separately the national expenditure on reducing drug-related crime. The total annual expenditure on tackling drug misuse has been estimated at £1.4 billion. An additional £217 million over three years was made available in 1998.

Police Service

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the levels of spending on the police service per head of the population in each county of England in each year since 1995–96. [94206]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The information requested is set out in the table:

Expenditure per head of population—1995–96 to 1999–2000

£

Police forces (England)	*1995–96* [1]	*1996–97* [1]	*1997–98* [1]	*1998–99* [2]	*1999–2000* [2]
Shire police authorities					
Avon & Somerset	98.0	103.7	107.5	111.1	115.5
Bedfordshire	100.4	103.9	106.9	110.9	111.8
Cambridgeshire	87.3	93.3	99.5	102.7	103.7
Cheshire	87.1	94.1	104.2	107.5	112.2
Cleveland	116.8	127.2	132.4	137.5	145.9
Cumbria	109	117.5	125.7	127.4	130.5
Derbyshire	90.0	94.1	98.4	102.7	108.8
Devon & Cornwall	95.1	96.9	100.2	108.5	112.3
Dorset	91.2	100.8	102.7	104.7	110.4
Durham	100.3	111.3	122.4	129.4	135.6
Essex	97.45	100.4	102.1	108.6	111.1
Gloucestershire	98.7	103.5	105.8	113.0	115.9
Hampshire	95.0	98.9	102.4	106.8	109.1
Hertfordshire	94.8	103.2	106.7	111.7	116.4
Humberside	107.0	110.3	119.7	122.9	126.9
Kent	96.1	103.5	111.5	114.0	116.7
Lancashire	107.5	111.5	117.2	119.8	123.3
Leicestershire	93.4	100.9	105.6	107.9	113.2
Lincolnshire	95.9	100.2	104.2	106.5	111.0
Norfolk	89.7	96.6	102.9	103.6	106.4
North Yorkshire	90.9	92.3	98.6	102.9	104.2
Northamptonshire	97.0	98.7	106.6	106.8	111.4
Nottinghamshire	100.9	107.6	114.5	117.4	121.6
Staffordshire	93.4	102.6	104.5	110.1	113.0
Suffolk	85.8	91.1	97.2	101.2	103.2
Surrey	107.7	110.8	116.5	115.8	118.8
Sussex	91.9	99.9	104.3	108.2	109.4
Thames Valley	92.8	97.1	102.8	106.8	109.2
Warwickshire	96.0	95.1	99.9	104.7	108.7
West Mercia	85.5	91.3	95.3	99.7	102.7
Wiltshire	96.9	100.5	104.6	108.3	113.0
Metropolitan police authorities					
Greater Manchester	125.9	130.2	136.2	140.6	146.9
Merseyside	151.5	153.3	158.2	166.5	172.4
Northumbria	120.6	126.2	131.7	137.5	143.6
South Yorkshire	108.6	114.2	124.9	125.3	129.5
West Midlands	120.4	130.9	132.5	135.9	139.5
West Yorkshire	111.1	123.9	130.7	131.3	135.61
Metropolitan police	214.8	216.1	218.3	234.6	240.5
Average for England	103.7	109.3	114.6	118.7	122.6

[1] Figures for 1995–96 to 1997–98 are from Audit Commission

[2] Figures for 1998–99 and 1999–2000 are based on police force budgets and police authority population estimates

Fire Service

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the levels of spending on the Fire Service per head of the population in each county of England in each year since 1995–96. [94207]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: I refer to the reply given by my hon. Friend, the then Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, the Member for Knowsley, North and Sefton, East (Mr. Howarth) to my hon. Friend the Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham (Mr. Marsden) on 15 February 1999, *Official Report*, column *503*.

Passports

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many people in Lancashire received their passports after the target date set by the Passport Agency in each of the last six months. [94208]

Mrs. Roche: The Passport Agency does not monitor its performance on a county basis.

Applications from Lancashire would normally be dealt with by the Liverpool Passport Office, which faced considerable operational difficulties over the summer. To ensure that customers' needs were met, it moved from working a ten-day turnaround target for straightforward applications—its main customer service target—to prioritising applications by declared travel dates. These dates were met in 99.99 per cent. of cases.

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many people in Lancashire did not receive their passports from the Passport Agency before their declared journey time; and when they will receive *(a)* compensation and *(b)* apologies. [94183]

Mrs. Roche: Applications from Lancashire would normally be dealt with by the Liverpool Passport Office and their records show that in the period January 1999 to September 1999 claims were received from 22 residents in Lancashire relating to a missed travel date. The Passport Agency very much regrets the anxiety and inconvenience caused by its missing of these dates. All these cases have received an apology and compensation as appropriate.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he expects to carry out the next customer satisfaction survey for the UK Passport Agency. [94132]

Mrs. Roche: Customer satisfaction surveys are carried out by the Passport Agency bi-monthly for postal applications and every quarter for personal callers. The last postal survey covered the period 30 July to 2 September 1999 and is due to be published shortly. The last survey for personal callers covered the period 27 August to 4 October and is due to be published at the beginning of November. Copies of the analyses of these surveys will be placed in the Library.

Justice and Home Affairs Council

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what subjects were discussed at *(a)* the informal EU Council of Justice and Home Affairs Ministers on 24 and 25 September and *(b)* the formal Council in Luxemburg on 4 and 5 October; and if he will make a statement. [94339]

Mr. Straw: I assume that the hon. Member is referring to the meetings that took place on 16–17 September and 4 October.

The informal meeting of Justice and Home Affairs Ministers in Turku, Finland, on 16–17 September concentrated on preparations for the European Council at Tampere. Ministers exchanged views on the three main themes—asylum and immigration, cross-border crime and developing a European Judicial Area—proposed for discussion at Tampere.

As regards the formal meeting of the Justice and Home Affairs Council in Luxembourg on 4 October, I have written to the Parliamentary Scrutiny Committees, in accordance with the special arrangements which apply during a recess, reporting on the outcome. I am sending the hon. Member a copy of my letter.

Counterfeit Travel Documents

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on his policy towards the Commission's comments (8505/99 ADD.1) on the proposal for a Council decision on the improved exchange of information to control counterfeit travel documents. [94318]

Mrs. Roche: The Government supported the adoption of this Council decision which was subject to agreement by unanimity. Nevertheless, it recognises that this measure can be seen both as a police co-operation measure and as a measure to combat illegal immigration and has noted the Commission's statement in that context. The final arbiter of the correct legal base for this measure would be the European Court of Justice; it is open to any interested party to bring such a matter before the Court for such a ruling.

The Government consider that, irrespective of whether the fifth recital of this Decision is redundant, it cannot as a Third Pillar measure affect the respective competencies of the Community and its member states.

Departmental Responsibilities

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the responsibilities of his Department in respect of *(a)* Scotland, *(b)* Wales and *(c)* Northern Ireland; and if he will make a statement. [94340]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: Broadly, my responsibilities remain the same as they were before devolution to Scotland and Wales (devolution to Northern Ireland has not yet taken effect). Specifically, details of the matters for which the devolved administrations in Scotland and Wales are now responsible, and for which the devolved administration in Northern Ireland will be responsible in due course, can be found in the following documents:

Scotland Act 1998, Schedule 5,

Scotland Act 1998: Executive Devolution Order,

Scotland Act 1998: Transfer of Functions Order,

Government of Wales Act 1998, Sections 21 and 22 and Part III,

Government of Wales Act 1998: Assembly Transfer Order, and

Northern Ireland Act 1998, Section 4 and Schedules 2 and 3.

EU Readmission Issues

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what is his policy towards the claim of the European Commission that the EU should have competence over readmission issues. [94133]

Mrs. Roche: Following the entry into force of the Amsterdam Treaty, matters concerning immigration and asylum co-operation are now contained within Title IV of the Treaty establishing the European Community and are therefore within Community competence. The Government is of the view that readmission issues could fall within the scope of Article 63(3)(b) TEC which provides for measures on immigration policy within the area of removal of illegal residents.

Under the terms of the Protocol on the position of the United Kingdom and Ireland, annexed to the Treaties by the Treaty of Amsterdam, the United Kingdom may decide to participate in the adoption and application of any measures, including readmission measures, brought forward in Title IV, but it is not otherwise bound by Community law in this area. Should any readmission measures be considered to be a development of the Schengen acquis, the provisions of the Protocol integrating the Schengen acquis into the framework of the European Union would also be relevant.

Prison Education

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what factors are used to determine the allocation of resources for postgraduate education courses to prisoners serving lengthy prison sentences. [94704]

Mr. Boateng: The main priority for the Prison Service is to raise the levels of literacy and numeracy among prisoners, but there are opportunities for eligible prisoners to pursue courses of higher education where resources allow.

A prisoner would be deemed eligible if as a result of assessment a higher degree course was a requirement of the sentence plan. It would be necessary prior to embarking on this course of study for the prisoner to demonstrate that he or she was capable of attaining the qualification. Resources to pay for this could either come from the governor's budget, a charitable organisation or from the prisoner or a relative.

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what resources are available for courses of study to further degree level in each prison; what criteria are applied in deciding the allocation of these resources; and if he will make a statement. [94583]

Mr. Boateng: It is for prison governors to decide how much from their annual budget to allocate to education. The main priority of the Prison Service is to raise the levels of literacy and numeracy among prisoners, but there are opportunities for eligible prisoners to pursue higher education studies. Each application is considered on its merits, and there is no predetermined level of funding specifically for degree courses. Before any application can be approved, the governor and education officer need to be satisfied that the prisoner has the aptitude, ability and motivation to complete their chosen course.

The Prison Service has made arrangements for eligible prisoners to undertake degree and other higher education courses with the Open University. These can be funded either by the prisoner, a relative, through a charitable trust or by the prison.

In addition, the Open University has a system of financial support which it has agreed, as from the academic year starting February 2000, it will extend to pay the fees for continuing students in prison and has allocated up to £100,000 for this purpose.

Freedom of Information

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will authorise correspondence and papers between Ministers and their US counterparts to be made available for public access, simultaneous to their availability in the USA under the provisions of that country's freedom of information legislation; and if he will make a statement. [94385]

Mr. Straw: The Code of Practice on Access to Government Information sets out current Government policy on access to information. The Code of Practice promotes a culture of openness. It makes the assumption that information should be released except where disclosure would not be in the public interest. Whilst the Code of Practice identifies categories of information that are exempt from the commitment to provide information, where there is a reference to harm or prejudice, there is the presumption that information should be disclosed unless the harm likely to arise from disclosure would outweigh the public interest in making the information available. The Code of Practice is a non-statutory regime which the Government plan to replace with a Freedom of Information Act. It will, however, continue to operate the Code of Practice until a new Act is brought into force. The Government plan to introduce a Freedom of Information Bill into Parliament as soon as the timetable allows.

The Government's proposals for a Freedom of Information Act are contained within Freedom of Information, Consultation on Draft Legislation. Under the provisions contained in the Bill, public authorities, including all central government departments, will have a duty to comply with requests promptly and in any event within a specified time limit. Where the information sought falls into an exempt area, it will be for the authority to consider, on a case by case basis, whether the information should be disclosed in the public interest. This will ensure that proper consideration is given to all requests by the authority. This is the appropriate way forward. It is for the United Kingdom Government to develop legislation which is appropriate to the needs of this country. It would be wrong to subject United Kingdom authorities to the scope of foreign legislation in the context of their activities in this country. It is for the Parliament of the United Kingdom to decide such matters, not the congress of the United States of America.

The draft Bill was the subject of pre-legislative scrutiny by the Public Administration Select Committee, as well as a Select Committee of the House of Lords and a period of public consultation. The Government will respond to the recommendations of the Select Committees and to the public consultation soon.

Plastic Bullets

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the new guidelines relating to the use of plastic bullets by police forces in England and Wales. [94379]

Mr. Straw: I refer to the reply I gave my hon. Friend, the Member for Pendle (Mr. Prentice) on 27 July 1999, *Official Report*, columns *246–47*.

Prison Service Documents

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what are the terms of reference for his inquiry into the leak of confidential Prison Service documents established on 12 July; if the inquiry team has power to examine the involvement of the intelligence services; and if he will place in the Library his letter to the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe). [93528]

Mr. Boateng: An internal investigation into the loss of confidential information from Belmarsh prison was ordered by the Director of High Security Prisons on 14 July 1999, headed by the governor of Whitemoor prison.

A separate inquiry is being undertaken by the Metropolitan Police which has led to an arrest, but is still continuing. The Prison Service inquiry will not be completed until after any police matters are concluded to avoid jeopardising any legal proceedings.

A copy of the letter I sent to the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) on 9 August about this matter has been placed in the Library.

Criminal Injuries Compensation Act

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will seek to amend the Criminal Injuries Compensation Act 1995 so that same-sex couples are dealt with in the same way as heterosexual couples. [93923]

Mr. Charles Clarke: We mounted a public consultation exercise on the compensation scheme earlier this year. That public debate was informed by the issue of a consultation paper "Compensation for Victims of Violent Crime: Possible Changes to the Criminal Injuries Compensation Scheme". The possibility of extending eligibility for fatal awards to partners of the same sex was one of the options for change mentioned in that paper.

We received over 50 responses to the consultation exercise and a wide variety of proposals for change was put forward, including the suggestion that fatal awards be given to same-sex partners. We are still considering the results of the consultation exercise, and hope to be able to say later in the year how we proposed to take matters forward.

TREASURY

Millennium Compliance

Mr. David Atkinson: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement of progress on the millennium readiness of his Department's computer systems, and those for which it is responsible in the provision of public services; if contingency plans are in place; and what slippage has occurred since the July quarterly report to the House. [93561]

Miss Melanie Johnson: Details of the Treasury's progress in tackling the bug are set out in our quarterly monitoring returns. These are available in the Libraries of the House and are published on the Internet. They show that work on business critical IT systems, embedded systems and telecoms has been completed. Our Y2K business continuity plan and millennium operating regime were completed in September. The results of the October monthly review of progress of Departments and agencies in tackling the bug are due to be announced shortly by the President of the Council.

The results of the latest independent assessment of the tax collection and financial institutions sectors will be announced at the next National Infrastructure Forum on 21 October.

Refurbishment Costs

Mr. Baker: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what is the estimated cost of refurbishing the Treasury. [94467]

Mr. Timms: The plans for the refurbishment of the Treasury accommodation in the building were announced by the former Chief Secretary on 27 July 1999, *Official Report*, columns *400–01*. The design and build costs of the current project within the Private Finance Initiative package are £113 million. The non-Treasury space will be developed and let by the Private Sector Partner to other public sector bodies.

Smuggling

Mrs. Spelman: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on his latest assessment of the volume of cigarettes and tobacco products illegally smuggled into the country without duty being paid. [93578]

Dawn Primarolo: Based on work still in progress, Customs' provisional assessment is that losses through all forms of smuggling were around £1.7 billion in 1998, equivalent to approximately 10 per cent. of the cigarette market and 75 per cent. of the hand-rolling tobacco market.

The Government take the challenge posed by smuggling to our health and revenue objectives extremely seriously and our position is clear. We will not permit organised smuggling to undo a policy on tobacco duty, which successive Governments have adopted for good and urgent health reasons.

EU Expenditure

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer, pursuant to his answer of 29 June 1999, *Official Report*, columns *132–34*, on EU expenditure, if he will identify the legal basis for those items of Government expenditure listed; and what total sums are involved. [94148]

Miss Melanie Johnson: I refer the hon. Member to the answer the former Economic Secretary gave the hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Mr. Hawkins) on 27 July 1999, *Official Report*, column *392*.

Public Finance Initiative

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what was the estimated cost to the Treasury of not enforcing in full in all cases financial penalty clauses in PFI contracts in the last year for which figures are available. [94525]

Mr. Andrew Smith: This information is not held centrally and could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

Ministerial Visits (United States)

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what meetings he held with members and officials of the United States Government during his visits of December 4 to 6 1997 to New York and 16 July 1998, to Idaho, United States of America; and if he will list the date and location of each meeting, and the names and officials of the United States Government at each meeting. [93953]

Miss Melanie Johnson: I refer the hon. Member to the answer which my predecessor gave him on 31 March 1999, *Official Report*, column *687*. The main purpose of the Chancellor's visit to the United States in December 1997 was to deliver a speech to the British-American Chamber of Commerce.

Windfall Tax

Mr. Rowlands: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what is the total amount collected by the windfall tax on the public utilities; and how much of this total has been paid out to each of the New Deal initiatives and other projects financed from the tax. [94447]

Mr. Timms: The Windfall Tax raised a revenue of £5.2 billion, all of which has now been collected. The allocation of this money to each initiative is set out in the Financial Statement and Budget Report, March 1999, Table 4.1: The Allocation of the Windfall Tax. These estimates will be updated in the Pre-Budget Report this autumn.

UK-US Inland Revenue Co-operation

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) if he will make a statement on the ways in which the Inland Revenue and the United States Inland Revenue Service co-operate to achieve their objectives; [93937]

(2) if he will list all the *(a)* joint committees and *(b)* working groups which have been in existence manned by the Inland Revenue and the United States Inland Revenue Service since 1 January 1997, specifying the title, purpose, starting date and duration of each committee or group; [93935]

(3) if he will list the agreements between the Inland Revenue and the United States Inland Revenue Service since 1 January 1997, specifying the title, purpose, starting date and duration of each agreement. [93936]

Dawn Primarolo: The Inland Revenue and the US Internal Revenue Service co-operate within the terms of the Double Taxation Convention between the UK and the USA, and also exchange views on general issues of mutual interest.

Council of Economic Advisers

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer on what dates Chris Wales, Paul Gregg and Shriti Vadera were appointed members of the Council of Economic Advisers. [93839]

Miss Melanie Johnson: Chris Wales and Paul Gregg took up their appointments on 3 September 1997, and Shriti Vadera on 1 April 1999.

Pakistan (Cargo Seizure)

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on HM Customs and Excise's seizure of cargo at Thamesport, in July, imported from the United States destined for Dubai and Lahore, alleged to have been procured for the Pakistani nuclear weapons programme. [94149]

Miss Melanie Johnson: There was no seizure of the nature identified in July 1999. There was, in May 1999, a seizure of aluminium bars intended for shipment to Dubai with a final destination understood to be Pakistan. The bars were of a specification which requires an export licence and were seized because there was no licence. Inquiries into this incident are continuing.

VAT (New Houses)

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what plans he has to introduce VAT at 17.5 per cent. on new houses; and if he will make a statement. [94196]

Dawn Primarolo: The Chancellor has no present plans to impose VAT at 17.5 per cent. on new houses. The Government keep under review the scope for using economic instruments to complement the planning system in achieving their social and environmental objectives.

National Insurance

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimate he has made of the number of employees whose liability for national insurance contributions will rise by 2001–02 as a result of the reforms to employees' NICs introduced in the (i) 1997, (ii) 1998 and (iii) 1999 Budgets. [94317]

Dawn Primarolo: There were no measures in the 1997 or 1998 Budgets which increased the NIC liability of employees. In fact, the 1998 Budget included the abolition of the 2 per cent. "entry fee", which would have cost all NIC payers about £1.40 per week in 2001–02 had it remained in place.

In the 1999 Budget, the Chancellor announced a number of changes for NICs. The point at which people start paying NICs and the upper earnings limit will be increased by more than indexation in April 2000 and April 2001, so those 16.6 million employees earning between £69 and around £540 per week will be liable to less NICs and 3.9 million employees earning more than around £540 per week will be liable to more NICs. The rise in the starting point for employees' NICs necessitates a rise in the upper earnings limit, to maintain the historical relationship between the two points and thus protect the base for such contributions.

Health Insurance

Mr. Efford: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer, pursuant to his answer of 22 July 1999, *Official Report*, column *632*, (1) if the remit of the single ombudsman as proposed in the Financial Services and Markets Bill will extend to matters relating to permanent health insurers and claims of individuals suffering from chronic diseases; [94032]

(2) if individuals covered through a contract of their employer with a permanent health insurer will have the right to complain to the single ombudsman; and if he will make a statement; [94070]

(3) if the single ombudsman will have the power to investigate the methods used by permanent health insurers to assess the medical and mental condition of claimants. [94031]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The carrying on of permanent health insurance business will continue to be an activity requiring authorisation under the Financial Services and Markets Bill, as it is now under the Insurance Companies Act 1982.

The Bill will require any authorised person who carries on those regulated activities specified by the Financial Services Authority to be subject to the compulsory jurisdiction of the new Financial Services Ombudsman Scheme.

The Authority is due to consult on the activities which it proposes should be covered by the compulsory jurisdiction of the Scheme before the end of the year. It is envisaged that it will cover permanent health insurance.

The details of the Scheme's remit, powers and eligibility of complainants will be specified in the rules set by the Authority. Such matters will also be addressed in the Authority's consultation.

Working Families Tax Credit

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimate he has made of the number of families in Hendon which will benefit from working families tax credit in its first year. [94394]

Miss Melanie Johnson: Estimates for Hendon are not available.

Duty-free Money

Sir Richard Body: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will estimate for 1999 the proportion of the money stock as measured by MO which can be attributed to duty-free money as measured by MO; and if he will state the proportion in the years *(a)* 1989 and *(b)* 1979. [94126]

Miss Melanie Johnson: Figures for MO are published in table 3.1B of the ONS publication "Financial Statistics". Data on the amount of duty-free spending is not available for the years requested.

Departmental Publications

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will list the titles of the in-house publications and newsletters which were produced for the staff of his Department, excluding non-departmental public bodies and agencies, in the last five years, specifying the dates on which each title was first produced, the frequency with which each title is produced and the current secrecy classification of each title. [93852]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The Treasury has produced a monthly staff magazine called "Chequerboard" since July 1992. To date there have been 80 issues, all of which have contained only unclassified material.

Gold

Mr. Caplin: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on the recent European Central Bank's agreement on gold. [94834]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The agreement reached by European central banks[1] to limit gold sales and lending over the next five years means that the UK will be able to continue its sales programme while the price is underpinned. The agreement is an endorsement of the UK's transparent approach to selling gold. The Bank of England is a signatory on behalf of the Treasury.

The text of the European central banks statement is set out below:

Statement on Gold

In the interest of clarifying their intentions with respect to their gold holdings, the institutions listed below[1] make the following statement:

1. Gold will remain an important element of global monetary reserves.
2. The above institutions will not enter the market as sellers, with exception of already decided sales.
3. The gold sales already decided will be achieved through a concerted programme of sales over the next five years. Annual sales will not exceed approximately 400 tons and total sales over this period will not exceed 2,000 tons.
4. The signatories to this agreement have agreed not to expand their gold leasing and their use of gold future and options over this period.
5. This agreement will be reviewed after five years.

[1] The European Central Bank; the central banks of Germany, France, Italy, Netherlands, Belgium, Spain, Portugal, Ireland, Luxembourg, Austria, Finland, Switzerland and Sweden; and the Bank of England.

Pre-Budget Report

Mr. Caplin: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer when he intends to publish his Pre-Budget report. [94835]

Mr. Gordon Brown: This year's Pre-Budget Report will be published on Tuesday 9 November.

Diplomats (Tax-free Concessions)

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will list the tax-free concessions which apply to (i) UK diplomats returning to the UK from EU countries, for *(a)* visits and *(b)* permanent residence and (ii) families of UK diplomats, indicating how many UK diplomats and members of their families are entitled to benefit from such tax free concessions. [94412]

Mr. Timms: No UK tax concessions are granted specifically to returning UK diplomats.

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what tax-free concessions apply to (i) UK nationals and (ii) their families who are employed by or otherwise

attached to, or are members of the *(a)* European Parliament, *(b)* European Commission, and *(c)* NATO when returning to the UK on visits or for permanent residence, indicating how many people in the above categories are entitled to benefit from tax-free concessions. [94413]

Mr. Timms: UK nationals and their families who are employed by or otherwise attached to, or are members of the *(a)* European Parliament, *(b)* European Commission, and *(c)* NATO on return to the UK for visits or transfer of residence are not by virtue of their status granted any special tax-free concessions. The host nation tax authority can, however, extend some concessions to eligible organisations and their personnel. Where the UK is the host nation no tax concessions are granted to UK nationals.

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what advice is given to people with entitlement to tax-free concessions as to the use of the entitlements; and if he will make a statement. [94414]

Mr. Timms: The Foreign and Commonwealth Office advise diplomatic missions, international organisations and their entitled personnel as to their tax-free entitlements. Customs and Excise advise visiting forces as to their tax-free entitlements.

Oral Statements

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will list *(a)* the reports published by his Department and its associated bodies, *(b)* the reports received from bodies set up by his Department, *(c)* the decisions his Department has taken and *(d)* events in the UK and elsewhere, since 27 July, which satisfied the criteria he uses for deciding whether to apply to make oral statements to the House when the House is sitting. [93966]

Miss Melanie Johnson: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer which the President of the Council has given him today.

SCOTLAND

Millennium Compliance

Mr. David Atkinson: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will make a statement of progress on the millennium readiness of his Department's computer systems, and those for which it is responsible in the provision of public services; if contingency plans are in place; and what slippage has occurred since the July Quarterly Report to the House. [93574]

Dr. Reid: Computer systems, embedded systems and telecommunications within the Scotland Office have been tested and declared to be Year 2000 compliant. No slippage has occurred since the July return, and contingency plans are in place. Responsibility for Year 2000 compliance in the wider public sector in Scotland is a matter for the Scottish Executive.

Carbon Dioxide Emissions

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what proportion of the carbon dioxide emissions reduction needed for a 20 per cent. reduction in the UK's 1990 levels by 2010 he expects to be delivered in Scotland. [93868]

Dr. Reid: Following Kyoto in 1997, the UK has a legally binding target to cut emissions of a basket of six greenhouse gases by 12.5 per cent. below 1990 levels over the period 2008–12. The UK Government also have a domestic goal to cut carbon dioxide emissions by 20 per cent. below 1990 levels by 2010.

The Government, in conjunction with the devolved administrations, are currently developing a draft climate change programme which will set out how we will deliver our Kyoto commitment and move towards our domestic goal. The aim is to publish the draft programme for consultation towards the end of 1999.

Departmental Publications

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will list the titles of the in-house publications and newsletters which were produced for the staff of his Department, excluding non-departmental public bodies and agencies, in the last five years, specifying the dates on which each title was first produced, the frequency with which each title is produced and the current secrecy classification of each title. [93846]

Dr. Reid: My Department is aware of 11 in-house publications and newsletters, which have been produced during the last five years. The information is set out in the table. Where the date of first issue falls before 1994, that is the date which is given. The majority of titles have not been issued according to a fixed schedule. Circulation of these titles ranges from 'all staff' to staff in a single Scottish Department. None of these titles carry any security classification.

Title of publication	*Date of first issue*	*Date of last issue*	*Frequency of issue*
BSU Newsletter	June 1998	October 1999	9 issues
BC Link	May 1994	October 1996	4 issues
Engineering, Water and Waste Directorate Newsletter[1]	1991	1995	Quarterly
Gemini Gem	March 1996	March 1998	12 issues
National Roads Directorate Newsletter	December 1994	December 1995	3 issues
Phoenix Flyer	May 1995	February 1996	4 issues
SCOAP Newsletter	February 1996	March 1998	7 issues
Scoop	June 1989	September 1999	Quarterly
SCOTS Newsletter	January 1995	November 1997	14 issues
Scottish Parliament News	December 1997	May 1999	8 issues
Training and Development News	February 1997	August 1999	15 issues

[1] No records regarding this title remain, as the Directorate has since been reorganised

Special Advisers

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how many special advisers have worked for Ministers in his Department since 1 May 1997; and on what date each of these special advisers was appointed to their post. [93881]

Dr. Reid: Between 1 May 1997 and 6 April 1999, four Special Advisers have worked for Ministers in the former Scottish Office. Ms Wendy Alexander and Mr. Murray Elder were appointed on 5 May 1997. Ms Alexander resigned on 31 December 1998 and Mr. Elder resigned on 6 April 1999 prior to the Scottish Parliament Election. Mr. David Whitton was appointed on 5 May 1998 and Ms Elsbeth Johnson on 1 February 1999. Both resigned on 6 April 1999.

My current Special Advisers in the Scotland Office are Mr. Richard Olszewski, appointed on 17 May 1999, Mr. Mike Elrick, appointed on 14 June 1999 and Professor Mike Donnelly, appointed on 24 June 1999. Professor Donnelly will work in an unpaid capacity.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Oral Statements

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list *(a)* the reports published by his Department and its associated bodies, *(b)* the reports received from bodies set up by his Department, *(c)* the decisions his Department has taken and *(d)* events in the UK and elsewhere, since 27 July, which satisfied the criteria he uses for deciding whether to apply to make oral statements to the House when the House is sitting. [93978]

Mr. Byers: I refer to the reply given by my right hon. Friend the President of the Council today, *Official Report*, columns 429–30.

Millennium Compliance

Mr. David Atkinson: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement of progress on the millennium readiness of his Department's computer systems, and those for which it is responsible in the provision of public services; if contingency plans are in place; and what slippage has occurred since the July quarterly report to the House. [93572]

Mr. Byers: Details of progress in tackling the bug are set out in our quarterly monitoring returns, the most recent being for September, which are available in the Libraries of the House and are published on the internet.

Contingency plans are in place within the Department and its agencies. The results of the October monthly review of progress of Departments and agencies in tackling the bug are due to be announced shortly by the President of the Council.

Metric and Imperial Units

Mr. Chidgey: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what assessment he has made of the inspection, compliance and enforcement costs of converting to dual metric and imperial units for goods sold loose from bulk. [94433]

Dr. Howells: The cost of converting an existing weighing machine to operate in metric and imperial units would be between £60 and £145. The cost of buying a new machine in metric and imperial units would start at £450, depending on the model ordered.

The cost of indicating prices in metric and imperial units would be relatively low where price tickets are printed by computer, but would be more expensive where price tickets are prepared manually. There may be a relatively small increase in the cost of inspection and enforcement because of the need to check the accuracy of weighing machines and price indications in both metric and imperial units.

Mr. Chidgey: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what assessment he has made of the impact of ending the exclusive use of imperial units for loose goods after 31 December on the retail trade, with regard to *(a)* the number of traders affected, *(b)* the average cost of conversion to metric plus imperial systems and *(c)* the total cost to the retail sector. [94432]

Dr. Howells: The compliance cost assessment published by the Department of Trade and Industry when the metrication legislation was laid before Parliament in 1994 estimated that about 62,000 traders would be affected. The overall business costs were estimated to be about £33 million, of which about £30 million was identified as the conversion or replacement of an estimated 200,000 weighing machines. The assessment did not apportion the costs between the metric changes in 1995 and the change to loose goods by the end of 1999. The UK Weighing Federation estimated that, at the beginning of 1999, only 95,000 weighing machines were still to be converted or replaced. According to the Federation, about 76,000 machines could be converted and the remaining 19,000 would have to be replaced.

Small Business Service

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what plans he has to transfer responsibilities from the Regulatory Impact Unit to the Small Business Service. [94669]

Ms Hewitt: There are three areas where responsibilities will be either transferred or shared between the Regulatory Impact Unit and the Small Business Service.

Regulatory information: The work on providing advice and information on regulations to small businesses was transferred to the Department of Trade and Industry earlier this year in anticipation of the establishment of the Small Business Service. This includes responsibility for the Direct Action Government internet service and the proposals for an Electronic Regulation Service.

Minimising regulatory burdens: The Small Business Service will be key to helping small businesses to meet the demands of regulation and ensuring that the impact of proposed regulations on small business is properly understood and taken into account at all levels of Government. The Small Business Service will work closely with the Regulatory Impact Unit to achieve this aim and working arrangements are being formulated at present.

Local Business Partnerships provide a forum for dialogue between local business and the local enforcement community. Responsibility for promoting partnerships will be transferred from the Regulatory Impact Unit to the Small Business Service shortly.

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what are the aims and objectives of the Small Business Service Unit. [94500]

Ms Hewitt: A consultation paper on the Small Business Service was issued in June. It proposed that the Small Business Service should have three main aims: to act as a strong voice for small businesses at the heart of Government; to simplify and improve the quality and coherence of Government support for small businesses; and to help small firms with regulation and ensure small firms' interests are properly considered in future regulation.

The consultation process closed on 30 September and the submissions are now being analysed.

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if the Chief Executive of the Small Business Service has been appointed. [94499]

Ms Hewitt: The post of Chief Executive of the Small Business Service was publicly advertised and the appointment will conform to public sector standards of recruitment. The date for applications has now closed and the selection process is taking place.

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what progress has been made establishing a Small Business Service; and what financial support the Small Business Service has *(a)* received and *(b)* been allocated. [94498]

Ms Hewitt: The consultation exercise on the role and objectives of the Small Business Service closed on 30 September. Over 700 written responses have been received and are currently being analysed.

The recruitment of the Chief Executive is under way and I hope to announce the name of the successful candidate in November.

As the Small Business Service will not begin operating formally until 1 April 2000, it is not currently in receipt of financial support. Its allocation for 2000–01 is not yet determined.

Forest Products

Mr. Dafis: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he has consulted the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport, and the Regions, concerning the impact on rates of deforestation of the proposed elimination of tariffs on wood products. [94462]

Mr. Caborn: The Government are very much seized of the importance of ensuring that trade liberalisation is consistent with sustainable development. My Department has been, and remains, in close consultation with the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions and other interested Departments on the range of environmental issues raised by the prospective new round of trade negotiations. With UK support, the European Commission is currently undertaking a sustainability impact assessment which will cover particular trade sectors, including forest products, likely to be included in the new round. This impact assessment will be used by the European Union to inform its negotiating position in the future trade negotiations.

Mr. Dafis: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will oppose the proposal to establish a World Trade Organisation agreement on forest products. [93835]

Mr. Caborn: We do not rule out the possibility of an agreement on tariff reduction on forest products as part of a comprehensive round of trade negotiations.

Mr. Dafis: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what assessment he has made of the impact on rates of deforestation of the proposed elimination of tariffs on wood products. [94461]

Mr. Caborn: With UK support, the European Commission is currently undertaking a sustainability impact assessment which will cover particular trade sectors, including forest products, likely to be included in the prospective new round of Multilateral Trade Negotiations. This impact assessment, along with the views of others, such as those received by my Department in our recent consultation on tariff priorities for the new round, will be considered in forming a UK Government position on the issue.

Mr. Dafis: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what assessment he has made of the adequacy of the mechanisms within Government to ensure that the Government's policies on forest conservation are taken into account when its stance in World Trade Organisation negotiations is being considered. [93833]

Mr. Caborn: In formulating the Government's approach to the negotiations, the Department has consulted widely. I am confident that the range of mechanisms for such consultations will ensure that all other areas of Government policy are fully considered in developing our position for the negotiations.

Employment Agencies

Mr. Flight: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (1) what assessment he has made of the change in costs of employing self-employed carers as a result of regulating secretarial and employment agencies; and if he will make a statement; [94373]

(2) what assessment he has made of the impact on self-employed carers of his policy of regulating secretarial and other employment agencies; and if he will make a statement. [94372]

Mr. Alan Johnson: Carers supplied by employment bureaux, whether self-employed or not, are protected by existing regulations on employment agency standards. We have been consulting on replacement regulations, including a proposal that workers (including carers) supplied by a bureau on a staff hire basis should have a

contract with that bureau instead of the hirer with whom they are placed. Care workers who are self-employed could remain so. The consultation document published on 31 May contains a regulatory impact assessment of possible cost consequences to those hiring staff through employment bureaux. We are also considering representations on costs.

Better Regulation Task Force

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry which organisations have been or will be consulted in drawing up the terms of reference for research to assess the degree of consistency between tribunals in various parts of the UK as reported in the Government response to the review of anti-discrimination legislation conducted by the Better Regulation Task Force; and what steps he is taking to ensure that the project has expert advice on potential solutions in the field of information technology. [93529]

Mr. Alan Johnson: I propose to consult widely on the planned research project into the operation of tribunals which, as indicated in the Government's response to the Better Regulation Task Force Report, is likely to provide information on the consistency of employment tribunal decision-making. The exact terms of reference of the project are not yet determined. Given their interest, anti-discrimination bodies, the Equal Opportunities Commission and others will all be included in that consultation. Expert advice on the use of information and communication technologies in this project will be commissioned as necessary.

Statutory Instruments

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list the statutory instruments introduced into Parliament by his Department in *(a)* 1997, *(b)* 1998 and *(c)* 1999. [93838]

Mr. Byers: My Department has introduced 280 Statutory Instruments into Parliament since 1 May 1997. A list detailing these has been placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

Correspondence

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when he will reply to the letter of 26 May from the hon. Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton regarding Mr. M. P. Dickson, a constituent. [93737]

Mr. Byers: The Minister of State, my right hon. Friend the Member for Makerfield (Mr. McCartney), replied to the letter on 26 July 1999. A copy will be made available in the Library of the House.

Ministerial Duties

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list the dates in July when the Minister of State, the right hon. Member for Makerfield (Mr. McCartney), was not performing ministerial duties. [94147]

Mr. Byers: There were no such dates.

Electronic Communications

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when the Government proposes to introduce legislation to safeguard the privacy and security of e-mails; and if he will make a statement. [94577]

Ms Hewitt: In July the Government published the draft Electronic Communications Bill, which facilitates privacy and security of electronic communications, including e-mail, within the existing framework of legislation. It will be introduced into Parliament in the next session.

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when he proposes to publish the E-Commerce Bill. [94576]

Ms Hewitt: The Electronic Communications Bill was published in draft on 23 July and announced by my hon. Friend the Member for North Swindon (Mr. Wills) on 23 July 1999, *Official Report,* columns *681–83,* as part of a consultation. I am pleased to say that we have received over 80 responses to the consultation.

The Government will introduce the Bill to Parliament in the next session.

Ilisu Dam

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on UK support for the Ilisu Dam project in Turkey. [94386]

Mr. Caborn: No decision has been made on the provision of ECGD support for this project. The case for such support is being considered in consultation with the contractors and governments from a number of countries.

Airlines

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what action he proposes to take to ensure fair competition between low cost airlines; and if he will make a statement. [94572]

Dr. Howells: Responsibility for ensuring that competition laws are not broken lies with the competition authorities, the Office of Fair Trading within the UK or the European Commission for activities which affect trade between member states. I look to these bodies to ensure fair competition, and for those with concerns to put them to the competition authorities for investigation.

Post Office

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what contribution was made to the Consolidated Fund by the Post Office in each of the last 10 years at *(a)* actual and *(b)* 1999 retail index prices; and if he will initiate a study of how future payments could be used to fund future investment in the postal services. [94637]

Mr. Alan Johnson: The Post Office does not make payments to the Consolidated Fund, as it does not pay a dividend. However, its contribution to the Exchequer can be measured by its negative External Financing Requirement, through which it is obliged to invest in

gilt-edged stock or National Loan Fund deposits. In each of the last 10 years its contributions in both actual and in 1998–99 RPI values were as follows:

£ million

	Actual	1998–99 RPI
1989–90	102	142
1990–91	0	0
1991–92	74	90
1992–93	80	94
1993–94	182	211
1994–95	235	265
1995–96	245	267
1996–97	285	304
1997–98	338	349
1998–99	321	321

In the White Paper "Post Office Reform: A World Class Service for the 21st Century", the Government confirmed that under the new financial regime for the Post Office an equivalent of a commercial dividend would be set at 50 per cent. of expected post-tax profits in the current financial year and at 40 per cent. in subsequent years. This will more than halve the rate at which profits are removed from the business and increase the funds available to the Post Office to fund future investment. Once the Post Office has been established as a plc, it will pay an annual dividend to the Exchequer rather than build up its deposits.

Timeshare

Mr. Sarwar: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (1) if he will make a statement on the regulation of the timeshare industry in the United Kingdom; [94435]

(2) what statutory provisions govern the regulation of timeshare operations in the United Kingdom. [94434]

Dr. Howells: Regulation of timeshare operations in the United Kingdom are governed by the Timeshare Act 1992, as amended by the Timeshare Regulations 1997.

Mr. Sarwar: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what assessment he has made of the effectiveness of the Timeshare Act 1992 and Timeshare Regulations 1997 in relation to the regulation of the timeshare industry. [94436]

Dr. Howells: I believe that the Timeshare Act has been effective and that timeshare in the UK is generally well run. Since the Act came into force in 1992, the level of complaints about timeshare made to the Office of Fair Trading has fallen significantly from over 11,500 in 1991–92 to less than half that number today—but there is no room for complacency with over 5,000 complaints every year. I intend to use the forthcoming consultation exercise to assess whether aspects of the legislation need updating.

Mr. Sarwar: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what plans he has to strengthen the regulations, under the Timeshare Act 1992 and Timeshare Regulations 1997, in respect of claims made by individuals against timeshare operators. [94437]

Dr. Howells: As set out in the Consumer White Paper "Modern Markets: Confident Consumers", the Government plans to review timeshare legislation to see whether aspects of it need updating. My Department will consult interested parties on our proposals before the end of this year.

Export Credits Guarantee Department

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on the ways in which the Export Credits Guarantee Department and the Export-Import Bank of the United States co-operate to achieve their objectives; what joint working groups and committees between the Export Credits Guarantee Department and the Export-Import Bank of the United States have operated since 1 January 1997; what agreements between the Export Credits Guarantee Department and the Export-Import Bank of the United States have been in existence since 1 January 1997; how many personnel from the Export-Import Bank of the United States have visited the Export Credits Guarantee Department since 1 June 1998; and how many personnel from the Export Credits Guarantee Department have visited the Export-Import Bank of the United States since 1 June 1998. [93938]

Mr. Caborn: 1. Co-operation between US Eximbank and ECGD to achieve our objectives: ECGD and the Export Import Bank of the United States (US Exim) co-operate in a number of ways to achieve their respective objectives. This includes discussions in multilateral fora such as the International Union of Credit and Investment Insurers (the Berne Union) and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), with the aim of maintaining discipline in the field of Export credits and phasing out trade distorting subsidies. They also hold ad hoc informal discussions.

2. Joint Working Groups, Committees and Agreements that have operated since 1 January 1997: ECGD and US Exim participate in the following Committees and Working Groups:

In the context of the OECD:

The Participants to the Arrangement on Guidelines for Officially Supported Export Credits

The Group on the Sector Understanding on Export Credits for Nuclear Power Plant

The Group on the Sector Understanding for Civil Aircraft,

The consultation Group on Tied Aid

The Working Group of Experts on Premium and Related Conditions and the Sub Group of country Risk Experts

The Working Party on Export Credits and Credit Guarantees

The International Union of Credit and Investment Insurers.

In the context of the OECD:

The Arrangement on Guidelines for Officially Supported Export Credits

The Statement of Intent on Officially Supported Export Credits and the environment

Agreement on environmental Information Exchange for Large Projects

The Berne Union Sector Understandings (on credit terms).

ECGD has a number of Bilateral Co-operation Agreements between various other Export Credit Agencies which at present does not include US Eximbank.

ECGD has entered into discussion with them but the discussions are at an early stage and US Eximbank is yet to respond to our draft agreement and documentation. If US Eximbank wish to pursue this agreement then we would expect to conclude the negotiations next year.

3. Visits by staff to US Eximbank and ECGD since 1 June 1998: Our relationship with US Eximbank cuts across many areas and their meetings take place at all levels with regard to 2 above. Our respective Chief Executives meet and talk to each other on a regular basis.

Visits to our respective office have occurred on the following matters:

Aircraft financing matters (2 visits)

Project finance matters (1 visit)

Co-operation Agreement discussions (2 visits).

Departmental Publications

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list the titles of the in-house publications and newsletters which were produced for the staff of his Department, excluding non-departmental public bodies and agencies, in the last five years, specifying the dates on which each title was first produced, the frequency with which each title is produced and the current secrecy classification of each title. [93848]

Dr. Howells: A list of those in-house publications and newsletters which were produced for staff and that have been notified to my Department's Publications Unit and published by my Department during this period has been placed in the Library of the House.

Federal Key Management Infrastructure

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when officials from his Department attended meetings of the United States Department of Commerce's Technical Advisory Committee to Develop Federal Information Processing Standards for the Federal Key Management Infrastructure. [93841]

Ms Hewitt: Officials from the Department of Trade and Industry have not attended any meetings of the US's Technology Advisory Committee on developing a Federal Information Processing Standard for a Federal Key Management Infrastructure.

Ministerial Visits (United States)

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many times since 1 January 1998 officials from his Department have visited the United States to gather information to help set up his Department's Small Business Service; on what dates his officials visited the US on each occasion; and which US organisations his officials visited on each occasion. [93957]

Ms Hewitt: Officials from my Department with a responsibility for small firms issues visited the United States in October 1998 and February 1999. Both visits had a broad agenda, but included meetings with the Small Business Administration and a number of other organisations which are engaged with the SBA in delivering business support for small firms. In addition, officials have met with colleagues from the SBA in the United Kingdom in November 1998 and July 1999.

Encryption

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many times *(a)* Ministers and *(b)* officials in his Department have held meetings with the United States Special Envoy for Cryptography, Ambassador David Aaron, since 1 January 1998, on (i) encryption and (ii) other issues; what were the dates and locations of each meeting; and if any other *(a)* British and *(b)* United States Government Departments took part in each meeting. [93865]

Ms Hewitt: Ministers have not met with Ambassador Aaron.

Officials from the Department of Trade and Industry, the Cabinet Office and the Government's technical advisers on information security, the Communications Electronic Security Group met Ambassador Aaron on 4 June 1998 in London, on 3 September 1998 in Ottawa and 3 December 1998 in Vienna. On the United States side, the meetings involved officials from the Department of State, Commerce, Justice and Defense, and from the National Security Council. Each of these meetings related to discussions about national and international policies on encryption and possible changes to export controls on cryptographic goods under the Wassenaar Agreement for Export Controls on Conventional Arms and Dual-Use Goods. Each of these meetings were multinational meetings involving a number of other countries.

NORTHERN IRELAND

Millennium Compliance

Mr. David Atkinson: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will make a statement of progress on the millennium readiness of his Department's computer systems, and those for which it is responsible in the provision of public services; if contingency plans are in place; and what slippage has occurred since the July Quarterly report to the House. [93576]

Mr. Ingram: I refer the hon. Member to the quarterly statements made in the House by the President of the Council. These statements cover the whole of the United Kingdom. The President of the Council is due to make a further statement shortly to update the House on progress towards compliance. Information on the compliance situation in each Department is laid before the House each quarter and is published on the internet.

It may be useful to point out that we have six Departments in Northern Ireland which are responsible, through Agencies, for the delivery of all key sectors of the infrastructure, with the exception of electricity generation and distribution. Hence most of the key services in Northern Ireland are included in the quarterly monitoring process and the statements by the President of the Council. They are also subject to the independent assessment process along with the Electricity Services and the results are reported at the Northern Ireland Infrastructure Forum and the National Infrastructure Forum.

At the Northern Ireland Infrastructure Forum on 11 October the following services reported a Blue rating under the Action 2000 colour coding:

Water and Sewage

Housing

Roads

Health and Ambulance Service

Payment of Welfare

Fire Service

Police Service

Electricity and Gas

NICS Telecommunications

Education

Prisons.

The position on the remaining services are:

Rail and Buses—90% Blue with 100% Blue expected by mid October

Housing—52% Blue with 100% Blue expected by November

Local Government—77% Blue with 100% Blue expected by October.

I should point out that Local Government in Northern Ireland has a much smaller remit than in Great Britain, the key business areas being refuse collection and disposal, street cleansing, environmental health and registration of births, deaths and marriages.

Four of the core Northern Ireland Departments are all now reporting that they are fully compliant. The Department of Economic Development and the Department of Health and Social Services state that they will be compliant by end of October. Only one Department has shown slippage since the July statement to the House, i.e. the Northern Ireland Office.

The compliance of critical and non-critical communication and embedded systems in the Northern Ireland Office were completed in August 1999. A robust programme to combat slippage in the critical and non-critical IT systems is under way to ensure timely compliance.

The Business Continuity Plans and Millennium operating Regimes are being tested and independently assessed in accordance with Action 2000 guidance and an overall 100% Blue rating is expected by the end of October.

The results of the latest independent assessment of the Northern Ireland Criminal Justice Sector will be announced at the next National Infrastructure Forum on 21 October.

Police Authority

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what is the total work force of the Northern Ireland Police Authority, including staff seconded from the civil service; and if he will list the principal occupation sub-divisions and their composition in respect of *(a)* gender and *(b)* perceived religious/community origin. [94657]

Mr. Ingram: The total work force of the Police Authority for Northern Ireland, including staff seconded from the Civil Service, numbers 46 persons.

(a) The gender of the 46 members of staff broken down into the following branches is:

Branch	*Female*	*Male*	*Total*
Community Affairs	6	4	10
Policy and Research	0	2	2
Press Office	5	0	5
Police Administration	2	3	5
Internal Audit	4	6	10
Senior Management	0	2	2
Secretariat and Administration	8	4	12
Totals	25	21	46

(b) In order to preserve individual confidentiality, Central Personnel Group have provided an overall breakdown of the staff's religious/community origin as follows:

Protestant: 30

Roman Catholic: 8

Non Determined: 8.

Union Flag

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland on what days of each year it is *(a)* required and *(b)* permitted for the Union flag to be flown from (i) Government buildings, (ii) headquarters of public bodies, (iii) RUC stations and (iv) schools. [94662]

Mr. Ingram: The Union Flag is required to be flown on Government buildings in Northern Ireland on 20 days during the year. The days on which the Flag is flown are as follows:

New Years Day: 1 January

Her Majesty's Accession: 6 February

Birthday of The Duke of York: 19 February

Commonwealth Day: 8 March (in 1999)

Birthday of The Prince Edward: 10 March

St. Patrick's Day: 17 March

Easter Day: 4 April (in 1999)

Birthday of Her Majesty The Queen: 21 April

Europe Day: 9 May

Coronation Day: 2 June

Birthday of The Duke of Edinburgh: 10 June

The Queen's Official Birthday: 12 June (in 1999)

Battle of the Boyne Anniversary: 12 July

Birthday of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth The Queen Mother: 4 August

Birthday of The Princess Royal: 15 August

Birthday of The Princess Margaret: 21 August

Remembrance Day: 14 November (in 1999)

Birthday of The Prince of Wales: 14 November

Anniversary of Her Majesty's Wedding: 20 November

Christmas Day: 25 December.

There is no requirement for headquarters of public bodies, RUC stations or schools to fly the Union Flag on these days. It is entirely at the discretion of each public body, the Chief Constable and individual school authorities respectively to decide if and when the Flag should be flown on their buildings.

Social Workers (Attacks)

Mr. John D. Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what is the trend in attacks upon those employed in social work; and if he will make a statement. [94541]

Mr. George Howarth: Information on the trend in attacks upon those employed in social work is not collected centrally.

HPSS organisations have policies to assist staff to deal with violence. The HSSE recently issued guidance for managers and staff. Further guidance on health and safety is to be issued shortly and organisations will be asked to review their policies. Violence is specifically mentioned and employers are to be advised to undertake risk assessments, to draw up action plans to identify, analyse and rectify problems, to train staff and to support and counsel those subjected to violence.

Departmental Publications

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will list the titles of the in-house publications and newsletters which were produced for the staff of his Department, excluding non-departmental public bodies and agencies, in the last five years, specifying the dates on which each title was first produced, the frequency with which each title is produced and the current secrecy classification of each title. [93849]

Mr. Ingram: The information for the Northern Ireland Office and Northern Ireland Departments is as follows:

Department/Title	*Date first produced*	*Frequency*
NIO		
Outlook	1992	3 per year
Inside out	March 1999	Bi-monthly
Keynotes	February 1994	Bi-monthly
Corporate and Business Plan—Staff Summary	1998	Annually
Snips News Bulletin	March 1997	16 editions
IIP Newsletter	May 1998	As required
Staff Reduction Project newsletter	February 1999	As required
News, Information and Opinions (magazine)	March 1998	Quarterly
DANI		
Fishnet Weekly News	November 1998	3 per month
Forest Service Newsletter	April 1996	Monthly
Streamline	Winter 1997	2 per year
Fair Do's	October 1997	2 per year
Gazette	July 1997	Quarterly—6 monthly
Vetlink	March 1992	6 per year
APHIS User News	July 1998	Irregular
'in touch'	March 1993	Quarterly
Personal Development Guidance Notes	February 1995	One off
AFDS Values and Customer Service	May 1999	One off
DED		
Resource Accounting	October 1998	One off
DED Newsline	September 1998	Quarterly
DENI		
Edlines (magazine)	March 1995	Irregular
DFP		
Newsline (magazine)	1993	Quarterly
Memo (magazine—successor to Newsline)	September 1996	Quarterly
Harassment Policy Statement	June 1998	As required
Fact File	May 1998	As required
IT Training Prospectus	December 1996	One off
H&S Policy Statement	1991	As required
DFP Departmental Plan	May 1994	Annually
DFP Strategic Plan (successor to Departmental Plan)	April 1997	Annually
Departmental Brief	April 1998	Bi-monthly
SCS Journal	December 1997	As required
DHSS		
The Magazine	July 1997	Quarterly
DHSS Library Newsletter	February 1997	Minimum of 5 each year
Team Talk	October 1998	Six weekly
People Matter	July 1995	Irregular
DOE		
Denote (newsletter)	December 1990	Quarterly
Steps to Change	December 1995	Quarterly
Equality Times	January 1999	2 per year
Departmental Annual Health & Safety Report	March 1995	Annually
Investors in People Newsletter	March 1999	Quarterly
Departmental Training and Development Strategy	November 1997	One off

None of the above publications has a current secrecy classification.

HEALTH

Casualty Modernisation Schemes

16. **Mr. Derek Twigg:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many casualty department modernisation schemes are planned this year to improve facilities for children. [92601]

Ms Stuart: Of the 242 schemes currently under way to modernise and expand accident and emergency departments, 55 include schemes of specific benefit to children. They range from creation of separate children's observation and assessment wards to separate waiting and play areas within the department. They amount to £28,360,000. In most cases, the children's schemes are an integral part of much wider A&E redevelopment schemes and it is not possible to identify the specific costing for the children's element of the schemes. The other 187 schemes, which are more general, will also be of benefit to children and their parents. Their safety, and that of the staff caring for them, will be better safeguarded. In other schemes, children will benefit from new diagnostic and resuscitation equipment.

Health Authority Priorities

17. **Dr. Cable:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what instructions are being given to health authorities on the relative priority to be given to *(a)* reducing financial deficits and *(b)* maintaining standards of health care among health providers in their districts. [92602]

Mr. Denham: The National Priorities Guidance for Health and Social Services 1999–2000 to 2001–02 highlights the need for the National Health Service to ensure financial stability is maintained and, where necessary, improve working balances and achieve clear targets on improving service standards for patients.

Non-emergency In-patient Cases

18. **Mr. Bill Michie:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many non-emergency in-patient cases were treated by the NHS during the year to the end of March *(a)* 1999 and *(b)* 1998. [92604]

Mr. Hutton: The number of non-emergency cases (ordinary in-patients and daycases) treated during 1997–98 was 4.9 million. The figure for 1998–99 was 5.4 million, an increase of 9.2 per cent. on the previous year.

Cardiac Care

19. **Mr. Amess:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what recent representations he has received on waiting times for *(a)* non-urgent and *(b)* urgent cardiac (i) operations and (ii) procedures. [92605]

Mr. Denham: Since April we have received a number of letters from Members of Parliament and members of the public, and Parliamentary Questions, regarding waiting times for cardiac surgical procedures.

Beta Interferon

20. **Mr. Burstow:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he expects to issue new guidance concerning the prescribing of beta interferon for *(a)* relapsing remitting and *(b)* secondary progressive MS. [92606]

Mr. Denham: We consulted earlier in the summer on a proposal to refer beta interferon to the National Institute for Clinical Excellence, for an authoritative appraisal of the available evidence, and an announcement will be made in the near future. We intend to issue a Health Service Circular giving management advice on beta interferon for the period until NICE guidance is available.

Miss Kirkbride: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the health authorities by region which *(a)* have and *(b)* have not agreed to clear their existing waiting list for MS patients waiting for beta interferon. [94195]

Mr. Denham: The information requested is not available.

We consulted earlier in the summer on a proposal to refer beta interferon to the National Institute for Clinical Excellence (NICE), for an authoritative appraisal of the available evidence, and an announcement will be made in the near future. We intend to issue a Health Service Circular giving management on beta interferon for the period until NICE guidance is available.

Optometrists

21. **Mr. David Heath:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on his policy on the role and training of optometrists. [92607]

Mr. Denham: We value very highly the contribution that optometrists make to the eye care of the population. We intend that, with appropriate training, they should develop their role beyond sight testing to work with general practitioners and ophthalmologists in treating patients with eye diseases.

Capital Investment

23. **Dr. Lynne Jones:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the planned level of capital investment in the NHS over the next three years. [92610]

Mr. Denham: Capital investment in the National Health Service over the next three years is planned at more than £8 billion, which will be targeted towards modernising the infrastructure of the NHS through spending on new hospitals, plant and equipment. This level of investment will be met from public capital and through the Private Finance Initiative.

Primary Care

24. **Mr. Forth:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what has been the cost to date of establishing *(a)* primary care groups and *(b)* primary care trusts. [92611]

Mr. Denham: The establishment of Primary Care Groups has been funded using moneys released by the abolition of fundholding. The first Primary Care Trust will be established early next year. The cost of establishing Primary Care Trusts, like those of PCGs, will largely be met using moneys released by the abolition of fundholding. The previous Government had set aside an annual budget of £180 million to run fundholding. We have used those moneys both to set up Primary Care Groups and to improve services to patients.

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many general practitioners have yet to agree to participate in a primary care group. [93906]

Mr. Denham: All general practitioners are part of, and covered by, a Primary Care Group. However, it is for individual general practitioners to choose how they wish to participate in the operation of their Primary Care Group.

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when the Government will publish its response to the Health Committee's Second report of Session 1998–99 on Primary Care Groups (HC 153). [94788]

Mr. Denham: The Government's response to the Health Committee's Report on Primary Care Groups is published today and copies will be placed in the Library. The Government welcome the Committee's report and are pleased that the Committee supports the Government's policy that underlies this initiative.

Draft Tobacco (Prohibition of Advertising and Promotion) Regulations

25. **Mr. Burgon:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what period of consultation he proposes on the draft Tobacco (Prohibition of Advertising and Promotion) Regulations. [92612]

Yvette Cooper: The eight weeks of public consultation on the draft Tobacco (Prohibition of Advertising and Promotion) Regulations 1999 and draft Regulatory Impact Assessment Document published on 17 June ended on 13 August.

Waiting Times

26. **Mrs. Virginia Bottomley:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many patients have been waiting in excess of one year for treatment. [92613]

Mr. Denham: At the end of August 48,900 patients (4.54 per cent. of the total list) had been waiting over a year for hospital admission. This is 23,000 lower than at the end of June 1998. In tackling waiting lists, we are reducing waiting times.

Prostate Cancer

27. **Mr. Flight:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what recent discussions he has held with local health authorities regarding the prevention and treatment of prostate cancer in men in their areas; and if he will make a statement. [92614]

Mr. Hutton: The Government are committed to improving the prevention, detection and treatment of all cancers including prostate cancer. We have identified this as a priority for the National Health Service. There is, as yet, no consensus of medical opinion about the correct management of early localised tumours. The Health Technology Assessment Programme has already funded two systematic reviews of the diagnosis and management of prostate cancer and the National Co-ordinating Centre for the HTA programme is commissioning a £200,000 study at the University of Bristol looking at the feasibility of conducting a multi-centre randomised trial of treatment for localised prostate cancer.

Mortality Ratio (Barnsley)

28. **Mr. Illsley:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what representations he has received regarding the level of the standard mortality ratio in the Barnsley area. [92615]

Yvette Cooper: High level performance indicators show that the standard mortality rate for Barnsley in the age range 65–74 years is 103, compared with the national figure for England of 90. The comparatively poor health status of Barnsley, particularly with regard to coronary heart disease, stroke and some cancers, evident from measures such as the high level performance indicators and standard mortality rates, has been recognised. Barnsley (together with Rotherham and Doncaster) was designated last year in the first wave of health action zones which are at the vanguard of our new approach to tackling health inequalities, through partnership working and with targeted investment to achieve modernisation, reform and results.

"Smoking Kills"

29. **Mr. Healey:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on progress in implementing the proposals in the White Paper, "Smoking Kills". [92616]

Yvette Cooper: Progress in implementation of "Smoking Kills" includes the allocation of up to £60 million over three years to health authorities to develop specialist services, the establishment this year of National Health Service smoking cessation services in health action zones, draft Regulations to ban tobacco advertising, the launch of the Public Places Charter, £47.5 million over three years to prepare the health education programme and consultation on an Approved Code of Practice on smoking in the workplace.

TB

30. **Mr. Gordon Prentice:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what steps he is taking to tackle the growing incidence of TB. [92617]

Yvette Cooper: The United Kingdom has a good record of tuberculosis (TB) control and we are determined this should remain the case. The Government are responding positively to adverse developments in other countries. These developments inevitably impinge on the incidence of TB in this country and we have recently seen small annual increases in the incidence of TB. However, notifications of TB in the UK have reached the relatively low levels of about 6,500 cases a year from nearly 50,000 in 1950.

In addition to the existing provisions we have for the surveillance, prevention and control of TB, including drug resistant TB, within the UK, recent developments include:

the commencement of work on ongoing enhanced surveillance of TB to improve monitoring;

the appointment of regional epidemiologists to help towards a more coordinated approach to surveillance;

the strengthening of surveillance of drug and multidrug-resistant TB through a scheme co-ordinated by the Public Health Laboratory Service (PHLS);

the development—by the PHLS—and availability of more rapid diagnostic and drug susceptibility tests for TB, which can be used where there is a presence of risk factors which might predispose towards multidrug-resistant TB;

the co-ordination of the PHLS's activities through the new Tuberculosis Programme.

Oral Cancers

31. **Dr. Gibson:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what studies he has commissioned or evaluated on the relationship between the chewing of tobacco products and the development of oral cancers. [92618]

Yvette Cooper: In its report published on 11 March 1999, the Scientific Committee on Tobacco and Health noted that chewed tobaccos are sources of potent carcinogens in the mouth.

Social Services (Children)

32. **Mrs. Anne Campbell:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many action plans have been approved by his Department to help local authorities improve their performance in providing high quality social services for children in need. [92620]

Mr. Hutton: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Basildon (Angela Smith) on 13 April 1999, *Official Report*, column *114*.

IVF Treatment

33. **Mr. Bob Russell:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what monitoring is carried out to ensure that IVF treatment is available in every health authority area. [92621]

Yvette Cooper: We have pledged to tackle unacceptable levels of geographical variations in access to NHS infertility treatment and have set in motion a programme of work to achieve that aim. A Departmental survey of current health authority infertility service provision has recently taken place and the results are being analysed. The Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists have published two sets of evidence based on clinical guidelines on infertility and intend to publish the third and final set on specialised services like IVF in January 2000. The RCOG guidelines have been commissioned by the Department.

The survey will enable the cost implications of any policy changes to be estimated and the RCOG guidelines will indicate the circumstances in which infertility treatment can be most clinically effective. We then hope to move towards fairer access to NHS infertility services where those most able to benefit from such treatment will be able to receive it.

Osteoporosis

34. **Mrs. Gilroy:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what investment his Department is making in services to combat osteoporosis. [92622]

Yvette Cooper: The Department has invested in measures to highlight the importance in preventing the development of osteoporosis and resulting fractures and the need for health authorities to develop their own local strategies. An osteoporosis strategy for England was launched in June 1998 by my right hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Ms Jowell) at the sixth Bath Conference on Osteoporosis and Bone Mineral Measurement. The strategy consisted of a quick reference primary care guide, a laminated desk top guide and a local health action sheet.

The Department does not specify what proportion of health authorities' funding allocations is to be spent on services to combat osteoporosis. It is for health authorities, in partnership with National Health Service trusts, primary care groups, local authorities and local stakeholders to determine how best to use their funds to meet national and local priorities for improving health and modernising services. The additional resources of at least 5.45 per cent. cash increase to all health authorities for 1999–2000 will help them in this.

Consultant Referrals

35. **Mr. Gray:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many patients have been referred to a consultant by their GP but are still awaiting their first appointment with the consultant. [92623]

Mr. Denham: The information requested is not available centrally.

Care Homes

Mrs. Brinton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he plans to accept the proposed national standards for the inspection of care homes drawn up by the Centre for Policy on Ageing earlier this year. [92608]

Mr. Hutton: Last year we commissioned the Centre for Policy on Ageing to work on identifying national required standards for older people in care homes. The proposed standards were published for consultation on 8 September. We will carefully consider all the comments we receive before finalising any regulatory standards and arrangements for implementing them.

Millennium Compliance

Mr. David Atkinson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement of progress on the millennium readiness of his Department's computer systems, and those for which it is responsible in the provision of public services; if contingency plans are in place; and what slippage has occurred since the July Quarterly report to the House. [93568]

Ms Stuart: Details of progress by the Department, its executive agencies and the National Health Service in tackling the millennium bug are set out in the appropriate monitoring returns. Those for the Department are available in the Library and are published on the Internet. The returns for individual NHS organisations are published on the Internet at: http://www.imc.exec.nhs.uk/2000

The results of the latest review of progress by Departments will be announced shortly in Parliament by the President of the Council. The latest results for the NHS are due to be announced at the Action 2000 National Infrastructure Forum on 20/21 October.

The Department and its Executive Agencies have completed all essential Year 2000 work by the published deadlines. Contingency plans for the Department have been prepared.

All NHS organisations have completed their compliance programmes or have contingency arrangements in place.

Cancer Services (North-West)

Mr. Brady: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he intends to publish his review of cancer services in the North-West of England. [94044]

Yvette Cooper: The report was published on 20 September. I have arranged for the hon. Member to receive a copy.

Anti-psychotic Drugs

Mrs. Brinton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what funds will be available to provide a typical anti-psychotic drugs to those patients for whom they prove more effective and more acceptable. [94299]

Mr. Hutton: The National Health Service Modernisation Fund consists of £700 million over 3 years. As part of the first year targeted allocation of the fund (1999–2000), £2.5 million had been allocated for a typical anti-psychotics. Discussions are still under-way concerning allocation of the NHS Modernisation Fund for years 2 and 3.

Mrs. Brinton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if NICE intends to carry out an appraisal of the effectiveness of newer atypical anti-psychotics compared with older generation anti-psychotics. [94295]

Mr. Hutton: We are considering asking the National Institute for Clinical Excellence to look at all treatments for schizophrenia and similar conditions. In general, NICE clinical guidelines will give advice on the appropriate use of all therapies, including drug therapies.

Mrs. Brinton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when assessing the effectiveness of drugs such as anti-psychotics which are known to have major side effects, what account NICE will take of the preferences and experiences of the individuals taking the drugs. [94296]

Mr. Hutton: In appraising pharmaceuticals and other treatments, the National Institute for Clinical Excellence will need to assess carefully the evidence on both the intended therapeutic effects and any adverse effects of treatment. Representative patient organisations will be invited to submit evidence on these and other aspects and will have the opportunity to comment on guidance in draft.

Mid-Essex Hospital Trust

Mr. Burns: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will publish figures for the last three months for which figures are available in the Mid-Essex Hospital Trust area for *(a)* the number of people waiting for 12 months or more for hospital treatment and *(b)* the total number of people waiting for hospital treatment. [94564]

Mr. Denham: The information available is given in the table.

The number of patients waiting for elective admission in Mid-Essex Hospital Services NHS Trust

Month	Total waiting	Number waiting over 12 months
June	9,824	1,083
July	9,488	1,061
August	9,465	991

Source:
Form KH07 and monthly returns

Mr. Burns: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list for the Mid-Essex Hospital Trust area the total number of people waiting on *(a)* 31 March 1997 and *(b)* the latest available period for orthodontic treatment. [94563]

Mr. Denham: The information available is given in the table.

The total number of people waiting for orthodontic treatment at Mid-Essex Hospital Services National Health Service Trust

Year (January to December)	Number of patients waiting
1996	49
1997	79
1998	64
1999 (year to date)	55

Source:
Mid-Essex Hospital Services NHS Trust (Orthodontics)
(This information is not collected centrally)

Mr. Burns: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will publish for the Mid-Essex Hospital Trust area the number of people on *(a)* 31 March 1997 and *(b)* the latest available period waiting (i) over 6 months, (ii) 12 months or more, (iii) over 18 months and (iv) over 24 months for orthodontic treatment. [94562]

Mr. Denham: The information requested is not available centrally.

The information available is given in the tables.

The total number of people waiting for orthodontic treatment at Mid-Essex Hospital Services NHS Trust

Year (January-December)	Number of patients waiting
1996	49
1997	79
1998	64
1999 (year to date)	55

Source:
Mid-Essex Hospital Services NHS Trust (Orthodontics)
(This information is not collected centrally)

The total number of people waiting more than 13 weeks for the first outpatient appointment (orthodontics) at Mid-Essex Hospital Services NHS Trust

Year	Number of patients
31 March 1997	7
31 March 1998	2
30 June 1999	0

Source:
Form QM08

Mr. Burns: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on measures being taken by the Mid-Essex Hospital Trust to be millennium compliant by 31 December. [94565]

Ms Stuart: Mid-Essex Hospital Services National Health Service Trust successfully met the 30 September deadline to "ensure that all systems were Year 2000 compliant or that effective contingency plans were in place if full compliance could not be achieved". The NHS Trust was therefore designated as Action 2000 "Blue" as of 30 September, indicating that assessment had not identified any risk of material disruption.

The NHS Executive Eastern Regional Office and the NHS Trust continue to work closely, and the Regional lead on Winter 2000 attends Project and Trust Board meetings.

In the next three months, the NHS Trust will continue to monitor its systems to ensure that they remain millennium compliant and to train staff in contingency arrangements.

Sheltered Accommodation

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the levels of spending on sheltered accommodation per head of the population in each county of England in each year since 1995–96. [94315]

Mr. Hutton: Details of the levels of total spending on sheltered accommodation are not collected centrally. A table showing information on reported personal social services current expenditure on sheltered accommodation by each local authority in England for 1995–96 to 1997–98 has been placed in the Library. Data for 1998–99 are not yet available.

Health Spending

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the levels of spending on health per head of the population in each county of England in each year since 1995–96. [94312]

Mr. Denham: Levels of spending on health per head of the population are given in the table.

Expenditure levels per head of population on health are not available by county, but figures based on health authorities have been provided as the nearest figures available. In some cases the health authority area may approximate to a county boundary, but this is not the position for all health authorities.

Expenditure in 1995–96 is not included because information is not available on a comparable basis.

England: Expenditure by head of population (by health authority)

£

Health authority	*1996–97*	*1997–98*	*1998–99*
Avon	590.20	574.58	619.77
Barking and Havering	636.24	587.94	690.89
Barnet	659.01	645.41	631.77
Barnsley	616.70	574.42	622.28
Bedfordshire	561.71	516.85	563.74
Berkshire	521.77	519.83	561.15
Bexley and Greenwich	679.13	660.28	704.59
Birmingham	693.97	681.20	754.68
Bradford	630.44	613.22	645.17
Brent and Harrow	685.31	692.90	733.13
Bromley	596.21	574.13	726.59
Buckinghamshire	532.73	519.14	536.25
Bury and Rochdale	656.75	614.58	637.94
Calderdale and Kirklees	586.70	557.91	597.32
Cambridge and Huntingdon	530.94	499.11	541.28
Camden and Islington	961.90	889.09	1,082.69
Cornwall and Isles of Scilly	627.51	592.84	626.42
County Durham	629.72	602.97	660.97
Coventry	605.31	599.77	664.54
Croydon	594.31	577.16	628.69
Doncaster	617.78	617.94	739.15
Dorset	619.19	588.85	631.11
Dudley	550.54	538.78	646.78
Ealing, Hammersmith and Hounslow	736.69	718.19	759.54
East and North Hertfordshire	585.36	575.15	601.73
East Kent	636.03	609.60	654.03
East Lancashire	635.02	626.05	679.85
East London and The City	846.28	812.81	887.72
East Norfolk	611.62	579.70	641.11
East Riding	599.69	579.53	626.68
East Surrey	666.25	649.25	689.62
East Sussex, Brighton and Hove	649.95	628.63	680.95
Enfield and Haringey	685.09	641.52	682.29
Gateshead and South Tyneside	713.02	687.27	728.98
Gloucestershire	583.23	571.04	587.64
Herefordshire	576.66	605.14	612.18
Hillingdon	623.60	611.35	659.25
Isle of Wight	707.44	701.23	741.54
Kensington, Chelsea and Westminster	902.58	837.02	920.87
Kingston and Richmond	653.35	661.77	709.67
Lambeth, Southwark and Lewisham	811.17	786.14	839.67
Leeds	675.81	667.01	741.75
Leicestershire	572.83	553.07	595.60
Lincolnshire	604.12	627.04	641.25
Liverpool	732.66	710.18	801.17
Manchester	787.40	771.10	851.74
Merton, Sutton and Wandsworth	714.95	692.10	734.55
Morecambe Bay	655.16	655.56	815.86
Newcastle and North Tyneside	696.79	666.99	747.47
North and East Devon	634.17	616.49	651.92
North and Mid Hampshire	538.86	518.81	541.54
North Cheshire,	632.25	628.41	662.45
North Cumbria	601.05	588.78	630.14
North Derbyshire	568.54	595.14	642.86
North Essex	564.45	555.32	601.58
North Nottinghamshire	578.57	559.44	599.86
North Staffordshire	606.52	602.29	631.23
North West Anglia	582.31	560.59	602.83
North West Lancashire	670.75	632.40	672.93
North Yorkshire	567.12	585.76	640.79
Northamptonshire	539.91	529.00	589.10
Northumberland	621.09	623.88	689.21
Nottingham	605.02	564.92	679.76
Oxfordshire	531.78	518.28	539.90
Portsmouth and South East Hampshire	561.65	521.45	586.91
Redbridge and Waltham Forest	695.30	669.61	724.04
Rotherham	603.27	564.88	611.09
Salford and Trafford	651.63	628.66	713.28
Sandwell	645.49	649.51	710.51
Sefton	680.90	620.22	683.55
Sheffield	817.29	805.76	845.27
Shropshire	562.68	546.14	570.07
Solihull	587.43	570.71	600.11
Somerset	576.74	569.56	602.51
South and West Devon	633.93	598.78	636.12
South Cheshire	577.17	575.70	626.78
South Derbyshire	580.08	585.52	612.27
South Essex	552.23	549.61	604.90
South Humber	594.61	635.57	687.96

England: Expenditure by head of population (by health authority)

£

Health authority	*1996–97*	*1997–98*	*1998–99*
South Lancashire	577.62	565.00	619.03
South Staffordshire	552.98	536.71	587.92
Southampton and South West Hamptonshire	574.88	577.56	621.60
St. Helens and Knowsley	628.63	618.00	664.57
Stockport	578.43	556.08	597.00
Suffolk	569.14	544.16	575.59
Sunderland	652.08	624.48	723.39
Tees	615.98	591.00	669.11
Wakefield	669.59	695.29	732.69
Walsall	607.64	583.80	655.67
Warwickshire	618.13	597.37	617.01
West Hertfordshire	596.49	598.96	621.66
West Kent	581.43	553.71	574.82
West Pennine	599.26	574.22	621.94
West Surrey	631.44	586.04	607.41
West Sussex	616.55	600.78	639.31
Wigan and Bolton	587.89	573.03	623.31
Wiltshire	579.65	558.34	586.42
Wirral	628.93	607.98	687.92
Wolverhampton	639.32	601.57	653.54
Worcestershire	559.83	582.26	607.59
England: before national adjustment for drugs and GDS	625.29	607.84	657.80
England: after national adjustment for drugs and GDS	643.98	675.14	720.10

Notes:

1. 1998–99 expenditure information is provisional

2. For 1997–98 and 1998–99 the majority of drugs expenditure has been accounted for by the Prescription Pricing Authority rather than individual health authorities. Also the majority of General Dental Service expenditure is not available by health authority. A total national position is shown including these two elements.

Sources:

Health Authority accounts for 1996–97, 1997–98 and 1998–99

Mid-year resident population estimates for 1996, 1997 and 1998

NHS Land Sales

Miss Kirkbride: To ask the Secretary of State for Health, pursuant to his answer to the hon. Member for Southport (Mr. Fearn) of 19 July 1999, *Official Report*, column *410*, how much money the National Health Service Executive expects to raise from the sale of the National Health Service sites listed for which planning permission for housing has been granted. [94290]

Mr. Denham: Most of the sites listed are in various stages of the planning process, and planning permission has not yet been issued. Of those where planning permission has been granted, the anticipated income is in the region of £15.5 million. If planning permission is granted for others listed, the anticipated income is approximately £180 million.

Miss Kirkbride: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how much money the NHS Executive has raised in each year since 1995 for the sale of its land for private development. [94192]

Mr. Denham: The money the National Health Service Executive has raised from the sale of land from private developments cannot be separately identified. The figures show the total capital receipts.

£ million

	HCHS[1]	*NHS Trust Receipts*[1]	*Total*
Outturn			
1994–95	158	51	208
1995–96	210	72	282
1996–97	276	116	393
1997–98	240	231	471
Estimated outturn			
1998–99	343	157	500

[1] Receipts from the sale of fixed assets, which include land, buildings and equipment

Private Hospitals

Miss Kirkbride: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how much money the NHS spent in private hospitals to treat NHS patients in each *(a)* month and *(b)* region since April 1995. [94025]

Ms Stuart: Information is not collected centrally on National Health Service expenditure on commissioning health care from private hospitals. Figures on total NHS expenditure on commissioning hospital and community health services outside the NHS each year from 1995–96 are set out in the table for the area covered by each NHS Executive Regional Office. Monthly figures are not collected centrally.

£000

Regional office	*1995–96*	*1996–97*	*1997–98*	*1998–99*
Northern and Yorkshire	154,678	124,811	144,475	[2]169,683
Trent	91,130	66,787	78,684	[2]100,157
Anglia and Oxford	65,918	79,125	108,411	[1]—
North Thames	255,304	160,152	179,679	[1]—
South Thames	209,584	174,254	185,906	[1]—
South and West	204,139	185,334	188,293	[1]—
West Midlands	94,272	51,734	91,792	[2]116,447
North West	151,170	28,947	106,778	[2]130,595
Eastern	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—	[2]129,349
London	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—	[2]223,016
South East	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—	[2]254,517
South West	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—	[2]125,245
Total	1,226,195	871,144	1,084,018	1,249,009

[1] Figures unavailable owing to the reorganisation of regional office boundaries

[2] Provisional figures—may change because of late notifications

Note:

In addition 'Laing's Healthcare Market Review 1998–99' estimates that the value of NHS purchases of acute treatment in the UK under health authority contracts was £50 million in 1995, £52 million in 1996, and £56 million in 1997, the latest figures available.

Barnsley Hall

Miss Kirkbride: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how much money was raised by the sale by the NHS Executive of the Barnsley Hall site in Bromsgrove; and where the money will be reinvested. [94194]

Mr. Denham: All proceeds from the sale of surplus National Health Service estate are directed back into central Departmental funds, to be redistributed back to regional offices as part of their overall capital allocations. The closure and sale of Barnsley Hall was the culmination of a range of investment in Bromsgrove and Redditch health services over the past few years, and as such the sale proceeds from Barnsley Hall can be seen as a partial

repayment of this investment. It is not the policy of the NHS to reveal how much it receives for land sales, as this information is considered commercially sensitive.

Cancer Patients

Miss Kirkbride: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what estimate he has made of the number of cancer patients who will be seen per week by NHS consultants under the Government's proposal to ensure that no patient referred by a GP waits more than two weeks once it is implemented in April 2000; [94026]

(2) how many cancer patients referred by GPs are seen per week by NHS consultants at present. [94072]

Mr. Denham: The Department does not currently collect data on the number of cancer patients seen by consultants per week.

However, data from the first quarter monitoring of the two week breast cancer standard, which began in April 1999, show that an average of 1,686 urgent referrals of suspected breast cancer were seen per week over the three months April-June 1999.

Health Service Circular HSC1999/205 requested that health authorities, in consultation with their National Health Service Trusts and local primary care groups, should undertake state of readiness surveys in preparation for the extension of the two week standard for urgent referrals for all cases of suspected cancer. These will include baseline assessments of numbers of urgent referrals. The surveys will be carried out on a rolling basis, in line with the planned roll out of the two week standard during 2000.

Booked Admissions Policy

Mr. Bill O'Brien: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on his advice to hospital trust boards on the implementation of the National Booked Admissions Policy. [94146]

Mr. Denham: The National Booked Admissions Programme was established last year with 24 pilot sites across England. It has since been extended to a further 60 pilots plus nine looking specifically at cancer services. These pilots were set up to enable patients to pre-book their admission dates or hospital appointments. The Programme is closely managed and supported by the National Patients' Access Team, which is currently headed by Peter Homa, and National Health Service Executive Regional Offices. They are closely monitoring the pilots' performance against outcome plans and milestones. Support includes training in project management and redesign techniques and also regular meetings where all the pilot sites discuss progress and share experiences.

The first wave of the programme and the cancer work is being evaluated by the Health Services Management Centre, based at the University of Birmingham, over a 3-year period. They will report at regular intervals, to enable lessons learnt to be fed back to the pilot sites and spread more widely to the NHS. The first initial evaluation report will be published shortly and will be sent to all health authorities, trusts and primary care groups.

On 2 September, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister announced the 60 new pilots being set up, benefiting 1.5 million patients, taking the total benefiting from the programme to around 2 million.

Home Care Companies

Mr. Öpik: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what progress the Government have made on proposed legislation on the registration of home care companies; and if he will make a statement. [94440]

Mr. Hutton: We are committed to reforming regulatory arrangements for care homes and other social services as set out in the White Paper "Modernising Social services". We will legislate for these reforms as soon as Parliamentary time allows.

Environment and Health

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the relationship between health and fitness levels and environmental factors. [93384]

Yvette Cooper: Our new health strategy *Saving Lives: Our Healthier Nation*, published on 6 July 1999, acknowledges that health is affected by a complex interaction of factors including the environment. It recognises the health benefits of a good environment and that factors such as cold, damp housing and poor quality air contribute to health problems including respiratory and cardio-vascular diseases.

Recognising, among other things, the links between poor housing and health, we have made substantial additional resources available for regenerating the worst neighbourhoods, improving social housing stock and combating fuel poverty for groups most vulnerable to cold-related ill health.

We are working through the New Deal for transport to encourage walking and cycling and to reduce pollution from vehicles. We are also promoting Health Action Zones, Healthy Living Centres and National Health Service walk-in centres to promote healthy lifestyles and improve access to community-based health facilities.

Breast Cancer

Mrs. Spelman: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the progress his Department has made on meeting the target for seeing patients diagnosed with breast cancer within two weeks. [94030]

Yvette Cooper: The first quarter's data on achieving the two week standard for the urgent referral of patients suspected of having breast cancer were published on 24 September. These showed that 91.1 per cent. of patients were seen within two weeks of urgent referral by their general practitioner. This represents some 12,500 women seen within two weeks of urgent referral out of a total of nearly 13,700 patients seen during the quarter. This was an encouraging start to achieving the standard and the Department is currently working with poorer performing National Health Service trusts to ensure improvement in performance in the second quarter.

Departmental Publications

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many *(a)* circulars and *(b)* executive letters his Department has issued in each month since May 1997. [94028]

Mr. Denham: The table shows the number of *(a)* circulars and *(b)* executive letters the Department of Health has issued in each month since May 1997.

Month	*Circulars*	*Executive letters*
1997		
May	12	3
June	4	4
July	12	2
August	16	5
September	17	4
October	26	6
November	14	6
December	22	8
1998		
January	18	6
February	21	—
March	40	—
April	42	—
May	30	—
June	14	—
July	27	—
August	21	—
September	22	—
October	30	—
November	34	—
December	42	—
1999		
January	23	—
February	36	—
March	48	—
April	29	—
May	29	—
June	22	—
July	34	—
August	39	—
September	33	—

Notes:

1. Until December 1997 the Department of Health issued circulars in the following series:
Health Service Guidelines (HSG); Finance Directorate Letters (FDL); Family Health Service Letters (FHSL); Local Authority Circulars (LAC); Local Authority Social Services Letters (LASSL); Chief Inspector (CI); Family Practitioner Notices (FPN) and Professional Letters (PL).
In December FPNs were discontinued.
On 2 February 1998 ELs, HSGs, FDLs and FHSLs were replaced with a single series of management letters—Health Service Circulars (HSC). This was as part of the Department's strategy to improve written communications and in response to the recommendations in the "Seeing the Woods, Sparing the Trees" Efficiency Scrutiny.
2. The Department's Agencies occasionally publish in the above series, and also issue circulars in their own series. Between May 1997 and September 1999 Medicines Control Agency published 72 Drug Alerts and 15 Consultative Letters. Medical Devices Agency published eight Device Bulletins, two Advice Notices, 16 Hazard Notices, 94 Safety Notices and 11 Pacemaker Technical Notes.

Health Professions Regulatory Body

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement about the composition of the body he plans to establish to regulate professions allied to medicine. [93907]

Mr. Hutton: No decisions have been taken about the precise composition of the new Health Professions Council, which will eventually replace the Council for Professions Supplementary to Medicine, using an Order under s60 of the Health Act 1999. The Government is committed to full and wide-ranging consultation on the proposals for new legislation in addition to the statutory consultation on the draft Order required by the Health Act, with a report to Parliament on the outcome when the Order is laid.

Medium-secure Units

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he will publish the findings of the current review of data collection requirements regarding escapes and absconds from medium-secure units. [93871]

Mr. Hutton: The Department is in contact with the National Health Service Executive Regional Offices to access the current data collection and to ensure that procedures are in place for recording escapes and absconds from medium-secure units. We expect these procedures will be in place later in the year.

Fundholders

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many general practitioners fundholding practices remain. [93905]

Mr. Denham: None.

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what estimate he has made of the cost of sustaining residual general practitioners fundholding practices in the next financial year. [93904]

Mr. Milburn: None. The residual fundholding scheme ended on 1 October 1999.

NHS Direct

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what qualitative studies he has commissioned regarding outcomes from calls to NHS Direct; and if he will make a statement. [93875]

Ms Stuart: The Medical Research Unit of the University of Sheffield is undertaking an independent evaluation of NHS Direct. This evaluation will include a study of the outcomes from calls to NHS Direct. We expect the University of Sheffield's full and final report to be published early next year.

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when the services of NHS Direct will be available in *(a)* Lymington, *(b)* New Milton and *(c)* Ringwood. [93869]

Ms Stuart: NHS Direct has been available in Lymington and New Milton since March 1999. The service will be available in Ringwood by the end of this year.

Strokes

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for Health, pursuant to his answer to the hon. Member for Coventry, South (Mr. Cunningham) on 13 July 1999, *Official Report*, column 151, on stroke services, if he will specify the funding that he is making available for initiatives related to strokes. [93902]

Mr. Hutton: The Department is currently supporting some inititatives relating to stroke through the National Institute for Clinical Excellence. The responsiblity (and hence funding) for the Effective Health Care Bulletin, national sentinel audits and development of clinical guidelines now rests with NICE, which has total funding of just under £10 million for this financial year. The hon. Member may wish to contact the Chairman of NICE, Professor Sir Michael Rawlins, for further details.

PRIME MINISTER

Millennium Compliance

Mr. David Atkinson: To ask the Prime Minister if he will make a statement of progress on the millennium readiness of his Department's computer systems, and those for which it is responsible in the provision of public services; if contingency plans are in place; and what slippage has occurred since the July quarterly report to the House. [93559]

The Prime Minister: For these purposes my office is part of the Cabinet Office. I refer the hon. Member to the answer given to him today by my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Cabinet Office, *Official Report*, columns *527–28*.

White Papers

Mr. Evans: To ask the Prime Minister if he will list the White Papers published from 1998 to date indicating their sale price. [93674]

The Prime Minister: The term "White Paper" has no formal definition but is interpreted as meaning those statements of Government policy and other documents which have been published in the Command Papers series but excluding Treasury Minutes, reports from Committees and Commissions and the papers in the Treaty and other series presented to Parliament by the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs. A list of those published from 1998 showing their sale price has been placed in the Library.

Yugoslavia

Sir Richard Body: To ask the Prime Minister what estimates he has received of the cost of reconstruction in Yugoslavia made necessary by the NATO offensive. [94124]

The Prime Minister: The reconstruction of Yugoslavia, and in particular Kosovo, is a huge task which will take many years. This is not just as a result of the conflict brought about by Milosevic's policy towards Kosovo, but because of the need for modernisation and democratisation of Yugoslav society and its economy. The UK will play a full part in this reconstruction.

We will not have an accurate estimate of reconstruction costs until the next donor conference held under their auspices in November. In the meantime, emergency and immediate reconstruction projects are going ahead under the auspices of the EU Task Force in Pristina and the UN Interim Administration in Kosovo (UNMIK).

The EU Task Force in Pristina has committed 46 million euros so far. The EU has pledged a total of 137 million euros of reconstruction aid for Kosovo in 1999 through the EU Assistance Fund in addition to 378 million euros of humanitarian aid.

Sir Richard Body: To ask the Prime Minister what consultations he has had with the heads of other NATO countries about the cost of reconstruction in Yugoslavia; and if any member country has yet agreed to contribute financially. [94125]

The Prime Minister: The European Union (through the European Commission) and the World Bank are responsible for the co-ordination of the donor effort for the reconstruction of Yugoslavia. All NATO countries are represented in either or both of these organisations.

The EU and World Bank are organising a series of donor conferences, the first of which was on 28 July 1999. At this conference initial donor indications of financial support amounted to US$2.1 billion. NATO members indicating their intention to provide financial support at this stage were: Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, Norway, Spain, The Netherlands, Turkey, United Kingdom and the United States. NATO countries who are also members of the EU will also be contributing multilaterally through the European Commission.

Government Reports

Mr. Evans: To ask the Prime Minister who was responsible for making the Government's Annual Report 1998–99 available to Tesco Stores Ltd. the day before it was made available to Parliament; and if he will make a statement. [94155]

The Prime Minister: Guidance to Ministers on the publication of Command Papers and other Government documents is set out in the "Ministerial Code" and "Guidance on the work of the Government Information Service".

The Stationery Office, who published the Government's Annual Report, were responsible for the marketing arrangements with Tesco. Copies of the report were distributed in advance by The Stationery Office to Tescos and other bookshops under the usual strict embargo that they should not be placed on sale until after the Report had been presented to Parliament on the morning of Monday 26 July. I understand that, due to an oversight in one or two individual stores, a small number of copies were available on Saturday 24 July.

Mr. Evans: To ask the Prime Minister (1) what estimate he has made of the cost to public funds of the Government's annual report 1998–99; [93670]

(2) what was the cost to public funds of the Government's annual report 1997–98; [93676]

(3) how many copies of the Government's annual report 1997–98 were *(a)* printed, *(b)* sold and *(c)* distributed free of charge. [93671]

The Prime Minister: The direct cost of preparing the Government's annual report 1998–99 for publication is estimated at £75,000. The equivalent figure for the Government's Annual Report 1997–98 is £96,000.

Additional costs associated with the Annual Report 1998–99, including putting the report on the No. 10 website and preparing a leaflet, are estimated at £105,000. The equivalent figure for the Annual Report 1997–98 are estimated at £144,000.

The costs, prices, print runs and sales for the first two Government annual reports are produced in the table.

	AR 1997–98 CM3969	*AR 1998–99 CM4401*
Costs to Government:		
Design and publication costs	£96,000	£75,000
Launch, distribution, etc.	£144,000	£105,000
Total cost to Government:	£250,000	£180,000
Sales:		
Cover price	£5.95	£2.99
Copies printed	20,000	100,000
Copies bought by Government	9,000	41,000
Total copies sold:	14,000	49,000
Leaflet/summary		
Numbers produced	20,000	150,000

Note:
All figures are approximate and rounded to the nearest thousand

Mr. Luff: To ask the Prime Minister if he will make it his policy not to make command papers and other Government documents available for retail sale before making them available to parliament. [93708]

The Prime Minister: Guidance to Ministers on the publication of Command Papers and other Government documents is set out in the "Ministerial Code" and "Guidance on the work of the Government Information Service".

Mr. Luff: To ask the Prime Minister how many copies of the Government's annual report had been sold through (i) the Stationery Office and (ii) other retail outlets at the most recent date for which figures are available. [93710]

The Prime Minister: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I have given to the hon. Member for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans) today, *Official Report* column *482*.

All copies of the Annual Report 1998–99 were sold by The Stationery Office, the publishers. Some have been sold direct to the public, the remainder through other retailers.

Mr. Luff: To ask the Prime Minister (1) what was the cost of *(a)* copy writing, *(b)* design, *(c)* photography, *(d)* printing and *(e)* all other relevant items of the production of the Government's annual report; and how many copies were produced in total; [93713]

(2) how many civil servants were involved in the production of the Government's annual report; and what is his estimate of the number of person-hours involved. [93712]

The Prime Minister: Preparation of the Government's Annual Report was undertaken in accordance with the requirements of "Guidance on the work of the Government Information Service".

The approximate costs of preparing the Annual Report 1998–99 for publication were as follows: design £75,000 and photography £1,000. Copywriting was done entirely within Government. Printing costs fall entirely to The Stationery Office, the private-sector publishers. 100,000 copies of the Annual Report were printed.

Oral Statements

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Prime Minister if he will list *(a)* the reports published by his Department and its associated bodies, *(b)* the reports received from bodies set up by his Department, *(c)* the decisions his Department has taken and *(d)* events in the UK and elsewhere, since 27 July, which satisfied the criteria he uses for deciding whether to apply to make oral statements to the House when the House is sitting. [93931]

The Prime Minister: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer given to him by my right hon. Friend the President of the Council, today, *Official Report*, columns *429–30*.

Cabinet Meetings

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Prime Minister (1) on how many occasions the Cabinet has met formally during the summer adjournment; [94624]

(2) when was the last full formal meeting of the Cabinet. [94623]

The Prime Minister: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply I gave to the hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs. Gillan) on 30 April 1999, *Official Report*, column *281*.

Single Currency

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Prime Minister what constitutional tests will be applied to any future decision concerning United Kingdom adherence to the euro. [94636]

The Prime Minister: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave to the hon. Member for Mid-Bedfordshire (Mr. Sayeed) on 13 April 1999, *Official Report*, columns *2–3*.

MOD Electronic Test Facility

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Prime Minister what representations he has received from the Irish Government with regard to the Ministry of Defence's Electronic Test Facility formerly sited at the British Nuclear Fuels Ltd site at Capenhurst, Cheshire, since 1 July; when these representations were received; and from which Irish Government departments. [93882]

The Prime Minister: The Irish Ambassador called on a senior official in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office on 26 July, where this issue was discussed.

Policy Unit (US Visits)

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Prime Minister, pursuant to his answer 25 June 1999, *Official Report*, column *480*, on Policy Unit (US visits), what were the names of the members of his Policy Unit who accompanied *(a)* him and *(b)* other Ministers on visits to the United States of America on four occasions since 1 January 1998; and how many meetings each of these members of his Policy Unit held with members and officials of the United States of America Government on each visit, indicating the dates and locations of each

meeting, the Policy Unit members involved at each meeting, and the names of the US Ministers and officials at each meeting. [93962]

The Prime Minister: David Miliband, Geoff Mulgan and Derek Scott accompanied me for all or part of my visit to the United States of America on 4–7 February 1998. David Miliband also accompanied me on similar visits on 22 September and 8 November 1998. James Purnell accompanied the former Secretary of State for Trade and Industry during a visit to the United States on 10–16 October 1998.

Members of the Policy Unit participated in the official Ministerial programme and also separately attended meetings with US public officials. All visits were undertaken in line with the rules set out in the Ministerial Code

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Prime Minister on how many occasions members of his Policy Unit travelled to the United States of America on official business between 1 May 1997 and 1 January 1998, indicating the name of the member and the dates of travel in each case. [93880]

The Prime Minister: None.

Prime Ministerial Meetings (US)

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Prime Minister, pursuant to his answer on 17 May 1999, *Official Report*, column *267*, on meetings with President Clinton, how many meetings he held with members and officials of the United States Government during his visit of 21 September 1998, indicating the location of each meeting and the names of the members and officials of the United States Government at each meeting. [93960]

The Prime Minister: I travelled to New York in September 1998 to attend the United Nations General Assembly, where I heard a speech by President Clinton. I had also been invited to make a speech and focused on the development of the United Nations and the challenges we face in a global economy.

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Prime Minister, pursuant to his answer of 17 May 1999, *Official Report*, column *267*, on meetings with President Clinton, how many meetings he held with members and officials of the United States Government during his visit of 4 to 7 February 1998, specifying the date and location of each meeting and the names of the members and officials of the United States Government at each meeting. [93903]

The Prime Minister: My visit to the United States in February 1998 was my first official visit to the United States as Prime Minister. I had talks with the President at the White House in Washington to discuss a wide range of issues of mutual interest.

Child Poverty

Mr. Webb: To ask the Prime Minister what definition of child poverty underlies his target of eliminating child poverty within 20 years. [94702]

The Prime Minister: I refer the hon. Member to the answers I gave to the right hon. Member for Fylde (Mr. Jack) on 29 March 1999, *Official Report*, column *496* and 31 March 1999, *Official Report*, column *717*.

On 21 September 1999, we published the document "Opportunity for all" which sets out our strategy for tackling the causes of poverty and social exclusion. The report includes a range of indicators against which we can monitor our progress in tackling these causes and overcoming the problems of people living in poverty.

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

Millennium Compliance

Mr. David Atkinson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement of progress on the millennium readiness of his Department's computer systems, and those for which it is responsible in the provision of public services; if contingency plans are in place; and what slippage has occurred since the July Quarterly report to the House. [93560]

Mr. Hill: Details of the Department's progress in tackling the bug are set out in our regular monitoring returns. These are available in the Libraries of the House and published on the Internet.

The President of the Council wrote to all Members on 23 September 1999 with details of the latest position. That confirmed that, with two exceptions, all the business critical systems of DETR(C) and the other DETR Agencies were expected to be complete by the end of October at the latest.

The exceptions were:

(a) The Planning Inspectorate which is on course to confirm that a business critical IT system to produce 400 standard letters will be millennium compliant in November. In the unlikely event of a delay in installing the system, the Agency is confident that it would still be able to maintain its current level and standard of service to customers.

(b) The Rent Agency, created on 1 October 1999, which is currently establishing the compliance of the embedded systems in the rent offices previously managed by local authorities. The Agency is aware that local authorities have been actively dealing with these embedded systems, and is confident that they will be fully compliant by December 1999.

The results of the October review, [illegible] announced shortly by the President of the Council, are expected to confirm that, with the exception of the above two Agencies, the Department's business critical systems and most of its non-critical systems will be millennium compliant by the end of the month.

Turning to progress in devising contingency plans, DETR(C) and its Agencies are on course to complete and test these plans by the end of this month.

As regards the millennium readiness of public services for which the Department has oversight, the results of the latest independent assessment of the water, transport, and local government sectors will be announced at the National Infrastructure Forum on 20–21 October 1999. It is expected that all these sectors will report that the independent assessments have not identified any risk of material disruption to the infrastructure.

Voluntary Purchase Grant

Mr. Austin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many tenants have received a voluntary purchase grant in *(a)* England and *(b)* London in each year since its introduction. [94347]

Mr. Mullin: The Voluntary Purchase Grant scheme was introduced in April 1996. The number of registered social landlord households who have received a voluntary purchase grant in England and in London since the scheme's introduction is shown in the table below.

Number of RSL households in receipt of VPG, in England and London

	London	*England*
1996–97	14	54
1997–98	35	195
1998–99	27	122

Note:
Source is the Housing Corporation's Annual Investment Reports

Rent-to-Mortgage Scheme

Mr. Austin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many tenants exercised their rights under the rent-to-mortgage scheme in each year since its introduction. [94348]

Mr. Mullin: Latest information on rent-to-mortgage activity in England since the introduction of the scheme in October 1993 is given in the table.

	Claims	*Acceptances*	*Sales*
October 1993 to March 1994	152	19	—
1994–95	738	89	12
1995–96	396	45	8
1996–97	373	34	4
1997–98	402	51	7
1998–99	n/a	n/a	9

The figures to March 1994, and for Sales in each period, are of reported activity only as no estimates were made for non-responding authorities in either grouping; the figures cover around 90 per cent. of authorities.

London Airports

Mr. Blunt: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many passengers passed through the London area airports in the past year; what is his forecast for the year 2015; and what estimate he has made of the number of such passengers who would in the next year if duty were to be imposed on aviation fuel at the same rate as on motor vehicle fuel, assuming a similar rate of tax is imposed by other countries. [93832]

Mr. Mullin: In 1998, 102 million terminal passengers passed through the London area airports (Heathrow, Gatwick, Stansted, Luton and London City).

In the DETR 1997 air traffic forecasts, the unconstrained forecast for London area airports (defined there as Heathrow, Gatwick, Stansted and Luton) is 147 million (low growth) to 212 million (high growth) with a mid point forecast of 184 million.

No specific estimate has been made on the effect of imposing a tax on aviation fuel at the same rate as that on motor vehicle fuel. However, studies have been done by

the International Civil Aviation Organisation (ICAO) and for the European Commission, among others, on the effects of applying different tax rates to aviation fuel under different scenarios. In reviewing such studies the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, in its Special Report on Aviation and the Global Atmosphere published earlier this year, noted that levies (taxes and charges) could be a means of reducing growth of aircraft emissions by further stimulating the development and use of more efficient aircraft and by reducing growth in demand for aviation transportation. The studies also showed that to be environmentally effective, levies would need to be addressed in an international framework. Consequently further work on market based approaches to limit the growth in aviation emissions is being taken forward by ICAO.

M4 Bus Lane

Mr. Brady: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions at what time on the morning of 23 July the M4 bus lane was opened to all vehicles; at what time it was closed again; and what period of time elapsed between the closure of two lanes due to an accident on that morning and the opening of the bus lane to all vehicles. [94204]

Mr. Hill: The accident occurred in the nearside lane (lane one) at about 7:30am. At 7:37am lane one closure signs were displayed on the two matrix sign gantries approaching the incident and all traffic except buses and taxis used the middle lane (lane two). This continued until 8:14am when this lane was also closed and the bus lane was opened to all traffic. This was carried out under police supervision to enable the fire brigade to work safely. At 8:54am, lanes one and two were re-opened to traffic and lane three reverted to being a bus lane.

Swanwick Air Traffic Control

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what is the planned date on which Swanwick air traffic control will become operational. [94202]

Mr. Mullin: Swanwick is still expected to become operational in the spring of 2002.

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the impact on Swanwick Air Traffic Control Centre of the Government's proposals for the future of NATS. [94300]

Mr. Mullin: The Government recognises the importance of introducing the right strategic partner to the New Partnership Company under the PPP. In order to protect the public interest and national security, given the strategic importance to the UK of NATS activities, the Government will have to be satisfied of, among other things, the strategic partner's commitment to the development of the New En Route Centre at Swanwick and the NSC, thereby maintaining the two-centre strategy.

The arguments for the PPP include: to give NATS access to private capital; enable that capital to be used to best effect; and bring in the investment and project management skills which only the private sector can offer. Additionally, it will free NATS investment and management decisions from Government financing constraints, allow NATS the commercial opportunities it lacks in the public sector, and introduce quality key private sector management skills to build on NATS operational excellence.

Carbon Dioxide Emissions

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if the climate change programme referred to on page 47 of the Government's Annual report 1998–99 will include measures designed to reduce carbon dioxide emissions by 20 per cent. by the year 2010 based on 1990 levels. [94200]

Mr. Mullin: The draft UK climate change programme will set out the Government's strategy for meeting the UK's legally binding target agreed at Kyoto to reduce a basket of six greenhouse gases by 12.5 per cent. below 1990 levels by 2008–12 and moving towards our domestic goal to cut emissions of carbon dioxide by 20 per cent. by 2010. We are aiming to publish our draft programme towards the end of 1999 for consultation.

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what was the level of carbon dioxide emissions in *(a)* England, *(b)* Scotland, *(c)* Wales and *(d)* Northern Ireland in each of the last 10 years for which figures are available; and if he will make a statement on future targets for carbon dioxide emissions in each area. [93862]

Mr. Meacher: A report is currently being completed for the Government and the devolved Administrations which will provide details of historic emissions in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. The report will detail emissions of the six greenhouse gases covered by the Kyoto Protocol for the years 1990 and 1995 and will be in the same format as that currently used for the UK-wide greenhouse gas inventory. The report is due to be published shortly. In future years, the Government plans to produce a greenhouse gas inventory for England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, alongside the UK inventory, on an annual basis.

Following Kyoto in 1997, the UK has a legally binding target to cut emissions of a basket of six greenhouse gases by 12.5 per cent. below 1990 levels over the period 2008–12. The UK Government also has a domestic goal to cut carbon dioxide emissions by 20 per cent. below 1990 levels by 2010. The Government is currently developing a draft climate change programme which will set out how the UK will deliver its Kyoto target and move towards its domestic goal. We are aiming to publish the draft programme for consultation towards the end of 1999.

Threatened Species

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what response the Government have made to the report requested from the Joint Nature Conservation Committee on the rationale

behind the listing of threatened species on schedules associated with Part 1 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981. [94203]

Mr. Mullin: My Department is actively discussing with the Joint Nature Conservation Committee what further measures may be appropriate to protect the relevant species.

Fuel Poverty

Mrs. Brinton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) what estimate he has made of the number of people living in fuel poverty in *(a)* solid-walled and *(b)* cavity-walled housing; [94311]

(2) what plans he has to provide funding for the insulation of the walls of solid-walled properties for those deemed to be living in fuel poverty. [94308]

Mr. Meacher: Data from the English House Condition Survey shows that there were at least 4.3 million fuel poor households in 1996. Of these, 1.5 million are estimated as living in solid-walled properties and 2.4 million in cavity-walled housing. The remaining 0.4 million are thought to live in non-traditional and mixed-construction housing.

The new Home Energy Efficiency Scheme (HEES) has been designed to tackle fuel poverty, focusing on those households most at risk of ill health due to cold homes. It does so by providing packages of heating and insulation improvements that will reduce the cost of keeping warm for households by up to £1,000 a year.

During the development of the scheme, the full range of heating and insulation measures were considered, including the use of external or internal wall insulation for solid wall properties. Discussions with the insulation industry showed that the cost of external wall insulation was about £2,500 for an average 3-bedroom semi-detached property with disruption for the household. With internal wall insulation, installation costs are less but the disruption to households is greater and there is a loss of internal space. In addition, there are redecoration costs after the work has been completed.

It was therefore felt that both these measures were more appropriate for large-scale estate renewal programmes where they could be combined with other work such as damp proofing, rather than for new HEES which will target individual properties, primarily in the private sector.

The packages available for solid walled properties under the new HEES include higher levels of heating improvements than those for cavity walled homes, so providing similar reductions in fuel costs for both types of property.

Mr. Alan Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what responses have been received to the consultations relating to the proposed redefinition of households in fuel poverty; and if he will make a statement on his plan for action following the consultation. [94199]

Mr. Meacher: The consultation document on the new Home Energy Efficiency Scheme invited comment on two aspects of the commonly used definition of a fuel poor household—that is to say, one needing to spend more than 10 per cent. of income to achieve a satisfactory heating regime—namely:

> whether the use of fuel for non-heating purposes should be included in assessing the amount of fuel needed to achieve a satisfactory heating regime;
>
> and
>
> whether the calculation of household income should exclude any element of housing costs such as rent or mortgage payments.

A total of 252 responses to the consultation document have been received to date. Forty per cent. of respondents did not comment on either of these particular questions. On the issue of non-heating fuel, 54 per cent. felt that all fuel costs should be taken into account; 6 per cent. had various other suggestions. On the issue of housing costs, 34 per cent. felt that they should not be excluded from income; 20 per cent. felt the opposite; and 6 per cent. made other suggestions.

The eligibility of households for assistance under the new HEES is not directly dependent on the definition of fuel poverty. However, it is relevant more widely to the discussion of fuel poverty issues, and we intend to look at the definition in the light of the comments received.

I shall write to my hon. Friend separately with a full copy of the analysis of the consultation responses and place a copy in the Library.

Mrs. Brinton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) what percentages of heat is lost on average from *(a)* solid-walled and *(b)* cavity-walled housing; [94310]

(2) what assessment he has made of the principal sources of heat loss in domestic properties. [94309]

Mr. Meacher: On behalf of the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions the Building Research Establishment has undertaken research into heat loss from solid-walled and cavity-walled housing.

In a typical semi-detached dwelling with un-insulated cavity walls and with average insulation standards for the other elements, the walls account for about 40 per cent. of the total dwelling heat loss (reducing to slightly below 20 per cent. if cavity-wall insulation is added).

For the same dwelling with un-insulated solid walls, the heat loss through the walls accounts for about 48 per cent. of the total dwelling heat loss.

Estimates of the principal heat losses for a typical dwelling are: walls 38 per cent., ventilation 23 per cent., windows and doors 26 per cent., roofs 5 per cent., floors 8 per cent.

Strategic Planning (Spending)

Mr. Cash: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the levels of spending on strategic planning per head of population in *(a)* Staffordshire and *(b)* each other county of England (i) in the current year and (ii) in each of the last three years. [94018]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The available information on planning expenditure does not permit spending on strategic planning to be separately identified.

GM Micro-organisms

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the environmental and health risks posed by the release into the environment of genetically modified micro-organisms; and if he will make a statement. [94168]

Mr. Meacher: All activities involving the contained use of genetically modified micro-organisms (GMMs) are required to be assessed for potential risk to both human health and the environment by the Genetically Modified Organisms (Contained Use) Regulations 1992, as amended. These Regulations also require that control measures are used to limit contact of the GMMs with the environment and general population so that harm is not caused.

For higher hazard GMMs release, to the environment must be prevented. This is achieved by application of extremely stringent control methods and 100 per cent. kill of all waste and contaminated material before disposal. For low hazard GMMs, control measures must minimise release. Although absolute prevention of release in these cases is not required, waste is still treated to inactivate the GMMs prior to disposal with, typically, at least 99.999 per cent. of GMMs being killed. In all cases the risk assessment must be used to ensure that the control measures, including the degree of inactivation, to prevent or minimise release are commensurate with maintaining a high level of safety for both human health and the environment.

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the arrangements for public involvement in decision making about the use of genetically modified micro-organisms; and if he will make a statement. [94163]

Mr. Meacher: All activities involving the contained use of genetically modified micro-organisms (GMMs) are regulated under the Genetically Modified Organisms (Contained Use) Regulations 1992, as amended. The Regulations require all activities to be assessed for potential risk to both human health and the environment. All activities involving hazardous GMMs have to be notified to the Health and Safety Executive (HSE).

Although there are provisions in these Regulations for information to be available to the public, including a public register with information from all premises undertaking work with hazardous GMMs, there are no provisions for statutory consultation with the public on individual activities. However, members of the public may request copies of activity notifications and are free to comment on activities to HSE. These comments will be considered and action taken as appropriate. Improvements to the public register proposed by the Health and Safety Commission in a recent consultation document on proposed new contained use legislation will greatly aid public access to information and therefore the ability to comment.

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to ensure that inactivated waste from factories and laboratories does not contain living genetically modified micro-organisms; and if he will make a statement. [94172]

Mr. Meacher: None at this time.

The Genetically Modified Organisms (Contained Use) Regulations 1992, as amended, require that users limit contact of GMMs with the environment and the general population. In all cases the degree of limitation must relate to the level of risk. For hazardous GMMs "limit" must be interpreted as "prevent". Control measures in these cases will include inactivation of waste material to give 100 per cent. kill.

The European Directive on the contained use of GMMs has been revised. The Health and Safety Commission (HSC) has consulted on proposals to implement the revised Directive by replacing the 1992 Regulations. The handling and treatment of waste was one of the key aspects consulted on. The responses to the consultation are being analysed.

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to extend inspections of sites using genetically modified micro-organisms to include those currently classified as low-risk; and if he will make a statement. [94166]

Mr. Meacher: All sites where work with any genetically modified micro-organisms (GMMs) is to take place must notify HSE and are subject to inspection by HSE Specialist Inspectors. HSE is currently considering how to improve its arrangements for regulating risks from such biological agents and this will include inspection of sites using low risk GMMs.

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to introduce independent assessments of the risks of genetically modified micro-organism use at registered sites; and if he will make a statement. [94169]

Mr. Meacher: None at this time.

Provisions for independent assessment of risks relating to hazardous genetically modified micro-organisms (GMMs) at premises undertaking contained use activities already exist. All premises and all activities involving hazardous GMMs are required to be notified to the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) under the Genetically Modified Organisms (Contained Use) Regulations 1992 (as amended). HSE's technical specialists, together with experts in other relevant Departments, scrutinise the risk assessments supplied with all notifications. In addition, advice can be sought from the Advisory Committee on Genetic Modification (ACGM).

The Regulations are due to be replaced by new legislation in Spring 2000 in order to implement the revised European Directive on the contained use of GMMs. The Directive requires that notification and an independent scrutiny is maintained for premises and all activities involving hazardous GMMs. The Health and Safety Commission (HSC) has consulted on proposals for the new legislation. Responses are being analysed.

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to introduce regulations specifying the maximum level of genetically modified micro-organisms in waste; and if he will make a statement. [94164]

Mr. Meacher: None at this time.

The Regulations which control all contained use activities involving genetically modified micro-organisms (GMMs)—the Genetically Modified Organisms (Contained Use) Regulations 1992, as amended—are intended to be replaced in Spring 2000. New Regulations are required to implement the revision of the European Directive on the contained use of GMMs. The Health and Safety Commission (HSC) has recently undertaken a public consultation on proposed new Regulations. The proposals did not include specifying limits for the numbers of GMMs which can be in waste. However, they did propose that there should be a requirement that all GMM containing waste be inactivated prior to disposal, unless users had the agreement of the authorities to do otherwise. Such agreement would only be given if fully justified by the risk assessment. In all cases the level of inactivation (ie percentage kill) must be commensurate with the level of risk. For hazardous GMMs inactivation must be 100 per cent.

Responses to the consultation are being analysed. I expect HSC to submit proposals to me early in 2000. It would be inappropriate to pre-empt their advice.

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will backdate to pre-1992 the Health and Safety Executive's public register of centres using genetically modified micro-organisms; and if he will make a statement. [94171]

Mr. Meacher: The Genetically Modified Organisms (Contained Use) Regulations 1992, as amended, require the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) to maintain a public register with information from all premises which undertake contained use activities with hazardous genetically modified micro-organisms (GMMs).

The Health and Safety Commission (HSC) recently consulted on proposals to replace these Regulations in order to implement revisions to the European Directive on the contained use of GMMs. The proposals included significant improvements in the quality and quantity of information to be placed on the public register. In particular, it was proposed to include information from all premises undertaking contained use activities, even those originally notified prior to 1992.

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to increase the resources dedicated by the Health and Safety Executive to the inspection of sites using genetically modified micro-organisms; and if he will make a statement. [94167]

Mr. Meacher: HSE is reviewing the way it inspects sites handling genetically modified organisms and biological agents to take account of the increased activity in this field and also to ensure that public concern is properly addressed. An internal HSE review will put forward recommendations in November 1999 and I am sure that HSE will wish to act on them as soon as possible. I believe it is right that HSE should consider ways in which it can continually improve its enforcement and inspection duties to ensure that risks are being properly controlled.

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to improve the monitoring and control of discharges of genetically modified micro-organisms into the environment; and if he will make a statement. [94170]

Mr. Meacher: None at this time.

All activities in containment (eg laboratories, production facilities) are regulated under the Genetically Modified Organisms (Contained Use) Regulations 1992, as amended. These Regulations require all genetically modified micro-organisms (GMMs) to be controlled so as to limit contact with the environment and the general population. GMMs are inactivated prior to disposal. Users are required to test and maintain control measures and to test (ie monitor) when necessary for the presence of viable GMMs outside of the primary physical containment. The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) Specialist Inspectors enforce the requirements of the Regulations. This includes scrutinising users' monitoring data and inactivation methods.

The Health and Safety Commission (HSC) has consulted on proposals for new Regulations to implement a revision to the contained use of GMMs European Directive. Responses are being analysed. I expect HSC to submit its final proposals to me early in 2000. It would be inappropriate to pre-empt HSC's advice.

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to require all registered users of genetically modified micro-organisms to provide information about their use; and if he will make a statement. [94165]

Mr. Meacher: None at this time.

The Genetically Modified Organisms (Contained Use) Regulations 1992 (as amended) require users undertaking contained use activities with GMMs which may be hazardous to humans or the environment to notify the individual activities to the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) before commencing work. Activities of negligible risk are not required to be notified, but users are required to provide information to HSE Specialist Inspectors if requested or during site inspections.

The Regulations are to be replaced in Spring 2000 to implement the revised European Directive on the contained use of GMMs. The Directive requires that users provide information to the authorities on all activities involving hazardous GMMs. The Health and Safety Commission (HSC) have consulted on proposals for the new legislation. Responses are being analysed.

Jubilee Line

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if the whole of the Jubilee Line extension will be open and fully operational before 31 December; and if he will make a statement. [93731]

Mr. Hill: The first two phases of the Jubilee Line Extension are now open, operating from Stratford to Waterloo. One phase 2 station, Southwark, is not yet operating, but will open within the next few weeks.

Phase 3 will include joining the existing Jubilee Line and will offer full through-running services from Stanmore to Stratford. It will also involve moving on to 7-day per week services (the Extension currently closes on weekends). Phase 3 is due to open in late autumn. The last new station, Westminster, will open a little later. I can therefore confirm that we expect the whole Extension to be fully operational by 31 December.

Best Value (Sefton)

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) what progress has been made in implementing Best Value in Sefton Metropolitan Authority; [94495]

(2) what progress has been made in implementing Best Value in the housing department in Sefton Metropolitan Authority. [94496]

Ms Beverley Hughes: It is the responsibility of each local authority to implement best value in its own area. However, I am aware that Sefton, like many other authorities around the country, is making progress. Each Department has drawn up proposals for a five-year fundamental review of all its services. In addition, Sefton is undertaking five pilot reviews. As part of this exercise, I understand the housing department will be reviewing services for the homeless. Under the best value regime, the performance of local authorities will be subject to independent scrutiny through the audit and inspection of all services, including housing.

Mrs. Gilroy: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what steps he is taking to ensure that the principles of sustainable development are built into Best Value. [93915]

Ms Beverley Hughes: Once the duty of Best Value comes into force on 1 April 2000, local authorities will be required to secure continuous improvement in the exercise of their functions with regard to a combination of economy, efficiency and effectiveness. We have made clear in the recently published 'Implementing Best Value—A Consultation Paper on Draft Guidance' that Best Value Reviews will need to give effect to the principles of sustainable development.

It is for local authorities to determine how to give such principles practical effect through the setting of consistent performance targets, following consultation with their community and in the light of progress with their Local Agenda 21 strategies.

Driving Licences

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to make the carrying of driving licences compulsory while individuals are driving. [94506]

Mr. Hill: This is being considered by the Vehicle Crime Reduction Action Team (VCRAT), formed by the Government last year to develop a strategy to reduce vehicle crime by 30 per cent. by March 2004. VCRAT concluded that the case for requiring drivers to carry their licences has not yet been made, but my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary indicated within the foreword to the VCRAT Strategy report that he will want to look at that issue again in the light of developing technology and further assessment of the potential wider crime reduction benefits. A copy of the report, published on 22 September 1999, is in the Library of the House.

Road Traffic Offences

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to publicise the *(a)* risk and *(b)* consequences of committing road traffic offences. [94505]

Mr. Hill: The Department's ongoing programme of publicity campaigns draws attention to the risk and consequences of committing road traffic offences. Our high profile advertising campaigns currently address speeding, drinking and driving, and the non wearing of rear seat belts, which are key factors in more than half of all road deaths. These campaigns focus on the potential risk of causing death or serious injury and the consequences to the perpetrator and others affected. Annex 5 of the Highway Code indicates some of the main offences and penalties.

We intend to publish soon a new strategy for improving road safety which will inform the development of future campaigns.

Construction Industry

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the state of *(a)* the construction industry and *(b)* the housing construction market between January and June 1997. [94596]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The volume of construction output in Great Britain increased by 1.0 per cent. from £13,700 million in the quarter beginning January 1997 to £13,834 million in the quarter ending June 1997. During this period new construction output fell by 0.3 per cent., whereas repair and maintenance grew by 2.3 per cent.

The volume of housing construction increased by 0.6 per cent. from £5,517 million in the quarter beginning January 1997 to £5,548 million in the quarter ending June 1997. During this period new housing construction remained unchanged and repair and maintenance grew by 0.8 per cent.

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) if he will make a statement on his initiatives to improve skills in the construction industry; [94597]

(2) if he will make a statement on his initiatives to encourage young people to enter the construction industry; [94599]

(3) if he will make a statement on his initiatives to encourage family friendly policies within the construction sector. [94598]

Ms Beverley Hughes: It is vital for the construction industry to be able to attract and retain people with the right skills—women as well as men, and from all ethnic communities.

We are driving forward the "Movement for Innovation" which is seeking to implement the recommendations in Sir John Egan's report "Rethinking Construction". A key item on the agenda is "respect for people" which covers training, equal opportunities, health and safety and site conditions.

We will shortly respond to the Report on Combating Cowboy Builders, which includes a proposal to introduce a Quality Mark scheme for builders in the domestic sector. One of the requirements of the scheme will be that a firm has operatives with the appropriate skills.

The "New Deal in Construction", launched last year in collaboration with the construction industry, is designed to make it easier for the industry to recruit young unemployed people and as a way of reducing skills gaps in the industry.

ADAS 2000

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what tests he has carried out on the ICCS ADAS 2000 equipment; where such tests were executed and under what circumstances; and what training staff have received on this equipment. [94645]

Mr. Hill: Testing carried out on ADAS 2000 covered:

Testing and pre-roll out checks of the hardware itself;

Full functional acceptance testing of the software;

Test of the system's ability to cope with the year 2000 itself, and with the following leap year date;

Performance testing by a number of users;

On-site trials at a Coastguard Co-ordination Centre.

All of these tests were done according to a pre-designed plan drawn up before delivery of the software by the supplier. They were performed on a test system set up using examples of the target hardware at both the client and server ends. Users were fully involved in both the planning and testing processes.

As to training, a team of people drawn from Coastguard Operations Staff accompanied the installation team to each Co-ordination Centre and instructed Coastguard operators in the use of the new software and the difference between it and the previous version.

ICCS is a separate major project where the current VHF and MF Radio Control Equipment in HM Coastguard will be replaced.

Rented Accommodation

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how he is ensuring that private landlords fulfil their responsibilities to maintain the standard of rented accommodation. [94494]

Miss Geraldine Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what steps his Department is taking to ensure that private landlords fulfil their responsibilities to maintain the standard of rented accommodation. [94532]

Mr. Mullin: Local authorities are responsible for enforcing standards of fitness in privately rented properties. We intend to reform the housing fitness standard by introducing a hazard based rating system which will enable local authorities to assess the fitness of privately rented housing more effectively. The introduction of mandatory licensing of houses in multiple occupation will place duties on landlords of this type of accommodation to maintain their properties to decent minimum standards and ensure the health and safety of their tenants.

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has for raising the quality of private rented accommodation. [94493]

Miss Geraldine Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans the Government have for raising the quality of private rented accommodation. [94534]

Mr. Mullin: We are committed to introducing mandatory licensing of houses in multiple occupation where the worst conditions are often found. This will place duties on landlords of this type of accommodation to maintain their properties to decent minimum standards and ensure the health and safety of their tenants. We also intend to reform the housing fitness standard by introducing a hazard-based rating system which will enable local authorities to assess the fitness of privately rented housing more effectively. In addition, we support the development of voluntary initiatives to raise standards in the private rented sector such as good practice codes and landlord accreditation schemes.

Homelessness

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) how many families were made homeless within *(a)* Sefton and *(b)* Merseyside in each year since 1993; [94580]

(2) how many people have been homeless during the last five years broken down by gender in Merseyside. [94648]

Mr. Mullin: Data on homelessness activity are reported each quarter by local authorities and this includes the number of households accepted as homeless and in priority need under the homelessness provisions of the 1985 and 1996 Housing Acts. Further classification by gender, or numbers of people, is not collected. The following table summarises information provided by authorities in Merseyside since 1994:

Households accepted as being unintentionally homeless and in priority need

Year	*Sefton*	*All Merseyside*
1994	218	3,235
1995	191	2,900
1996	166	2,557
1997	106	2,093
1998	109	1,995
1999 1st half	68	[1]1,030

[1] An estimate for non response from one authority is included in this figure

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to further reduce homelessness among *(a)* families and *(b)* young people. [94582]

Mr. Mullin: The Government have a Manifesto commitment to impose a new duty on local authorities to protect those who are homeless through no fault of their own and are in priority need. This includes families with children and others who are regarded as vulnerable, which can include young people. Since taking office, we have already strengthened the legislation to give homeless people reasonable preference in the allocation of long-term social housing.

My Department has set up an official-level sounding board with the local authority associations, Shelter, the Chartered Institute of Housing and others to discuss further proposals for change, on which we would propose to consult more widely in due course. In particular, we will be looking at ways of encouraging more partnership working at a local level, through the development of local homelessness strategies and preventive initiatives. We will also be considering further measures to ensure that housing solutions are sustainable in order to reduce the risk of homelessness recurring.

The Department has also established a Youth Homelessness Action Partnership, again with both the voluntary and statutory sectors, to look at the particular problems faced by young people and to develop proposals for tackling them. Our revised Code of Guidance on the Allocation of Accommodation and Homelessness, due to be published around the end of the year, will recommend local authorities to treat young care-leavers, especially, as being vulnerable under the homelessness legislation.

My Department is also contributing to follow-up work on the Social Exclusion Unit's reports which have a particular bearing on young people, including "Bridging the Gap" and the "Report on Rough Sleeping". These measures include: the extension to young homeless people of the Education Maintenance Allowance pilots (which aim to encourage young people to remain in full-time education and so improve their life-skills); the introduction of a new Youth Support Service, with links to statutory and voluntary housing and homelessness agencies; and the establishment of the new Rough Sleepers Unit, which is co-ordinating Government action to achieve our target of reducing the number of people sleeping rough in England by two-thirds by 2002.

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to use lottery funding to support projects and organisations which help the homeless. [94649]

Mr. Mullin: None. Responsibility for distributing proceeds from the National Lottery rests with a number of distributing bodies which make their decisions independently of Government.

HM Coastguard

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the recommendations contained within Lord Donaldson's report on a five-year strategy for HM Coastguard. [94509]

Mr. Hill: The Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions accepts all of the recommendations contained in Lord Donaldson's Review of the Five-Year Strategy for HM Coastguard.

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if any dedicated frequencies are going to be allocated for marine safety information broadcasts; and if there have been any operational difficulties utilising existing frequencies for marine safety information broadcasts. [94646]

Mr. Hill: The Maritime and Coastguard Agency (MCA) have applied to the Radiocommunications Agency for two additional VHF working frequencies which will be used primarily for Maritime Safety Information broadcasts. The MCA application was placed before the National Frequency Assignment Panel (NFAP) on Friday 15 October 1999.

Operational difficulties utilising those frequencies assigned to Maritime Safety Information broadcasts have been limited to some mutual interference between HM Coastguard transmissions and those of port operators in Clydeport, Liverpool and Medway. Those difficulties have been overcome by avoiding transmissions on a frequency in use by the other authority and HM Coastguard's use of an alternative working frequency not normally assigned to Maritime Safety Information.

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how the new equipment used by HM Coastguard for Medilink Services varies from the original equipment used by BT coast radio stations; and what difficulties have been involved in its introduction. [94626]

Mr. Hill: The Medilink equipment, known as TeleConnect, installed in HM Coastguard Co-ordination Centres is specifically designed for simplex communications. This mode of communications allows only one operator to speak at any time. Hospital medical staff who might not be familiar with this mode of communications have received appropriate training from HM Coastguard.

BT Coast Radio Stations were fitted with Medilink equipment which differs from HM Coastguard's equipment in that it provides duplex communications. This mode of communications is similar to that used, for instance, in normal telephone calls. The Maritime and Coastguard Agency (MCA) has applied to the Radiocommunications Agency for two of the hitherto BT duplex channels following closure of BT Coast Radio Stations.

No difficulties were encountered with the introduction of Medilink equipment into HM Coastguard Co-ordination Centres. The TeleConnect Units installed for Medilink purposes have been used successfully on each occasion medical advice has been sought by vessels at sea.

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many incidents, by category, have been handled by each coastguard station during the last five years. [94644]

Mr. Hill: The following tables detail incidents, by category, handled by each Coastguard station during the last five years.

HM coastguard SAR activity: 1994

District	Total incidents	Assistance rendered	Assistance not rendered	Hoax	Number assisted	Number rescued	Lives lost
Aberdeen	362	164	193	5	447	375	7
Belfast	350	172	160	18	293	94	12
Brixham	690	445	236	9	712	295	4
Clyde	397	218	172	7	457	133	37
Dover	531	258	258	15	518	258	24
Falmouth	976	357	611	8	460	413	51
Forth	330	167	159	4	282	157	8
Holyhead	566	315	236	15	523	257	8
Humber	415	308	99	8	694	241	8
Liverpool	446	257	181	8	413	174	14
Milford Haven	444	241	197	6	277	213	5
Oban	235	180	52	3	335	123	4
Pentland	136	76	59	1	116	40	5
Portland	861	512	329	20	953	511	3
Shetland	152	124	27	1	384	111	4
Solent	1,188	728	426	34	1,465	429	32
Stornoway	198	123	72	3	182	119	9
Swansea	815	426	353	36	1,350	435	8
Thames	600	392	193	15	758	395	9
Tyne Tees	357	231	113	13	554	169	12
Yarmouth	360	197	146	17	495	113	8
Total	10,409	5,891	4,272	246	11,560	5,067	272

HM coastguard SAR activity: 1995

District	Total incidents	Assistance rendered	Assistance not rendered	Hoax	Number assisted	Number rescued	Lives lost
Aberdeen	568	246	305	17	1,201	675	16
Belfast	396	218	166	12	346	188	9
Brixham	768	499	256	13	616	535	15
Clyde	449	270	163	16	407	188	18
Dover	751	355	379	17	1,232	192	21
Falmouth	1,044	377	663	4	468	428	26
Forth	332	174	153	5	412	151	5
Holyhead	660	354	291	15	491	290	13
Humber	523	391	127	5	744	237	11
Liverpool	531	317	200	14	557	221	11
Milford Haven	561	289	255	17	443	222	8
Oban	288	209	73	6	371	133	8
Pentland	136	93	40	3	255	37	8
Portland	981	602	368	11	953	511	12
Shetland	226	178	48	0	301	134	4
Solent	1,279	828	420	31	1,610	480	13
Stornoway	242	169	70	3	249	149	14
Swansea	1,112	618	471	23	753	672	8
Thames	894	635	241	18	996	397	11
Tyne Tees	374	236	131	7	515	142	8
Yarmouth	578	247	317	14	851	155	6
Total	12,693	7,313	5,152	251	13,872	8,051	245

HM coastguard SAR activity: 1996

District	Total incidents	Assistance rendered	Assistance not rendered	Hoax	Number assisted	Number rescued	Lives lost
Aberdeen	670	188	469	13	661	362	7
Belfast	303	174	114	15	362	96	5
Brixham	720	456	255	9	898	445	9
Clyde	415	256	150	9	392	171	18
Dover	559	258	294	7	1,625	140	13
Falmouth	895	345	544	6	578	331	31
Forth	316	160	137	19	240	158	11
Holyhead	553	322	210	21	495	247	4
Humber	508	375	129	4	683	272	11
Liverpool	523	274	235	14	419	161	12
Milford Haven	445	253	180	12	459	260	7
Oban	255	180	70	5	333	163	5
Pentland	133	85	46	2	216	28	4
Portland	874	548	318	8	845	405	8
Shetland	123	90	32	1	225	62	4

HM coastguard SAR activity: 1996

District	*Total incidents*	*Assistance rendered*	*Assistance not rendered*	*Hoax*	*Number assisted*	*Number rescued*	*Lives lost*
Solent	1,207	751	418	38	1,844	478	31
Stornoway	224	149	74	1	311	110	9
Swansea	958	515	411	32	562	504	10
Thames	771	512	252	7	2,298	380	6
Tyne Tees	334	219	98	17	463	125	6
Yarmouth	505	191	303	11	317	111	5
Total	11,291	6,301	4,739	251	14,226	5,009	216

HM coastguard SAR activity: 1997

District	*Total incidents*	*Assistance rendered*	*Assistance not rendered*	*Hoax*	*Number assisted*	*Number rescued*	*Lives lost*
Aberdeen	763	217	536	10	643	195	14
Belfast	292	167	113	12	333	95	10
Brixham	776	476	286	14	1,193	300	8
Clyde	457	267	176	14	565	197	15
Dover	619	266	340	13	420	116	15
Falmouth	975	357	612	6	351	264	64
Forth	330	176	149	5	343	144	9
Holyhead	638	384	239	15	480	354	8
Humber	489	331	153	5	761	262	9
Liverpool	691	351	321	19	821	201	8
Milford Haven	482	266	208	8	395	242	6
Oban	267	222	41	4	338	163	11
Pentland	140	101	39	0	307	55	7
Portland	814	494	307	13	722	353	10
Shetland	153	133	20	0	354	73	6
Solent	1,158	768	331	59	1,345	685	20
Stornoway	238	154	84	0	174	124	8
Swansea	795	471	309	15	567	496	11
Thames	705	476	196	33	833	425	4
Tyne Tees	378	256	108	14	568	158	3
Yarmouth	507	223	268	16	287	182	5
Total	11,667	6,556	4,836	275	11,800	5,084	251

HM coastguard SAR activity: 1998

District	*Total incidents*	*Assistance rendered*	*Assistance not rendered*	*Hoax*	*Number assisted*	*Number rescued*	*Lives lost*
Aberdeen	788	265	515	8	413	325	12
Belfast	251	161	78	12	420	112	4
Brixham	767	492	252	23	1,679	370	7
Clyde	394	198	185	11	407	131	8
Dover	681	353	315	13	1,259	105	38
Falmouth	915	278	628	9	351	306	25
Forth	267	156	107	4	244	177	5
Holyhead	558	288	259	11	374	243	9
Humber	507	335	164	8	1,130	254	11
Liverpool	724	385	324	15	707	207	6
Milford Haven	443	259	179	5	510	167	8
Oban	288	243	45	0	436	82	10
Pentland	111	77	33	1	138	43	4
Portland	790	458	311	21	662	424	8
Shetland	141	126	15	0	411	52	4
Solent	1,066	628	386	52	2,014	482	33
Stornoway	211	147	61	3	153	128	9
Swansea	849	444	383	22	1,119	247	11
Thames	729	484	235	10	971	247	14
Tyne Tees	442	256	169	17	769	136	16
Yarmouth	631	310	297	24	328	232	7
Total	11,553	6,343	4,941	269	14,495	4,470	249

Notes:

Assistance Rendered—SAR Unit despatched and rendered assistance to a casualty.

Assistance Not Rendered—SAR Unit called out or despatched but casualty resolved problem, others assisted first or False Alarm with Good Intent.

Hoax—SAR Unit Called Out or despatched based on call with Malicious Intent.

Persons Assisted—SAR Unit used to transfer or escort persons to safety but not from a life threatening situation.

Persons Rescued—SAR Unit used to evacuate or escort persons to safety where but for the intervention lives would probably have been lost.

Pupil Funding

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what was the average funding allocation per child attending *(a)* junior and *(b)* secondary schools in each year from 1992 to 1998 in the Metropolitan Borough of Sefton. [94595]

Ms Beverley Hughes: Sefton's Standard Spending Assessment per pupil figures for Primary and Secondary Education from 1992–93 to 1998–99 are shown in the table.

£

	Primary education SSA per pupil	*Secondary education SSA per pupil*
1992–93	1,769	2,586
1993–94	1,788	2,596
1994–95	1,879	2,630
1995–96	1,875	2,492
1996–97	1,955	2,590
1997–98	2,038	2,662
1998–99	2,153	2,789

Road Traffic Reduction

Mr. Dafis: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he plans to set targets for road traffic reduction. [94459]

Mr. Hill: We intend to publish our first report on the issue of whether to set a national road traffic reduction target, under the Road Traffic Reduction (National Targets) Act 1998, by the end of this year.

Forest Products

Mr. Dafis: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what studies his Department has carried out or commissioned into the environmental consequences of the proposed World Trade Organisation agreement on forest products. [93836]

Mr. Mullin: The UK and its EU partners are committed to the launch of a comprehensive Round of multilateral trade negotiations at the 3rd WTO Ministerial meeting in Seattle (30 November-3 December). The UK does not believe that a sectoral approach to trade negotiations in advance of the Seattle Ministerial is the best way forward.

The European Commission is currently undertaking a sustainability assessment of the WTO new Round. The UK supports this work and UK Government officials have met with the consultants to discuss progress. This study will consider the range of possible sustainability impacts in all trade sectors likely to be affected by the Round, including forest products, and will be used by the European Union to inform its negotiating position at Seattle and thereafter.

Thameslink (Franchise Extensions)

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on Thameslink's plans for franchise extensions aimed at increasing capacity. [94134]

Mr. Hill: The Franchising Director and Chief Executive of the Shadow SRA has recently invited franchises to submit bids for the renegotiation of passenger rail franchises, and encouraged them to include proposals for significant new investment in improving capacity, punctuality and reliability of services in their bids. He has also announced that he will prioritise those bids that he receives, and will take them forward for renegotiation over the coming months. The Franchising Director will review any renegotiation that he receives from Thameslink's franchise GOVIA as part of this process.

Private Hire Vehicles (Control) Act 1998

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he plans to publish the regulations to bring into effect the provisions of the Private Hire Vehicles (Control) Act 1998. [94404]

Mr. Hill: During the summer we conducted jointly with the Public Carriage Office a consultation on proposals for regulating private hire vehicle operators in London. We are considering the responses, with the aim of publishing draft regulations as soon as possible. Further consultations will follow on proposals for regulating private hire drivers and vehicles.

Train Operators' Performance

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what independent evaluations are commissioned by *(a)* his Department and *(b)* the Rail Regulator of the performance of train operators. [94020]

Mr. Hill: None. The Franchising Director is responsible for monitoring the performance of train operators. Performance data provided by train operators are independently and regularly checked for the Franchising Director by the University of Sheffield. Data relating to train operators' performance are also produced by Railtrack using trackside equipment. This data is independently audited.

Ministerial Visits

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he intends next to visit the Ribble Valley. [93660]

Mr. Prescott: I have no current plans to visit Ribble Valley.

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on his recent visit to Poland. [94573]

Mr. Prescott: I visited Warsaw on 20 September to attend informal high level consultations under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. The purpose of the meeting was to prepare for the Fifth Conference of the Parties to the Convention, to be held in Bonn from 25 October to 5 November 1999. The meeting was well attended by Ministers and other high level representatives, and proved a valuable opportunity to discuss a number of important issues. I was pleased to note that there is still strong political commitment to the process and the participants reaffirmed their determination

to drive the negotiations forward. I hope we can make good progress in Bonn and pave the way for a successful outcome at the Sixth Conference of the Parties, which is the deadline for decisions on key outstanding issues.

Planning Decisions

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many local authority planning decisions have been overturned on appeal by *(a)* the Planning Inspector and *(b)* himself in each of the last two years. [93718]

Ms Beverley Hughes: I have asked the Chief Executive of the Planning Inspectorate, Mr. Chris Shepley, to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from C. J. Shepley to Mr. Nigel Evans, dated 19 October 1999:

The Secretary of State has asked me to reply to your Question about local authority planning decisions that have been overturned by the Planning Inspectorate and the Secretary of State over the past two years.

The information requested is as follows:

Planning appeals against refusal

Appeal decided during	*Decisions overturned by Inspectors*	*Decisions overturned by Secretary of State*	*Total*
1997–98	4,200	31	4,231
1998–99	4,001	29	4,030

Regional Government

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many letters he has received from people living in Lancashire in support of a regional tier of government for the north-west. [94187]

Ms Beverley Hughes: None.

Unoccupied Shops

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many *(a)* shops and *(b)* dwellings above shops are currently unoccupied. [93695]

Ms Beverley Hughes: Some local authorities collect data on empty retail units, but we do not hold national figures. There are 315,000 existing dwellings over shops in total in England, of which 18 per cent. or approximately 57,000, are empty (1996 figures).

New Homes (Lancashire)

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, pursuant to his answer of 19 July 1999, *Official Report*, column *387*, on new homes built in Lancashire in 1998, how many were built on *(a)* brownfield sites and *(b)* greenfield sites. [93673]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The information requested is not available. Estimates of the proportion of new homes built on previously developed land are available from the Department's Land Use Change Statistics, for Government Office Regions but not yet for counties. Latest figures show that, in 1994, 57 per cent. of new dwellings were built on previously developed land in the north-west, and 43 per cent. were built on land that was not previously developed. These figures exclude new dwellings provided from conversion of existing buildings, for which reliable information is not available below national level.

Estimates of the number of houses built are available from the Department's housing completion statistics at county level, but these do not distinguish houses built on greenfield and brownfield land.

These sources are under review and will be developed to provide more detailed, timely information.

Sussex Downs

Mr. Flight: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he expects to make an announcement about the future structure and funding of the successor body to the Sussex Downs Conservation Board. [94463]

Mr. Mullin: My right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister announced on 29 September that he was asking the Countryside Agency to consider, in consultation with the local authorities concerned, designating a National Park in the South Downs. In the event of a National Park designation being confirmed, a South Downs National Park Authority could be expected to become the successor body to the Sussex Downs Conservation Board. Arrangements for the structure and funding of National Park Authorities are laid down in the Environment Act 1995. Almost three-quarters of the membership is made up of local councillors, including parish representatives. Current funding arrangements provide for 75% of core budgets to come direct from central Government, with the remaining 25% coming from constituent local authorities, compensated through the revenue support grant.

I met the hon. Member as part of a delegation from East and West Sussex and Hampshire on 12 October. As I indicated then, the Countryside Agency will liaise closely with all the local authorities across the South Downs to ensure that any recommendations it makes for a National Park properly take into account the particular characteristics of the area. I also indicated that Ministers would place importance on there being a smooth transition from the Sussex Downs Conservation Board to a successor body.

Bird-proofing

Mr. Galbraith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to introduce legislation for compulsory proofing of premises against birds; and if he will make a statement. [94454]

Ms Beverley Hughes: Local authorities already have powers to deal with bird nuisance through a variety of measures including the Public Health Act 1961, the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 and the Environmental Protection Act 1990. The Government have no plans to introduce further legislation.

"Renegade" Collision

Dr. Godman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what progress has been made with the Marine Accidents Investigation Branch's inquiry into a collision between the Irish fishing vessel "Renegade" and an unidentified merchant vessel which occurred on 26 July; if he will place a copy of the report of the inquiry in the Library; and if he will make a statement. [93942]

Mr. Hill: The Marine Accidents Investigation Branch will not be investigating the collision between the Irish fishing vessel "Renegade" and a merchant vessel as both vessels were non-UK registered and the accident happened outside UK territorial waters. However, the Irish authorities are investigating the incident.

Disabled Rail Passengers

Mr. Hayes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when the Office of the Rail Regulator will publish the revised code of practice for disabled passengers. [94526]

Mr. Hill: The Rail Regulator has prepared a draft revision of his Code of Practice "Meeting the needs of Disabled Passengers". The draft version is currently subject to a technical consultation and the Regulator plans to publish the document in draft form during November 1999. He will invite comments from a wide range of interested parties including rail operators and representatives of disability groups.

JANSC

Mr. McDonnell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the training and arrangements for consultation on, and consideration of, the future operation of the JANSC or its successor body. [94338]

Mr. Mullin: The future role and operation of the successor body to the JANSC is currently being formulated, in consultation with the Civil Aviation Authority and the Ministry of Defence. Once finalised, these will be encapsulated within formal Directions to the CAA, and made available to the House.

National Air Traffic Services

Mr. McDonnell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the time scale and arrangements for the exploration of his proposal for more conventional contractual arrangements for the provision of air traffic control services by NATS to BAA plc. [94337]

Mr. Mullin: Where NATS provides air traffic control services at an airport, it does so on the basis of a contract with the airport operator. However, the means by which it charges for these services differs between six of the BAA airports and other airports. Outside the BAA-run airports, NATS is paid by the airport operator, but in the case of Aberdeen, Edinburgh, Gatwick, Glasgow, Heathrow and Stansted, the contractual arrangement between NATS and the BAA provides for NATS to charge airlines directly for its services. No other provider of air traffic control services at airports has the ability to recover its charges direct from the airlines.

The Government, in line with its expressed desire to explore the feasibility and desirability of a more conventional contractual arrangement, have recently written to representatives of the airlines, air users and the airport operators. These parties have been invited to comment on the arguments for and against direct charging for air traffic control provision at airports.

The Government propose that the CAA, as regulator, should review how direct charging is working after the PPP is set up. In carrying out this review, the CAA will consult with air traffic control service providers, airport operators and users. The Government will take a final view as to whether the facility should be extended to all providers, or should be withdrawn, when this review is complete. It is not the Government's intention unilaterally to force an end to a charging method that, on reflection of the arguments, was acceptable to all three parties involved.

Mr. McDonnell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on those synergies which are to result from the public private partnership proposed by the Government for the future of National Air Traffic Services Ltd. [94322]

Mr. Mullin: We are determined to secure a genuine partnership between the public and private sectors. Private sector status will allow important investment and management decisions to be taken on commercial grounds while the public sector interest will be protected through the Golden Share, the shareholders agreements and the Government appointed partnership directors. There will also be a stakeholder council to provide a forum for consultation with all stakeholders in the partnership.

Mr. McDonnell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions for what level of proposed reduction in the Government's shareholding in NATS it will be required to seek prior parliamentary approval. [94330]

Mr. Mullin: The Government intend to retain a 49 per cent. stake in NATS and will seek to ensure through legislation that there can be no reduction below this level without Parliamentary approval. In addition to this, a mechanism will be devised which will allow for limited dilution of the Government's stake if that is necessary in order to raise investment capital.

Mr. McDonnell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the detailed discussions which are to take place with potential strategic partners in the public private partnership proposed by the Government for the future of National Air Traffic Services Ltd on the suggested employee share scheme, setting out the arrangements for the timing and publication of the results of these discussions. [94323]

Mr. Mullin: The Government have said that 5 per cent. of NATS shares will be made available for an employee share scheme. Details of that scheme are being developed and we intend to discuss proposals with pre-qualified potential strategic partners, and with employee representatives in due course. However, as the pre-qualification process cannot begin until well into the

Parliamentary process for the legislation which will enable the PPP to be effected this will not be for some time.

Mr. McDonnell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the dates and duration of the meetings held by (i) himself and (ii) his Ministers with representatives of trade unions representing staff at National Air Traffic Services Ltd in the six months prior to 27 July. [94320]

Mr. Mullin: My right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister met with representatives of the IPMS and PCS on 27 July 1999 to discuss the NATS PPP.

Mr. McDonnell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the effect on employment levels of the Government's proposed sale of 51 per cent. of National Air Traffic Services Ltd in the (i) five years and (ii) 10 years following the sale. [94321]

Mr. Mullin: No formal assessment of staffing levels has been undertaken by the Government. However, it is expected that due to the continued increase in the growth of Air Traffic, coupled with the new opportunities the PPP will create, there should be no adverse effect on staffing levels as a result of the PPP.

Mr. McDonnell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the proportion of employees taken on by the public private partnership proposed for National Air Traffic Services Ltd who will be able to join the Civil Aviation Authority Pension Scheme. [94331]

Mr. Mullin: All NATS staff who are in employment with the company at the time the public-private partnership is established will be entitled to remain in the Civil Aviation Authority Pension Scheme. It will be up to the strategic partner to determine the pension arrangements to be offered to staff taken on by the partnership after it is established.

Mr. McDonnell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if the decisions of the regulator proposed for Air Traffic Services in determining a dispute between the service provider and users envisaged under the public private partnership proposed for the future of National Air Traffic Services Ltd. will be open to judicial review. [94328]

Mr. Mullin: Decisions of the regulator will be open to judicial review in the same way as those of regulators in other regulated industries.

Mr. McDonnell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list those potential strategic partners identified by the Government to date for participation in the public private partnership proposed for the future of National Air Traffic Services Ltd. [94324]

Mr. Mullin: The strategic partner for the NATS PPP will be selected following a competitive tender process. The Government will seek the widest possible participation in the process in the first instance, to enable them to pre-qualify a shortlist of quality and most appropriate candidates.

Mr. McDonnell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment has been made of the proposal that the employee share distribution involved in the public private partnership arrangements proposed for the future of National Air Traffic Services Ltd should include the distribution of shares into a Trust fund controlled by the employees. [94325]

Mr. Mullin: The form of the employee share scheme will be discussed with NATS staff representatives in due course. A Trust Fund is one option which will be considered.

Mr. McDonnell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the assurances to be given to leisure users of National Air Traffic Services Ltd on their exemption from certain charges under the proposed public private partnership. [94336]

Mr. Mullin: Leisure fliers are currently exempt from most air traffic control charges and NATS is not seeking to change this. There have, of course, long been differing views as to whether these exemptions should continue. But there will be full consultation with air users and other interested parties, if at any time in the future, there are proposals to remove these exemptions.

Mr. McDonnell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what mechanism will be set up to assess on its merits each occasion when it is necessary for the United Kingdom to be represented in international fora on air traffic matters by *(a)* Government officials and *(b)* the private sector partner envisaged in the public private partnership proposed for National Air Traffic Services Ltd. [94327]

Mr. Mullin: The question of United Kingdom representation at international fora is presently being considered. Many international panels and study groups, upon which the UK is represented, are highly technical in nature. In such cases the prospect of a conflict between commercial and public interest may be minor, and outweighed by the benefit of having the best qualified body take the lead. The Government are the signatory to most international instruments and must, therefore, ensure both that all interests are taken into account in deciding the UK's negotiating position, and that all relevant sources of expertise are used to the greatest effect.

Mr. McDonnell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the dates and duration of the meetings held by (i) himself and (ii) his Ministers with the senior management of National Air Traffic Services Ltd in the six months prior to 27 July. [94319]

Mr. Mullin: In the six months up to 27 July, the Minister for Transport met with Senior Management of NATS on 4 March, and 8, 22 and 27 July. The DPM met with senior officials of NATS in a separate meeting on 27 July, and that meeting was also attended by the Minister for Transport.

Mr. McDonnell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the Government's proposals to take powers of direction over National Air Traffic Services Ltd, the Civil Aviation Authority and UK civil aviation in times

of hostilities, severe international tension or great national emergency; and what will be the arrangements for consultation on these proposals. [94334]

Mr. Mullin: The Government will need to be able to exercise control over NATS operations, and over UK civil aviation in the event of crisis, war, severe international tension or national emergency. The Government therefore intend to bring forward legislative proposals to take powers to direct the CAA, NATS and any other owner or operator of a relevant asset to:

participate in planning for an emergency;

in the case of the CAA, to discharge its functions in accordance with the directions;

in the case of owners of assets and operators of air services, manage the asset or provide the service in accordance with the directions.

The Government will be seeking the consent of Parliament to these powers of direction being available in times of hostilities, severe international tension or great national emergency.

The Government's proposals were set out in the consultation paper "A public/private partnership for National Air Traffic Services Ltd (NATS)", published on 20 October 1998, and in the Government's report on the responses received, which was published on 27 July 1999.

Mr. McDonnell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what contingency arrangements are to be put in place to ensure the uninterrupted provision of air traffic control services and the compliance of the United Kingdom with its international obligations in the event of insolvency of a strategic partner in the proposed public private partnership for National Air Traffic Services Ltd. [94326]

Mr. Mullin: The United Kingdom is bound by the Chicago Convention to provide continued air navigation services in national airspace. Where the company is, or is likely to become, insolvent, the proposed legislation will provide that the Secretary of State and the regulator have powers to petition the courts for a special administration order, to appoint an administrator to manage the affairs of the company. The administrator will oversee the transfer to another company, as a going concern, sufficient of the licensee's business to ensure that the licensed activities can be properly carried out, and to ensure that the licensed activities are carried out pending completion of the transfer. It is envisioned that these powers would be applied in the event that NATS was or was likely to be unable to pay its debts, or if it would be just and equitable under the Insolvency Act for the company to be wound up.

Mr. McDonnell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what sanctions the Economic Regulator will be able to impose under the public private partnership proposed by the Government for the future of National Air Traffic Services Ltd. for any abuse of the monopoly position of the private sector strategic partner. [94335]

Mr. Mullin: The Government feel that any proposed enforcement regime should be both prompt and effective. However, in order to ensure that the UK can provide an uninterrupted service—as the Chicago Convention requires—the holder of the en-route licence must be allowed to continue its licensed activities while any abuse of its monopoly position is rectified. To this end, the Government will be seeking powers for the CAA, as economic regulator, to secure, where necessary, Provisional or Final Enforcement Orders. These Orders will be used to prevent any contravention or likely contravention of a licence obligation. The regulator will be able to enforce such Orders through civil proceedings, in order to obtain appropriate relief.

Mr. McDonnell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what mechanisms and criteria he will use under the public private partnership proposed by the Government for the future of National Air Traffic Services Ltd., to determine whether the strategic partner is, and remains, a fit and proper person whose ownership will not compromise the public interest or national security. [94333]

Mr. Mullin: The strategic partner will be selected via a rigorous, competitive process—to ensure that they have the pre-requisite financial capability, proven commercial management expertise and strategic rationale for investing in NATS.

The Government will wish to satisfy themselves, at the earliest possible stage of the selection process, that the strategic partner passes all probity and national security examinations. The Government will also ensure resolution of any actual or perceived conflict of interest issues and that the partner is committed to maintaining and, where necessary, improving NATS provision of safe air traffic control services to users of UK airspace.

The design of the remaining stages of the process will allow bidders the opportunity to demonstrate their understanding of the aviation industry and public interest concerns. Shortlisted bidders will be required to prepare thorough final offers which will detail their long term commercial business plans for NATS and allow them to provide commitments for the further development and enhancement of NATS infrastructure and the broadening of NATS management skill base.

Mr. McDonnell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the response by the trade unions representing NATS staff to the Government's plans for selling 51 per cent. of National Air Traffic Services Ltd. [94332]

Mr. Mullin: The Trade Unions response to the Government's proposals for the future of NATS was contained in a joint submission made by the Institution of Professionals, Managers and Specialists and the Public and Commercial Services Union. In it, the Unions recognised the case for change, in order to access additional sources of capital investment, to meet the needs of maintaining existing safety and efficiency levels against increased traffic. However, they disagreed on the best way to achieve this, arguing that NATS should stay in the public sector, and putting forward as their preferred solution, an Independent Publicly Owned Company (IPOC) option.

The Government considered the IPOC model, and a range of other options, both in deciding on their preferred option in the first instance and in considering the responses to the public consultation. There are many similarities between the IPOC model and the New

Partnership Company, but the Government believe that the New Partnership Company approach supplies all the solutions of an IPOC model, but with additional benefits.

In common with the IPOC, the New Partnership Company secures access to private capital, separates regulation from operations, introduces economic regulation, involves all stakeholders in the company's future, provides for Government to appoint Partnership Directors, gives Government—and consequently the taxpayer—annual dividends, and provides on-going assurances that the company is operating properly in the national interest. However, the New Partnership Company also:

removes any future risk of investment counting in the public accounts and therefore becoming subject to Government controls;

enables private sector investment, project and commercial management expertise to be introduced;

brings in genuine private sector efficiency drivers at the outset;

gives the company more freedom to extend its operations world-wide, while minimising the risk to the taxpayer of possible financial failure;

provides proceeds for use in other transport projects.

The Unions also put forward a trust model (such as NavCanada) as an alternative to IPOC, if the Government's overriding objective was to raise proceeds for other transport projects. The Government also considered a trust model in deciding on their preferred option. They concluded that, while a trust might offer limited benefits, primarily the potential for involving airspace users and NATS staff, there were a number of weaknesses in the model. These included the lack of real commercial incentives or disciplines, making costs higher than they could be, difficulties in ensuring adequate accountability, and the potential complexity of the ownership structure.

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what communication he has received from the institutions of the European Community concerning the proposed share of Her Majesty's Government in the re-organised National Air Traffic Services; and if he will list the articles of any treaty relating thereto. [94635]

Mr. Mullin: A copy of the Government's consultation paper, setting out the proposals for the Public-Private Partnership, was sent to the European Commission at the time of its Publication in October 1998. The commission acknowledged receipt of the document and said that it awaited, with interest, further developments.

In July 1999, the Government sent a copy of their report on the responses to the consultation exercise to the Commission, and offered an explanatory presentation, at official level, of the proposals. Arrangements for this presentation, particularly on the proposed regulatory, are oversight of the new partnership company currently in hand.

Housing Developments

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to ensure that substantial new housing developments have access to the necessary infrastructure and services; and if he will make a statement. [94157]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The draft policy planning guidance note 3 (Housing), which is now being finalised in the light of consultation, requires all major housing developments to be planned as communities. This implies adequate infrastructure and services.

Commercial Airline Pilots

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what representations he has received on the recruitment and training of pilots for commercial airlines. [94027]

Mr. Mullin: This is one of the issues that was considered by the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs (ETRA) Transport Sub-Committee into Aviation Safety. The report was published on 21 July 1999.

We are currently considering all of the Select Committee report's recommendations. Our response will be before the House as soon as possible.

Wildlife Sites

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the Government's legislative proposals on the protection of *(a)* SSSIs and *(b)* other wildlife sites; and what plans he has for the restoration of damaged sites. [94380]

Mr. Mullin: The Government will bring forward legislation to ensure the better protection and management of SSSIs as soon as Parliamentary time permits. Measures to be taken were set out in "The Government's Framework for Action" on 2 August.

Increased emphasis on positive management agreements, backed up by new powers to combat neglect, will lead to an improvement in condition for all our SSSIs through better protection and management.

In addition, we have set up a Local Sites Review Group to consider how local authorities and other bodies can best contribute to the identification, protection and management of locally important sites.

Lead Shot

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on his proposals for the use of lead shot. [94378]

Mr. Mullin: On 1 September 1999, legislation to restrict the use of lead shot came into force in England. Regulations to restrict the use of lead shot in Scotland and Wales are a matter for the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly respectively.

The regulation prohibits the use of lead shot on or over all Ramsar sites, as well as those Special Protection Areas and other Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) that have been identified as being sites important for waterfowl by English Nature. The regulation will also apply to areas below the high water mark of ordinary spring tides (only some of which are already designated as SSSIs). Outside these areas, the regulation prohibits the use of lead shot for shooting all species of *Anatidea* (ducks and geese) together with moorhen, coot golden plover and snipe.

A13

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what contracts for the improvement of the A13 have been let; when, under the terms of the contract, they were due to be completed; and when each contract is expected to be completed. [94365]

Mr. Hill: Three contracts have been let in recent years to improve the A13: West of Heathway to Thames Avenue, Thames Avenue to Wennington and Wennington to Mar Dyke.

The contractual completion dates are, respectively, May 1999, March 1997 and August 1998.

We expect the Heathway to Thames Avenue scheme to be finished around November/December 1999; the other two schemes were completed in May 1997 and October 1998 respectively.

The West of Heathway scheme has been delayed by problems with statutory undertaker's equipment and there have been some difficulties with the design and construction of a complex viaduct. The other two schemes were delayed because of problems with earthworks.

Departmental Publications

Mr. Maclean: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list his Department's spending on official publications since May 1997. [93678]

Mr. Prescott: The spending on official publications since May 1997, which includes the costs incurred by the department in publishing, preparation, production and purchase of copies for official use, was £5,897,683. Where the Department makes use of a private sector publisher, the publishing, printing and design costs are generally met by the publisher as part of their acceptance of the risks of publication.

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the titles of the in-house publications and newsletters which were produced for the staff of his Department, excluding non-departmental public bodies and agencies, in the last five years, specifying the dates on which each title was first produced, the frequency with which each title is produced and the current secrecy classification of each title. [93843]

Ms Beverley Hughes: A list of corporate internal publications produced by the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions since immediately before its creation in June 1997 has been placed in the Library. The Department's policy has been to rationalise the number of regular staff newsletters and magazines to improve communication and save money; periodic publications that have been incorporated into others have been marked with an asterisk.

Information about the former departments of the Environment and Transport before April 1997 is not readily available and could be gathered only at disproportionate expense.

Flaxmill

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what progress has been made in granting planning permission for Flaxmill; and if he will make a statement. [94123]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The Secretary of State has decided that the applications for planning permission and for listed building consent with regard to Flaxmill should not be referred to him for determination. He has notified Shrewsbury and Atcham Borough Council of his decision. This is now a matter for the local planning authority.

Diesel Spillages

Mr. Öpik: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to introduce legislation to make negligent spillage of diesel on highways an endorsable offence; and if he will make a statement. [93646]

Mr. Hill: There is an offence, under existing regulations, of "using a vehicle in a dangerous condition" the penalty for which in the case of goods vehicles and buses includes an endorsement of 3 penalty points. It would be for the police and the courts to decide whether such an offence might apply to a case where a motorist had spilled diesel on the road.

The Road Vehicles (Construction and Use) Regulations 1986 currently require that fuel tanks must be constructed and maintained in such a manner that neither liquid nor vapour can escape from them. Anyone failing to comply with these Regulations may be liable to a maximum fine of £2,500.

The European Parliament is currently considering changes to the Fuel Tank Directive (70/221/EEC) which would require fuel caps to be securely attached to the tank. When applied in the UK this amendment should reduce the risk of spillage even further.

Mr. Öpik: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to include road accidents caused by diesel spillage as a separate category within road accident statistics; and if he will make a statement. [93645]

Mr. Hill: Data on the presence of oil or diesel on the road surface at the site of a road accident have been collected as a separate category within road accident statistics from the beginning of 1999. It was introduced following a review of the collection of national road accident statistics. No information is collected nationally on the contributory factors to accidents.

Regional Planning (London)

Mr. Pound: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the regional planning process in London. [94288]

Mr. Hill: The Government are putting in place new procedures for the regional planning process in London. The proposals were outlined in the White Paper "A Mayor and Assembly for London" and are contained in the Greater London Authority Bill currently before Parliament.

The Boroughs will remain the local planning authorities for their areas, but the Mayor will be responsible for drawing up strategic planning guidance in the form of a new Spatial Development Strategy (SDS) for London. The detailed content of the SDS will be for the Mayor to consider but, in general terms, it is expected to address all issues of strategic importance to the capital with a spatial dimension. The SDS will also provide a common spatial framework for all the Mayor's strategies and policies. Borough Unitary Development Plans will be required to be in general conformity with the SDS.

Present strategic planning policy for London is contained in The Secretary of State's Strategic Guidance for London Planning Authorities, and its annexes. This will remain in place until the Mayor produces the first Spatial Development Strategy.

The Mayor must also have a means of intervening in the development control process where issues of genuine strategic importance are concerned. The Mayor will therefore become a statutory consultee for planning applications of potential strategic importance. The Mayor will also have the power to direct a Borough to refuse planning permission for these cases where he or she considers this necessary on strategic grounds. The criteria for applications that will be notified to the Mayor were announced by my hon. Friend the Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Mr. Raynsford) on 15 March 1999, *Official Report*, columns *472–74*, and will now be taken forward into secondary legislation. The Government will be carrying out further consultation on the draft secondary legislation associated with the Mayor's planning role shortly.

The Mayor will also be responsible for representing London's interests on broader strategic planning matters, including at the regional level.

Dangerous Goods Cargo

Mr. Sheerman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many dangerous goods incidents attributed to the carriage of cargo have been reported to the CAA in the last 12 months; how many of these were investigated; how many of these were forwarded to the CPS for prosecution; and how many led to successful prosecutions. [94539]

Mr. Mullin: In the twelve months to the end of September 1999, the Civil Aviation Authority received 126 reports of incidents involving dangerous goods carried as cargo. The CAA's Dangerous Goods Office reviews the circumstances of all reported incidents and will take appropriate action. If an incident is the result of a deliberate action or has potentially serious consequences, it may be referred to the CAA's Aviation Regulation Enforcement and Investigation Branch for formal investigation. Five of the dangerous goods incidents reported in the last 12 months have been referred for formal investigation. So far, one of these incidents has resulted in a prosecution by the CAA. That prosecution was successful.

Housing (North-west)

Miss Geraldine Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what progress has been made in meeting targets for housing on recycled land in the north-west. [94533]

Mr. Raynsford: The Department's Land Use Change Statistics show that, in 1994, 57% of new dwellings were built on previously developed land in the north-west, but these figures exclude conversions from existing buildings. The existing Regional Planning Guidance for the region emphasises the importance of channelling growth back into the main urban areas, but gives no targets. This guidance is currently being reviewed, and the issue of an appropriate target for the reuse of previously developed land and buildings for housing is under consideration.

Audit Fees

Miss Geraldine Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what steps the Government take to regulate the size of audit fees for small village councils. [94531]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The setting of audit fees in respect of the audit of accounts is a statutory responsibility of the independent Audit Commission under Section 7 of the Audit Commission Act 1998. The Secretary of State has no powers to direct an auditor or the Audit Commission on the conduct of an audit.

The Commission is aware of the burden that audit costs can impose on small parish councils and have introduced measures designed to reduce fees. Parish Council audit fees are charged at a rate that is 40% of that charged for principal authorities. Parishes with an income below £5,000 per annum can reduce the burden further by adopting the 'triennial scheme' which allows three annual audits to be undertaken together to save on the overheads associated with an audit.

Sellafield MOX Plant

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many responses were received to the public consultation which closed on 23 July on the Sellafield MOX plant; what proportions were in favour; and what proportion were received from abroad. [94154]

Mr. Meacher: A total of 332 responses were received during the public consultation period on the economic case for the Sellafield MOX plant. Of these, 16 (5 per cent.) were in favour, and 32 (10 per cent.) were from abroad.

Green Ministers Committee

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, pursuant to his answer to the hon. Member for Elmet (Mr. Burgon), 16 July 1999, *Official Report*, column *341*, if he will list the Departments which did not send a Minister to the Green Ministers' meeting of 6 July, indicating the reasons given for non-attendance; and if he will make a statement. [94294]

Mr. Meacher: The Departments represented by Ministers were: Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions; Law Officers Departments; Department of Trade and Industry; Home Office; Ministry of Defence; Department of Culture, Media and Sport; the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food; and the Northern Ireland Office. Those represented by officials

were: the Chancellor's Departments; Cabinet Office; Department for Education and Employment; Department for Health; and Department of Social Security. The Departments not represented were: Foreign and Commonwealth Office; Lord Chancellor's Department; and the Department for International Development.

Several Ministers were absent from the meeting because they were attending a ministerial awayday organised by the Cabinet Office on behalf of the Prime Minister.

The first annual report of the Green Ministers Committee has been published since the meeting. This sets out in some detail the achievements and future plans of the Committee.

Powered Garden Tools

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to bring forward measures to restrict the use of powered garden tools on Sundays. [93644]

Mr. Hill: The Government have no plans to bring forward measures to restrict the use of powered garden tools on Sundays.

Special Advisers

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions on what dates Special Advisers from his Department have visited the United States of America on official business since 1 May 1997; which of his Special Advisers took part in each visit; and if he will list the meetings which these Special Advisers held with members and officials of the United States Government during each visit, specifying the date and location of each meeting and the names of the US members and officials at each meeting. [93959]

Mr. Prescott: I refer the hon. Member to the reply I gave to him on 27 July 1999, *Official Report*, column *332*. In addition, I was accompanied by a Special Adviser when I undertook a further visit to the United States of America in April 1999.

Ministerial Meetings (United States)

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what meetings he held with members and officials of the United States Government during his visit on 7 to 9 June 1998 to the United States of America for the UN Special Session on Drugs; and if he will list the date and location of each meeting, and the names of the members and officials of the United States Government at each meeting. [93950]

Mr. Prescott: None.

MTBE Contamination

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) what analysis he has carried out where MTBE has been found in ground water and aquifers; and if he will make a statement; [93666]

(2) what assessment he has made of the extent of ground water contamination by MTBE; if he will list those sites where MTBE contamination has been detected; and if he will make a statement. [93665]

Mr. Mullin: At the request of my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Environment, the Environment Agency is undertaking a research project to establish the incidence of MTBE in England and Wales, the results of which are expected in the first half of next year. The Environment Agency has already monitored for MTBE at 300 sites in its Thames region. MTBE was found at the sites listed although my advice is that the observed concentrations are all below the level at which it has been suggested that health hazards may arise.

Location	*Date*	*Observation (ug/l)*
Pimlico, Dolphin Square, Well 1 and 2	7 July 1997	124
Catford, Initial Services	7 July 1997	114
Wimbledon, South Downs Works	7 July 1997	109
Wandsworth, King George's Park	7 July 1997	109
Warley, Warley Hospital	3 July 1997	58
Holyport, Les Lions Farm	1 July 1997	50
Sunbury, Pim Board and Co. Ltd.	6 July 1998	9.98
Slough, Slough Trading Estate	4 June 1998	3.37
Hounslow, Avis Rent-a-Car	13 May 1998	2.28
Hounslow, Avis Rent-a-Car	2 September 1998	1.39
Goosey, Church Farm	29 April 1998	1.36
St. Albans, Mud Lane PS	10 March 1999	1.3
Stanford-in-Vale, Sheepcroft Hill Farm	29 April 1998	1.22
Pimlico, Dolphin Square, Well 1 and 2	13 July 1999	0.7
Sunbury, Chertsey Road, Well 3	6 July 1998	0.7
Pimlico, Dolphin Square, Well 1 and 2	21 December 1998	0.63
Stansted Mountfitchet	8 March 1999	0.49
Isleworth, Garvin House	13 May 1998	0.4
Bicester, Wendlebury (Faccenda) Chicken	16 February 1998	0.31
Chigwell, Epping Forest Country Club	6 July 1998	0.3
Chalfont St. Giles	19 March 1998	0.22
Abingdon, Vineyard Maltings	27 April 1998	0.21
Rickmansworth, Tolpits	17 March 1999	0.21
Newbury Racecourse	20 May 1998	0.18
Epsom, Nonsuch	25 September 1998	0.14
Cheam PS	13 June 1998	0.13

Location	Date	Observation (ug/l)
Loudwater, Railko	12 May 1998	0.13
Hillingdon, Blue Dragon Laundry	13 May 1998	0.13
Reading, Battle Hospital	15 May 1998	0.12
Bray, PS	16 September 1998	0.12
Watford, Bushey Hall	17 March 1999	0.12
Underground NCRS	15 April 1999	0.12
Kenley PS	25 February 1998	0.11
Watford, Eastbury PS	17 March 1999	0.11
Binsted, Hawbridge Farm	20 May 1998	0.1

FPSO (Fires)

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what contingency plans he has for responses to major fire on board any of the FPSO in severe weather conditions in the oil fields west of Shetland; and if he will make a statement. [94528]

Mr. Meacher: Arrangements are in place; the response to a major fire would be dealt with by the Maritime and Coastguard Agency (MCA) in co-operation with operators of offshore installations and the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI). In line with Lord Donaldson's report on command and control at sea, DTI would co-ordinate in the event of an incident involving a Floating Production, Storage and Offloading (FPSO) installation at anchor, where there is risk of or actual damage to the environment.

Under health and safety law, operators must assess major accident hazards, including fires, and take appropriate measures to deal with them. The Health and Safety Executive enforces these requirements, and inspects the installations to ensure measures are in place.

School Bus Transport

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what action he is taking to improve the safety of school bus transport. [94723]

Mr. Hill: The use of buses is already considered the safest way to transport children to and from schools. With the introduction of seat belts on forward facing seats in coaches and minibuses carrying groups of children on organised trips we have already implemented measures that improve the safety of these vehicles.

A new School Travel Advisory Group has been set up to advise local authorities, school governors and teachers etc. on the best practices for operating school travel. It includes safety as part of its remit.

Rent Service

Mr. Linton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what progress has been made with the establishment of the Rent Service as a Next Steps executive agency. [94817]

Mr. Mullin: The Rent Service was established as a Next Steps Executive Agency on 1 October 1999. Copies of the Agency's Framework Document have been placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

The aim of the Agency is to provide for rental valuations which are impartial and fair to tenants, landlords and taxpayers.

I have set the following targets for the Agency for the remainder of 1999–2000:

1. Achieve targets for service delivery set out in table below.
2. Manage the Service within financial allocation.
3. Implement new and streamlined management structure by end November 1999, including appointment of Area Managers, posts in the Quality Inspectorate and regional redetermination teams.
4. Develop and implement effective Agency systems for finance, personnel, training and development, internal and external communication, and the quality control of valuation by 31 March 2000.
5. Put in place by the end of October 1999 a detailed plan for the implementation of the new IT system and abide by that plan.
6. Produce detailed action plan for phased rationalisation of the office structure in London by 31 October 1999 and implement first phase by 31 March 2000. Produce detailed action plan for reorganisation of the office structure outside London by 31 December 1999.
7. Negotiate and conclude 1999 pay settlement for rent officers. Develop plan to negotiate harmonised terms and conditions for Agency staff by 31 March 2000.

Targets for service delivery for 1 October 1999 to 31 March 2000

	Current performance	Target
Housing benefit determinations (without an inspection). Statutory requirement—5 working days.	60% within 4 working days 71% within 5 working days	65% within 4 working days 80% within 5 working days
Housing benefit pre-tenancy determinations. Statutory requirement—5 working days.	65% within 3 working days 95% within 5 working days	70% within 3 working days 99% within 5 working days
Housing benefit redeterminations. Statutory requirement—20 working days.	30% within 20 working days	50% within 20 working days
Housing renovations grants determinations. Statutory requirement—45 days.	98% within 45 working days	88% within 45 working days

London Transport

Mr. Woodward: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many of the Government's performance targets for *(a)* London Underground and *(b)* London Buses have been met in the last two years. [91528]

Mr. Hill *[pursuant to the reply, 27 July 1999, c. 358–59]:* The following table shows the performance and targets of both London Underground and London Buses.

	Performance				*Targets*			
	1998–99	*1997–98*	*1996–97*	*1995–96*	*1998–99*	*1997–98*	*1996–97*	*1995–96*
London Underground								
Train Service regularity (%)[1]	94.3	95.4	93.5	95.6	n/a	95.9	95.7	95.7
Percentage of schedule operated	93.6	95.5	94.5	96.2	96.9	96.9	96.5	n/r
Ticket purchase—queueing less than 3 mins (%)[1]	93.9	94.8	96.0	97.2	n/a	98.0	98.0	98.0
Escalator availability (%)	92.7	93.3	92.8	92.7	91.4	93.0	92.0	92.0
Lift availability (%)	94.8	95.8	96.8	95.5	93.8	96.0	96.0	95.0
Excess journey time (mins)	6.46	—	—	—	6.25	—	—	—
Customer satisfaction measures								
Train service (%)	75	75	76	76	77	77	76	76
Information on stations and trains (%)	77	74	74	68, 73	75	75	73	66, 76
Customer safety and security (%)	81	81	83	83	83	83	83	84
Station staff helpfulness and availability (%)	68	67	69	64	70	70	69	65
Train and station cleanliness (%)	67	66	68	63, 68	69	69	69	66, 70
London Transport Buses								
Kilometres operated	98.5	98.7	99.1	99.2	99.0	99.0	99.0	99.0
Low frequency routes departing on time	69.0	70.0	70.3	71.4	77.0	74.0	74.0	70.0
Low frequency routes—departing early	5.0	5.0	4.8	4.7	3.4	4.0	4.0	4.0
Night bus services—departing on time	71.0	66.2	61.3	61.4	70.0	65.0	65.0	65.0
Excess waiting time on high frequency routes (min)	2.0	1.8	1.8	1.7	1.4	1.5	1.5	1.5
Customer satisfaction measures								
Bus stations—overall quality of environment	73	68	69	67	76	71	71	71
Bus stations—overall quality of information	63	63	65	66	68	68	68	67
Condition of bus stops and shelters	78	57	55	53	76	57	54	54
Internal cleanliness of buses	75	67	59	58	83	70	63	63
External cleanliness of buses	76	66	54	54	78	69	54	54
Staff helpfulness	82	60	63	64	87	66	66	66

[1] This measure was replaced in 1998–99 with a measure of excess journey time

CABINET OFFICE

Millennium Compliance

Mr. David Atkinson: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office if she will make a statement of progress on the millennium readiness of her Department's computer systems, and those for which it is responsible in the provision of public services; if contingency plans are in place; and what slippage has occurred since the July quarterly report to the House. [93566]

Marjorie Mowlam: Details of the Cabinet Office, its Agencies and associated public bodies—for which I am responsible—progress in tackling the bug are set out in our quarterly monitoring returns. These show that work on all business critical systems, embedded chips and telecommunications systems is now complete. The results of the October monthly review of progress of Departments and agencies in tackling the bug are due to be announced shortly by the President of the Council.

There has been a slight slippage in ensuring the compliance of a few non-business critical applications and embedded systems. This work had been scheduled for completion by the end of September. Some of this has now been completed and contingency arrangements have been invoked to ensure compliance of all systems by the end of October.

In line with CCTA guidance, all areas including No. 10 will have Business Continuity Plans and Millennium Operating Regimes in place and tested by the end of October.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Millennium Compliance

Mr. David Atkinson: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement of progress on the millennium readiness of his Department's computer systems, and those for which it is responsible in the provision of public services; if contingency plans are in place; and what slippage has occurred since the July quarterly report to the House. [93565]

Mr. Wills: The Department's millennium readiness programme was completed in April 1999. Prior to completion of the programme, all of the Department's

systems were subjected to a rigorous testing process. Consequently, there has been no slippage since the July quarterly report to the House.

Where functions delivered by the Department involve the provision of public services, business continuity plans have been developed and tested. In addition to subjecting continuity plans to rigorous testing, each plan, and test results, have been subjected to independent assessment before being agreed.

Similar progress has been made in the Employment Service where the millennium readiness programme was completed in June 1999 with business continuity plans completed and tested in August 1999.

Details of the Department's and the Employment Service's progress in tackling the bug are set out in their quarterly monitoring returns. These are available in the Libraries of the House and are published on the internet. The results of the October monthly review of progress of Government Departments and agencies in tackling the bug are due to be announced shortly by the President of the Council.

Vocational Programmes

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many students are currently on *(a)* GNVQ and *(b)* NVQ programmes; and what proportion achieved their intended qualifications in each of the last five years. [94736]

Mr. Wicks: The figures requested are shown in the following table. Information on the proportion of students achieving GNVQ and NVQ qualifications is not available on a consistent basis for all GNVQs and NVQs.

Numbers on NVQ/GNVQ programmes

Thousand

Academic year	*Numbers studying for: NVQs* [1]	*GNVQs* [2]
1994–95	660	n/a
1995–96	799	n/a
1996–97	871	198
1997–98	789	186
1998–99	856	[3]—

[1] These are UK figures derived from the Labour Force Survey (Spring 1995 to Spring 1999).
[2] These are figures for England, Wales and Northern Ireland taken from the Joint Council for National Vocational Awarding Bodies annual press notice.
[3] To be published in November 1999.

Able Pupils

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has to reflect the attainments of able pupils who take GCSEs early in school performance tables. [94740]

Jacqui Smith: The achievements of such pupils have been included in performance tables since they were first published in 1992.

Level 3 Qualifications

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list for the last five years the numbers and proportions of whole Level 3 qualifications obtained through *(a)* GCE A Level, *(b)* GNVQs, *(c)* NVQs and *(d)* other recognised qualifications. [94731]

Mr. Wicks: The information requested is shown in the following table. Information on the proportion of people gaining level Figures are for England unless stated otherwise.

Table 1 Numbers of Level 3 qualifications awarded by type (1993/94–1997/98)

Qualification type	*Academic year qualification was issued*				
	1993–94	*1994–95*	*1995–96*	*1996–97*	*1997–98*
2 or more GCE A Levels[1]	164,469	164,597	169,345	182,523	188,173
Advanced GNVQ	1,210	11,493	28,078	34,274	39,011
NVQ Level 3	[2]25,114	[2]48,682	[2]63,794	[2]90,385	90,343
Other VQs Level 3[3]	123,736	101,965	83,685	66,560	57,672

[1] The figures represent the number of people who have achieved two or more passes at A level. A levels are level 3 courses but a person needs to have two or more passes at A level to have achieved the same as an advanced GNVQ or a NVQ level 3.
[2] Figures are for United Kingdom only.
[3] Other (unregulated) vocational qualification only relate to those awarded by the following awarding bodies (Oxford Cambridge and RSA (OCR), Edexcel and City and Guilds).

Level 2 Graduation Test

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what consultations he has held with disability interests concerning the modification of the Level 2 graduation test at age 19 years for those with special educational needs. [94679]

Mr. Wicks: The Qualifications Curriculum Authority (QCA) will be consulting disability interests as part of its remit to develop and consult on options for a 'graduation' certificate.

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what arrangements he will make for further progression after Level 2 graduation at age 19 years; and if modern apprenticeships will remain open to young adults who have graduated from Level 2. [94684]

Mr. Wicks: The Government are committed to offering continuing learning opportunities for young people. Those, for example, who have successfully completed NVQ qualifications at level 2 are encouraged to progress to further training or vocational education. Many will opt for Modern Apprenticeships, where funding is available until the young person's 25th birthday.

Student Loans

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what is the starting-point of

annual income for the repayment of student loans which are in *(a)* income-contingent and *(b)* old-style mortgage loans. [94743]

Mr. Wicks: The starting point of annual income for the repayment of student loans which are income-contingent will be £10,000; the starting point of annual income for the repayment of student loans which are old-style mortgage loans is £18,192 in academic year 1999–2000. The repayment of income-contingent loans will be fairer than mortgage-style because it will be tied closely to income. Repayments will be based on 9 per cent. of income over £10,000 a year so that repayments will increase or decrease in line with changes in income. The repayment of mortgage style loans above the threshold is not income-contingent. A fixed proportion of the loan has to be repaid each year: someone earning £20,000 a year will repay the some monthly sum as someone earning £40,000.

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment when he will announce arrangements for the extension of loans to part-time students. [94745]

Mr. Wicks: My noble Friend the Minister for Education and Employment announced on 29 January that from 2000–01 we would make loans available to part-time students on low incomes to help with the costs of study, and would announce details later this year. The Department is now analysing information from the Student Income and Expenditure Survey, and will make a further announcement before Christmas.

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many students hold means-tested loans; and what is their overall value. [94744]

Mr. Wicks: The Student Loans Company have informed me that at 15 October 1999, cheques have been issued to 325,000 students under the new student support arrangements. The total value of the loans was approximately £346 million. These figures are for the United Kingdom.

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what representations he has received about delays in the delivery of student loan cheques following their arrival at college for the autumn term. [94675]

Mr. Wicks: To date, my Department has received one e-mail about delays in the delivery of this term's student loan cheques. Students who applied on time and provided the necessary documentation should have received their cheques: that is a considerable achievement by all concerned.

Learning Accounts

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what representations he has received about the current acceptability of individual learning account credits to higher education institutions; and what advice he has circulated to them. [94732]

Mr. Wicks: The Department has not received any representation about the current acceptability of individual learning account credits to higher education institutions, nor have we issued specific advice to higher education institutions on the acceptability of credits.

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many individual learning accounts are currently open; and what is their cumulative value. [94734]

Mr. Wicks: By the end of August 22,530 individual learning accounts were opened through Training and Enterprise Councils (TECs). The cumulative contribution from TEC resources to these accounts is £734,277. These are the first pilot accounts. The national framework will be rolled out as planned in 2000. Under that we expect to see a rapid build-up towards the target of 1 million accounts in 2002.

Inspection Procedures

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what proposals he has for co-ordination of inspection procedures for post-compulsory education between Ofsted, the Further Education Funding Council Inspectorate and the Training Standards Council Inspectorate. [94761]

Mr. Wicks: Under the proposals in our "Learning to Succeed" White Paper (CM 4392), we will bring together the current arrangements for the inspection of provision for post-16 education, (excluding higher education), and of work-based training, into a single system.

Ofsted will take responsibility for the inspection of 16–19 provision in schools and colleges. For post-19 provision in colleges, and for work-based provision for all age-groups, there will be a new independent Inspectorate. The two Inspectorates will work together, where appropriate, to plan a joint inspection plan for sixth form, further education and tertiary colleges, working to a common inspection framework.

Social Exclusion Unit Report

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many times the departmental-led Ministerial Group has met to progress the Social Exclusion Unit report (Cm 4405); and how many times the official cross-departmental implementation group has met. [94747]

Mr. Wicks: The Ministerial Steering Group has met once to progress the work set out in "Bridging the Gap: New Opportunities for 16–18 year olds not in education, employment or training". The official cross-departmental implementation group has met twice.

Careers Education

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on the relationship between the proposed Connections Support Service and the existing providers of careers education and advice, with specific reference to the professional qualifications and inspection regime; if the remit covers all young people; and who is to finance the service. [94683]

Mr. Wicks: The Social Exclusion Unit report "Bridging the Gap: New Opportunities for 16–18 year olds not in education, employment or training", published in July, outlined a new support service for all 13–19 year olds. Since then we have consulted widely on the service, including its functions, structure and professional formation. The consultation closed on 15 October and we

are considering responses. Decisions on the structure, professional qualifications, inspection and funding of the new service and how these will affect existing organisations providing careers education and advice to young people, will be taken following analysis of the consultation response.

Tuition Fees

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what advice he has issued to higher education institutions about collection of tuition fees in circumstances where students have not yet received their loan cheques. [94676]

Mr. Wicks: Loan cheques are intended to cover maintenance costs rather than tuition fees and have already been issued to eligible students who applied on time and provided all the necessary documentation. We have asked higher education institutions to be flexible and sensitive in collecting tuition fees and not to bill or require payments from students whose financial assessments have not yet been completed. A copy of our written advice to institutions has been placed in the Library.

Lecturers (Professional Qualifications)

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what progress he has made in developing new professional qualifications for lecturers in further education and the private training sector. [94762]

Mr. Wicks: All further education colleges in England will shortly be consulted about proposals. As regards the private training sector, the Employment National Training Organisation (ENTO) is currently reviewing the range and scope of its qualifications.

Adult Education (Funding)

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on standards fund grants for adult and continuing education. [94756]

Mr. Wicks: The level of the 2000–01 Standards Fund grant for Local Authority Lifelong Learning Development Plans will be announced shortly. Local education authorities have an important role in lifelong learning and the grant next year will be significantly higher than this. We want authorities to use this money to reach new learners, to improve the quality of learning opportunities they offer, and to strengthen their own internal planning and their links with other learning providers. That is the way to ensure the learning opportunities they offer best meet the needs of the people they serve.

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what representations he has received concerning the withdrawal of local authority discretionary award schemes and the implications of new funding arrangements for improving access to further education. [94735]

Mr. Wicks: The discretionary awards scheme was not working well with large variations in funding in different parts of the country with consequential effects on access. A number of letters have been received about the new further education student support arrangements in 1999–2000. But more money will be available overall so that, in general, students are better off than in the previous year and than would have been the case had we allowed discretionary awards to continue for this year.

Study Leave

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment on what basis his Department is planning for 50 per cent. participation in the right to time off for study or training; and if he plans any incentives to providers to achieve this level of participation. [94681]

Mr. Wicks: The Department made a planning and costing assumption, published in the 1997 Regulatory Appraisal, based on our estimate of the number of young people aged 16 and 17 in employment, not qualified to Level 2, and not working towards a Level 2 qualification. This is a new entitlement, and performance will be kept under review. Employers can apply to the local TEC for a contribution towards the cost of the study or training.

Post-16 Education

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what arrangements he proposes to put in place to secure an element of moral and social education and pastoral arrangements in post-16 education. [94759]

Mr. Wicks: It is a matter for the individual institutions and private training providers to decide how they address moral and social education and pastoral arrangements for their post-16 students. There is no compulsory curriculum post-16, and therefore no requirement to study any particular subjects. However, for example, the new GCE A-level specifications have been written to identify, as appropriate to the subject, ways in which the study of the area can contribute to an understanding of spiritual, moral, ethical, social and cultural issues.

Hardship Loans

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment when he will announce the result of his consultation exercise on hardship loans. [94746]

Mr. Wicks: The review of Hardship Loans and Access Funds will be completed by Christmas and the outcome will be announced in the new year.

Schools Access Initiative

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on progress with the Schools Access Initiative. [94725]

Jacqui Smith: The Schools Access Initiative gives capital support to make more mainstream schools accessible to pupils with disabilities and those with sensory impairments. It has run each year since 1996 and a total of £25 million had been allocated by March 1999. We have allocated a further £20 million in 1999–2000 which will benefit over 1,600 schools and are planning further big increases for the following two years.

Special Educational Needs

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on local education authorities' progress in developing special educational needs development plans. [94724]

Jacqui Smith: From 1 October 1998 LEAs have a statutory duty under Section 5 of the School Standards and Framework Act 1998 to carry out all their functions to promote high standards. Education Development Plans are three-year plans whose purpose is to draw together the main actions which LEAs are taking in pursuit of this statutory duty. They will increase accountability to schools, local partners and to Government.

Targets for special schools and information on how LEAs plan to improve standards achieved by pupils with Special Educational Needs (SEN) in their schools must be reflected in the main body of the EDP. The SEN Annex (Annex 4) gives further more detailed information about the LEA's policy.

All LEAs now have an EDP, and almost all have been approved for three years from April 1999 to March 20002. The Department will continue to monitor and evaluate EDPs during this period.

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if a premium will be available for work-based training of those with special educational needs. [94752]

Mr. Wicks: The funding which the Department provides to Training and Enterprise Councils (TECs) for work-based training includes an element to cover the additional costs incurred in providing quality training for those with special training needs.

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many pupils in England carried statements of special educational need in each of the last 10 years; and what proportion of the total of pupils they represented. [94680]

Jacqui Smith: The available information is shown in the following table.

Number and percentage of pupils with statement of special educational needs in England
Position in January each year

Year	Number of pupils with a statement of special educational needs	Percentage of pupils with a statement of special educational needs
1999	248,041	3.0
1998	242,294	2.9
1997	234,629	2.9
1996	227,348	2.8
1995	211,307	2.6
1994	194,541	2.5
1993	178,029	2.3
1992	160,759	2.1
1991	153,228	2.0
1990	159,485	2.1
1989	155,191	2.1

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has for improving the transition planning for those aged 16 years with special educational needs. [94753]

Jacqui Smith: The Government intend to change the law in order to require local education authorities to conduct the 'transition review' of a child's statement during academic year 9. At present the transition review takes place after the child's 14th birthday, which means that the review may not in practice be undertaken until year 10. Where the young person leaves school at age 16 he or she may therefore have had only one review which has focused on the personal 'transition plan'. The proposed change will ensure that 16-year-old school leavers who have statements of special educational needs will have had the benefit of at least two and in most cases three annual reviews at which planning for their transition from school has been actively and effectively addressed. Further guidance on good practice in transition planning will be provided in the revised SEN Code of Practice.

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has to encourage local education authorities to alter the balance of their provision for children with special educational needs between *(a)* privately funded institutions, *(b)* publicly funded special schools and *(c)* inclusion in mainstream schools, respectively. [94729]

Jacqui Smith: It is for local education authorities to decide the pattern of provision they need to meet the special educational needs of pupils in their area.

Where parents want a mainstream setting for their child, our policy is to try to provide it. Equally, where more specialist provision is what is sought, it is important that parents' wishes are respected. Our approach has been practical, rather than dogmatic, with an acceptance that the key objectives must be to safeguard the interests of all children and to ensure that they achieve to their full potential. We are advocating inclusion by choice and have underlined that there remains a continuing and vital role for specialist schools.

We are seeking to join up the different sectors (maintained, independent and voluntary) and establish more effective links between the special and mainstream schools. Through the establishment of the SEN regional co-ordination projects local authorities are being encouraged to work with each other and with the voluntary and private sectors to better plan and meet the needs of pupils with special educational needs.

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what initiatives he has taken to improve the education provision within the special needs sector within Sefton Metropolitan Borough. [94587]

Jacqui Smith: The Government's Programme of Action: Meeting Special Educational Needs, published in November last year, announced a package of measures designed to improve special educational needs provision across the country. As part of the targeted support available to local education authorities in 1999–2000, Sefton Metropolitan Borough was allocated £182,987 under the Special Educational Needs Standards Fund Programme and a further £152,800 under the Schools Access Initiative to make more primary and secondary schools accessible to disabled pupils.

These targeted resources are additional to the substantial increase in resources available to local education authorities via the Standard Spending Assessment. Sefton's Standard Spending Assessment for

1999–2000 was £122.2 million, an increase of £5.7 million on the previous year. It is for local education authorities to determine, within the total resources available to them, the level of resources available for special educational needs provision.

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many primary and secondary children with *(a)* learning and *(b)* physical difficulties are accommodated within the mainstream school system in Sefton Metropolitan Borough. [94588]

Jacqui Smith: The information requested is not held centrally. However, in January 1998, of the 27,882 pupils in maintained primary schools in Sefton Metropolitan Borough, 369 were pupils with a statement of special educational needs and 4,239 were pupils with special educational needs but without a statement. Of the 19,744 pupils in maintained secondary schools in Sefton Metropolitan Borough, 506 were pupils with a statement of special educational needs and 2,020 were pupils with special educational needs but without a statement.

Academic Standards

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what consultations he plans on the maintenance of academic standards while extending participation in higher education to 50 per cent. of young people. [94678]

Mr. Wicks: My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has announced that 50 per cent. of young adults will be able to enter higher education by the age of 30. Increased participation is likely to be largely in high quality, shorter qualifications valued by employers. Maintenance and improvement of standards would be central to any consultation.

Young Carers

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has to support learning at a distance by young people who have responsibilities as carers. [94748]

Jacqui Smith: There is already a comprehensive range of distance learning materials available for young people which can be accessed by those young people who have caring responsibilities.

Education Business Partnerships

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment when he expects to complete a national network of education business partnerships. [94757]

Ms Estelle Morris: There is already a national network of education business partnerships in place. We are, however, working closely with the National Education Business Partnership Network and others to strengthen the national, regional and local structures for promoting and encouraging greater collaboration between schools and business.

Educational Maintenance Allowances

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will give details of pilot schemes for Educational Maintenance Allowances and define the basis on which income eligibility is to be calculated and the number of pupils affected. [94751]

Mr. Wicks: The Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA) is being piloted in 15 local education authorities (LEAs) across England to test the effectiveness of targeted financial support on post-16 participation and attainment rates. The 15 pilot LEAs are: Middlesbrough, Walsall, Southampton, Oldham, City of Nottingham, Bolton, Doncaster, Stoke-on-Trent, Gateshead, Cornwall, Leeds, Lewisham, Southwark, Greenwich, Lambeth. Different pilot variants are being tested in different areas.

Young people resident in the pilot areas may be eligible to receive an EMA if they left Year 11 last summer, participate in full-time post-16 education at school or college, and satisfy a financial assessment based on their parents' annual gross taxable income. The full allowance (£30 in all areas except Nottingham and Oldham where £40 is the maximum) will be payable if the parents' gross taxable income is less than £13,000. For higher incomes, the amount will be tapered, down to a minimum of £5. No allowance will be payable where the taxable income exceeds £30,000 (£20,000 in London). In the London LEAs, eligibility is restricted to young people living in selected wards; in Leeds to those who attended selected schools pre-16.

The EMA will be paid during term-time only and will be stopped if the young person fails to comply with the terms of a learning agreement (such as not attending lessons) drawn up with the institution. Bonuses are payable for retention and achievement.

We estimate that around 29,000 young people in the 15 pilot areas will be eligible for an EMA.

Learning Direct Helpline

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on the correlation between those accessing the Learning Direct helpline and their eventual attainment of *(a)* qualifications at Level 2 or above and *(b)* basic skills qualifications. [94738]

Mr. Wills: The information is not available from existing evaluation. We are currently designing continuing evaluation arrangements on the use made of Learning Direct.

Small Business Service Areas

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will give details of the network of local learning and skills councils and Small Business Service areas. [94755]

Mr. Wicks: When the Government published the "Learning to Succeed" White Paper and Small Business Service consultation document, my right hon. Friends the Secretary of State for Education and Employment and the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry asked the Regional Development Agencies and the London Development Partnership to provide us with advice on potential local Learning and Skills Councils, and Small Business Service boundaries.

Ministers are currently considering the advice received and we intend to announce details of boundaries shortly.

National Record of Achievement

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on progress to date with the National Record of Achievement in education. [94677]

Mr. Wicks: Following early trialling of the ideas proposed by the 1997 report of the National Record of Achievement Review Steering Group, materials under the title of "Progress File" have been developed and are being tested and adapted over the next three years with schools, colleges and employers in ten demonstration projects in different areas of England. The new materials are also available to other interested schools. The existing National Record of Achievement remains available to schools and training providers.

Return Rates (Education)

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what estimate he has made of the current social rate of return to *(a)* primary, *(b)* secondary and *(c)* tertiary education. [94730]

Mr. Wicks: The estimated social rate of return to A-levels taken by young people is 14–21 per cent. The National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education estimated the rate of return on first degrees at 7–9 per cent. in the first half of the 1990s, and there are some indications that a marginally higher figure may now be appropriate. Estimates for compulsory education are not available.

Discount Card

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what detailed proposals he has for the 16 to 18 discount card; who will finance these discounts; what arrangements will be made to deal with complaints by *(a)* dissatisfied consumers and *(b)* potential providers who are excluded from the scheme; and what is the anticipated cost to public funds. [94750]

Mr. Wicks: The Youth Card will build on the current Learning card which is issued to all young people during their final year of compulsory education. When fully up and running it will reward young people in learning and help to remove some of the barriers to further learning by offering a range of attractive discounts covering transport, leisure, and the commercial sector.

Discussions are taking place with a wide range of organisations to secure these discounts. The expectation is that the cost of discounts will be borne by those organisations willing to accept the Youth Card for discounting purposes. Consequently no significant additional public cost is anticipated.

All those organisations willing to recognise the Youth Card for discounting purposes will be bound by contract to deliver the agreed discount and to ensure that any complaints are dealt with properly. This contract will be reviewed annually.

School Sixth Forms

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment when he will announce the results of his consultation on school sixth forms. [94754]

Mr. Wicks: The consultation on the funding of school sixth forms closed on Friday 15 October. Some late responses are still being received. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State will announce the results of the consultation after he has considered all views.

Learning Support Assistants

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what progress has been made in developing professional qualifications, matched to NVQs, for learning support assistants. [94728]

Jacqui Smith: Work is currently in progress to develop a national framework of training and qualifications for teaching assistants. The Department is working on this with the Local Government National Training Organisation (LGNTO) in consultation with Local Educational Authorities, the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority and other bodies. This framework will cover all teaching assistants including those learning support assistants who support children with special educational needs. As part of the first phrase of this work, we have commissioned LGNTO to develop national occupational standards for all teaching assistants. This work is due to be completed in Spring 2000.

"On a Wing and a Prayer"

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what reply he has made to MENCAP's report on school inclusion entitled, "On a Wing and a Prayer". [94727]

Ms Estelle Morris: The DfEE is working closely with MENCAP. However, the publication of this report coincides with the publication of a DfEE commissioned report entitled "The Management, role and training of Learning Support Assistants". Both reports explore how learning support assistants work with pupils with special educational needs in inclusive settings. They each highlight good practice. The Government are already taking forward work relating to a number of the recommendations in the MENCAP report, as highlighted in the Teachers Green Paper. Specifically we are:

working with the Local Government National Training Organisation to develop a national framework of training and qualifications;

developing good practice materials on the effective deployment of teaching assistants, including learning support assistants;

making available £350 million over this and the next two financial years to support the recruitment and training of an additional 20,000 (FTE) assistants, including learning support assistants.

In addition, we are currently in discussion with MENCAP and the authors of the two reports about the possibility of a joint conference to discuss the research findings and identify ways forward for improving practice.

"Learning to Succeed"

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what consultations he has had with local education authorities *(a)* in the course of the preparation of the paper "Learning to Succeed" (Cm 4392) and *(b)* after the paper's publication. [94739]

Mr. Wicks: Ministers and officials meet with the Local Government Association and individual local education authorities on a regular basis to discuss a wide range of issues including our proposals in "Learning to Succeed". We have also received written responses to the consultations associated with the White Paper from the Local Government Association and a large number of individual local education authorities.

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on the role of the voluntary sector in the implementation of Learning to Succeed. [94760]

Mr. Wicks: The voluntary sector has a number of important roles to play in implementing the proposals in 'Learning to Succeed'. These include helping to ensure that the education and training that the Learning and Skills Council provides is relevant to the needs of young people and adults and providing high quality opportunities to help young people and adults get and keep work. Voluntary organisations are particularly well placed to contribute their expertise in key areas such as tackling social exclusion and in the education and training of those with special or basic skill needs.

Pupil Numbers (Crosby)

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what was the average number of children by year group in primary and secondary schools within the Crosby constituency, in each year from 1992 to 1999. [94585]

Ms Estelle Morris: Information on the number of pupils by year group is not collected centrally.

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what is the expected average number of children by year group in primary and secondary schools within the Crosby constituency in each year from 1999 to 2001. [94586]

Ms Estelle Morris: The information is not available in the form requested.

Private Finance Initiative

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many private finance initiatives are currently being promoted by Lancashire Education Authority. [94184]

Jacqui Smith: Lancashire Education Authority is currently engaged in replacing Fleetwood High School through the Private Finance Initiative.

Science Laboratories

Dr. Gibson: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment (1) if he will list the cases where private finance initiative resources have been given to science laboratory development; [93706]

(2) how much private funding initiative resource has contributed to capital budget funding for science laboratory development in the last five years. [93707]

Mr. Wicks: In the Schools sector, five Private Finance Initiative (PFI) projects have been signed, with many more in the pipeline, to provide new or replacement secondary schools. All of these schools will have modern science laboratories fully capable of delivering the national curriculum. The PFI credits given by the Government to support these projects do not include separately identifiable amounts for specific aspects of each development.

In the Higher Education sector two of the seven signed deals include modern facilities for teaching and research in the fields of medical, biological and clinical science. In the Further Education sector, the seven PFI deals signed to date do not include specific science laboratory elements.

Dr. Gibson: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will publish the results of the examination of the design needs of scientific laboratories in secondary schools under Building Bulletin 80. [93715]

Jacqui Smith: The Department has reviewed its guidance on science accommodation in secondary schools, and a revised building bulletin updating Building Bulletin 80, 'Science Accommodation in Secondary Schools: A Design Guide', will be published shortly.

National Curriculum for Science

Dr. Gibson: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment with whom consultations were held in the revision of the experiments carried out in the National Curriculum for Science in Schools. [93709]

Jacqui Smith: The Qualifications and Curriculum Authority consulted a number of science associations, prior to preparing advice to the Secretary of State on proposals for a revised science curriculum. A full list of those consulted is contained at Annex 2 of the QCA's Report "Developing the School Curriculum", which was published on QCA's website www.qca.org.uk following the Secretary of State's announcement on 9 September. In addition all local authorities, teachers, governors, parents and other interested parties were able to contribute to the public consultation on the revised National Curriculum which ran from May to July this year. On the basis of the QCA's advice we have strengthened the role of Scientific Enquiry within the Science curriculum by establishing it as a separate Attainment Target. Revised curriculum handbooks will be sent to schools in November and copies will be placed in the Library.

Building Bulletin 80

Dr. Gibson: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what is the distribution list for the replacement document for Building Bulletin 80. [93714]

Jacqui Smith: The Department will distribute copies of the revised Building Bulletin 80, 'Science Accommodation in Secondary Schools: A Design Guide', to the House of Commons and House of Lords Libraries and the British Library. The priced document will be available from the Stationery Office.

Maths Year 2000

Mr. Hesford: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what support schools will be given in the forthcoming Maths Year 2000. [94538]

Ms Estelle Morris: This September we launched the National Numeracy Strategy in primary schools, underpinned by a comprehensive programme of training. Maths Year 2000 aims to support teachers as they implement the strategy by creating a positive, "can-do" culture towards mathematics throughout the community.

We are investing £105 million in the National Numeracy Strategy over two years. This includes up to £19.2 million available to provide maths resources in the classroom for 2000–2001. £6.75 million is being invested in the Maths Year which includes a total of £0.5 million specifically provided for local numeracy projects involving schools and their business partners. Many businesses will also be running their own schemes to support schools as their contribution towards the year.

Schools will be able to find a range of ideas for ways to get involved through regular newsletters, a free calendar with puzzles and stories about the history of maths and, from December, the Maths Year Website (www.mathsyear2000.org).

Teachers' Pay

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on his plans to introduce performance-related pay for teachers; and what recent representations he has received on this issue. [94159]

Ms Estelle Morris: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State submitted the Department's written evidence to the School Teachers' Review Body (STRB) on 23 September, asking them to consider the Government's proposals for reform of teachers' pay, including a new upper pay spine for classroom teachers accessed via a performance threshold, and requesting the Review Body to make recommendations accordingly. A copy of this evidence is in the Library of the House. The formal consultation period on the Green Paper and its accompanying technical consultation document ended on 31 March. Detailed summaries of the responses to the consultation are also available in the Library of the House.

The Department has continued to discuss the Government's proposals in detail with representatives of the teacher unions and employers.

Corporal Punishment

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment when he plans to introduce legislation to outlaw the use of *(a)* the cane and *(b)* other forms of corporal punishment in independent schools; and if he will make a statement. [94579]

Jacqui Smith: From this September, Section 131 of the School Standards and Framework Act 1998 outlawed corporal punishment for all pupils in maintained and non-maintained schools, and for children receiving nursery education.

Departmental Publications

Mr. Maclean: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list his Department's spending on official publications since May 1997. [93690]

Mr. Wills: Within the Department's Advertising and Publicity Budget the total spend on publications since May 1997 is £4.106 million.

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list the titles of the in-house publications and newsletters which were produced for the staff of his Department, excluding non-departmental public bodies and agencies, in the last five years, specifying the dates on which each title was first produced, the frequency with which each title is produced and the current secrecy classification of each title. [93844]

Mr. Wills: Since the Department was created in 1995, it has produced the following internal communications for its staff:

The News Centre—daily electronic information which announces key news about policy or work related issues published via the Department's intranet;

BulletinBoard—a weekly paper publication which briefly outlines what has been on the week's Newscentres;

BulletinBoard Link—issued weekly to staff on loan/secondment, career breaks, maternity leave and home workers, who do not have access to electronic information. It provides an outline of what has been on the Newscentre and details where to get more information;

A Message From . . .—gives important strategic information from members of the Board. It is produced as required and available on paper and electronically; and

Feedback—a staff magazine published six times a year.

None of them bear a security classification.

Employment Service Appeals Procedure

Mr. Öpik: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment in each of the last three years *(a)* how many cases were referred to the Employment Service Appeals Procedure, *(b)* what percentage of cases handled by the Employment Service was referred to the Employment Service Appeal Procedure, *(c)* what was the average time that cases referred to the Employment Services Appeals Procedure took to be resolved, and *(d)* what percentage of appeals taken to the Employment Service Appeals Procedure were withdrawn before reaching a final ruling; and if he will make a statement. [94593]

Ms Jowell: Responsibility for the subject of the question has been delegated to the Employment Service agency under its Chief Executive. I have asked him to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from Richard Foster to Mr. Lembit Öpik, dated 19 October 1999:

As the Employment Service is an Executive Agency the Secretary of State has asked Leigh Lewis to reply to your question concerning statistical information about appeals received by the Employment Service over the last three years. This is something which falls within the responsibilities delegated to Mr. Lewis as Chief Executive of the Agency. I am replying in his absence.

It may be helpful, by way of background, if I first explain a little about the Employment Service appeals procedure. Decisions on doubtful claims to Jobseeker's Allowance are made by Employment Service Adjudication Officers. If a jobseeker wishes to appeal against a decision given by the Employment Service Adjudication Officer, they complete a form giving their reasons for appeal. The Adjudication Officer then re-examines the case, collects any further information that may be required from the jobseeker and the employer, and either revises the decision in the jobseekers favour or

prepares a written submission to The Appeals Service, which is not part of the Employment Service. On receipt of the submission, The Appeals Service allocates a date when the case can be heard by an appeals tribunal and deals with all subsequent administration such as notifying the jobseekers of the outcome of the appeal.

Against this background, the following table shows the number of appeals received by the Employment Service over the last three operational years.

Operational year	*Number of appeals received by the Employment Service*
1996–97	18,628
1997–98	30,312
1998–99	19,261

The following table shows the number of appeals received as a percentage of all the decisions given by Employment Service Adjudication Officers.

Operational year	*Percentage of decisions appealed against*
1996–97	1.2
1997–98	2.8
1998–99	2.2

In answer to your question on what was the average time that cases referred to the Employment Service Appeals Procedure took to be resolved, the only information available on speed of process is the length of time appeals take to be processed by the Employment Service. The following table shows the length of time between the appeal being made by the jobseeker and processed by the Employment Service Adjudication Officer either by revising the decision in the jobseekers favour or referring the appeal submission to The Appeals Service.

Operational year	*Percentage of appeals processed within the stated periods*		
	Up to 28 days	*29–56 days*	*Over 57 days*
1996–97	90	8	2
1997–98	83	13	4
1998–99	86	12	2

As you will see, it is split into three periods, appeals processed within 28 days of receipt, those processed between 29 and 56 days after receipt and those not processed within 57 days. Because Employment Service Adjudication Officers often need to obtain further information from the jobseeker on receipt of an appeal, it is unusual for a decision to be revised or a submission to be prepared and referred to The Appeals Service immediately on receipt.

On occasions these enquiries can be protracted which means that the Employment Service Adjudication Officer is not in a position to process the appeal quickly. However, the Employment Service sets performance targets to encourage appeal submissions to be processed as quickly as possible. These are that 70% of appeals must be processed within 28 days and 85% within 56 days. The Employment Service does not collect information on the time the appeal subsequently takes to be allocated a hearing date and resolved by The Appeal Service.

Finally, I am sorry that the Employment Service does not keep information on the numbers of appeals which were withdrawn before the Appeals Tribunal made a decision. This would be a matter for The Appeals Service which is the responsibility of the Department of Social Security.

You may also be interested to know that from 18 October the appeals procedure will be changing with the implementation of the new Decision Making and Appeals arrangements.

I hope this is helpful.

Professor Barber

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment on what date Professor Michael Barber was appointed as Standards and Effectiveness Adviser; when Professor Barber has travelled on official business to the United States of America since his appointment; and what meetings he held with members and officials of the United States Government during each visit. [93887]

Ms Estelle Morris: Michael Barber was appointed as Head of the Standards and Effectiveness Unit on 2 May 1997.

Michael Barber visited San Diego to speak at the National Centre on Education and the Economy's conference in January 1998. He met various state level officials but no representative of the US Government. He visited Washington DC in December 1998 to present to the World bank on education reform in the UK. While he was there, he met Bruce Reed, Assistant to the President for Domestic Policy. He visited the USA again in August 1999 to speak at the International Principals' Institute conference in Lancaster, Pennsylvania and on that occasion met Bruce Reed again and Andrew Rotherham, who shortly afterwards took up a post as education adviser to President Clinton's administration. He also gave a presentation to a group of officials in the Education Department in Washington DC.

Postgraduate Students

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will publish *(a)* the number of students undertaking postgraduate university courses for (i) MA and (ii) PhD degrees in the arts and humanities and *(b)* the amount of finance provided by his Department to help sustain such students in each of the past five years. [94673]

Mr. Wicks: The available data for both student numbers and expenditure for the five most recent years are shown in the following tables.

Students on Arts and Humanities[1] courses in HE institutions in the UK

Academic year	*MA*	*PhD*
1994–95	97,133	20,524
1995–96	107,338	23,523
1996–97	108,375	25,924
1997–98	113,282	26,849
1998–99[2]	112,547	27,082

[1] Excludes students on Combined courses who may study Arts and Humanities as part of their course.
[2] Provisional data.

Departmental postgraduate expenditure[1] for the UK

Financial year	*£ million*
1994–95	18.3
1995–96	18.5
1996–97	18.0
1997–98	18.3
1998–99	18.8

[1] The Department allocates expenditure on postgraduate courses as a whole and it is not therefore possible to separately identify expenditure on MA and PhD courses.

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has to increase the funds available to support students undertaking postgraduate courses in the arts and humanities; and if he will make a statement. [94674]

Mr. Wicks: My right hon. Friend, the Secretary of State, welcomed the establishment of the Arts and Humanities Research Board to allocate postgraduate awards and research grants for arts and humanities courses. The total funding of the Board is over £44 million in 1999–2000, which includes funds for postgraduate arts and humanities courses. Decisions about the level of future funding for postgraduate courses in arts and humanities are under consideration.

Careers Service

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has to change the statutory basis for the Careers Service in England. [94033]

Mr. Wicks: Following publication in July of the Social Exclusion Unit's report on new opportunities for 16 to 18-year-olds not in education and training, we have consulted widely about a new service to support young people including its functions and organisation. The consultation period ended on 15 October and we are considering the responses.

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has to integrate careers advice and guidance for young people with the service for adults; and if he will make a statement. [94039]

Mr. Wicks: Access to high quality information and advice on learning and career opportunities is essential for young people and adults to make well informed decisions about the range of learning and career opportunities open to them.

Following publication in July of the Social Exclusion Unit's report on new opportunities for 16 to 18-year-olds not in education and training, we have consulted widely about a new service to support young people, including its functions and organisation. The consultation period ended on 15 October and we are considering the responses.

From April 2001, the Learning and Skills Council will be responsible for planning and funding local provision for adults. We will ensure that provision for clients of all ages is complementary.

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has to change the contracting system for the Careers Service; and if he will make a statement. [94035]

Mr. Wicks: Following publication in July of the Social Exclusion Unit's report on new opportunities for 16 to 18-year-olds not in education and training, we have consulted widely about a new service to support young people including its functions and organisation. The consultation period ended on 15 October and we are considering the responses.

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has to make additional funding available to Careers Service contractors for improved use of ICT. [94037]

Mr. Wicks: The Government fund Careers Service contractors to deliver a range of services as set out in their contract with the Secretary of State. Contractors are expected to develop the use of ICT to deliver services more effectively.

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has to improve guidance to 18-year-olds who are in full time education. [94034]

Mr. Wicks: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State requires careers services to focus their help on young people, including 18-year-olds, who need most help to stay in, or progress in, education. The "Learning to Succeed" White Paper announced the creation of a new youth support service which will provide guidance and support for all young people aged 13–19, building on what is currently provided by the Careers Service, parts of the Youth Service and other organisations. Guidance for 18-year-olds currently given through their FE institution or from the Careers Service will continue under a new youth support service. Eighteen-year-olds in higher education will continue to receive guidance through their education institution.

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has to introduce externally validated quality assessments of Careers Service contracts and contractors. [94038]

Mr. Wicks: The "Learning to Succeed" White Paper announced the creation of a new youth support service which would provide guidance and support for all young people aged 13–19, building on what is currently provided by the Careers Service, parts of the Youth Service and other organisations. Consultation on the new service ended on 15 October 1999. Quality assurance arrangements are being considered as part of that process.

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has to monitor the education and career progression of 18 to 25-year-olds. [94036]

Mr. Wicks: The Government have invested significant resources to ensure that all adults, young and old, have access to high quality and co-ordinated information and advice on learning and careers opportunities. Services will be co-ordinated and delivered at local level through the lifelong learning partnerships. The partnerships will be expected to identify and target particular groups of people who, for various reasons, may lack confidence and need extra support and encouragement to access the learning opportunities open to them. The Government, through the Learning and Skills Council from April 2001, will monitor the success of the partnerships in achieving this objective.

Departmental Staff

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many people were employed by his Department in each of the years from 1993–94 to 1998–99; if he will break down the total into the categories *(a)* male, *(b)* female, *(c)* registered disability and *(d)* ethnic minority; and if his Department has an equal opportunities policy. [88684]

Mr. Wicks *[pursuant to the reply, 30 June 1999, c.225]:* The original answer failed to explain that information on people with a disability and people from an ethnic minority background is not held in the form requested before April 1996. The following table shows the breakdown of available DfEE staff figures from 1993–94 to 1998–99:

	Total employed	*(a)* Male	*(b) Female*	*(c) Registered disability*	*(d) Ethnic minority*
1 April 1993	8,978	3,950	5,028	[1]—	[1]—
1 April 1994	6,561	2,887	3,674	[1]—	[1]—
1 April 1995	5,683	2,500	3,183	[1]—	[1]—
1 April 1996	5,212	2,345	2,867	240	324
1 April 1997	4,795	2,206	2,589	226	312
1 April 1998	3,956	1,838	2,118	191	310
1 April 1999	4,094	1,874	2,220	247	347

[1] Information on people with a disability and people from an ethnic minority background is not held in the form requested before April 1996.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Millennium Compliance

Mr. David Atkinson: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make a statement of progress on the millennium readiness of his Department's computer systems, and those for which it is responsible in the provision of public services; if contingency plans are in place; and what slippage has occurred since the July Quarterly report to the House. [93571]

Mr. Morley: Details of the Ministry's progress in tackling the millennium bug are set out in our quarterly monitoring returns. These are available in the Libraries of the House and are published on the Internet. The results of the October monthly review of progress of Departments and agencies are due to be announced shortly by the President of the Council.

Work on ensuring that all of the Ministry's internal systems are millennium ready has been completed, for both critical and non-critical systems. Testing will be ongoing to ensure that compliance is maintained. As indicated in the July quarterly Report to the House, work on IT and telecoms systems was completed earlier in the year. Work on embedded systems was not completed until September, in part because of the take-on of new buildings/systems.

Business continuity planning (including contingency planning) and development of MAFF's MOR will be completed this month. As part of our MOR we will be ensuring that contact is maintained with key players in the food industry throughout the millennium period.

With regard to the provision of related public services, millennium preparations in non-Departmental and other associated Public Bodies are being monitored and satisfactory progress is being maintained. Independent assessments of the preparedness of the food and groceries and flood defence sectors were reported to the July National Infrastructure Forum. Emerging results for the food and groceries sector indicated blue for internal compliance and amber for business continuity planning, using Action 2000's colour coding system. The flood defence sector was assessed as 95 per cent. blue and 5 per cent. amber. The latest results of the independent assessments of these sectors (including continency planning) will be announced at the next National Infrastructure Forum on 21 October.

Special Advisers

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food on what dates special advisers from his Department have visited the United States of America on official business since 1 May 1997; which of his special advisers took part in each visit; and if he will list the meetings which these special advisers held with members and officials of the United States Government during each visit, specifying the date and location of each meeting and the names of the United States members and officials at each meeting. [93987]

Mr. Nick Brown: No special advisers from my Department have visited the United States of America on official business since 1 May 1997.

Ministerial Visits

Mr. Evans: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food when he intends next to visit the Ribble Valley. [93661]

Mr. Nick Brown: I hope to visit the North-West Region this year to meet farmers and others, and would like to include a visit to the Ribble Valley in my itinerary. I will let the hon. Member know when a firm date has been established.

Common Fisheries Policy

Mr. Gill: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, pursuant to his answer of 20 July 1999, *Official Report*, column *495*, if he will list the average size and weight of the *(a)* undersized and *(b)* oversized fish corresponding to his answer on percentages by weight for cod, haddock and whiting. [94341]

Mr. Morley: The average sizes and weights of the three species sampled as part of the 1997 CEFAS North Sea discard study are detailed in the following table.

Species	*Average of*	*Discards below MLS*	*Discards above MLS*
Cod	Length (cms)	30.0	36.0
MLS=35 cms	Weight (g)	277	455
Haddock	Length (cms)	26.6	21.2
MLS=30 cms	Weight (g)	175	279
Whiting	Length (cms)	24.2	29.1
MLS=27 cms	Weight (g)	114	202

The actual estimates of the proportions of discarded fish, by number that were undersized, were cod 82 per cent., haddock 57 per cent. and whiting 67 per cent.

By weight, the percentages were cod 73 per cent., haddock 46 per cent. and whiting 53 per cent.

Live Animal Exports

Mr. Prosser: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if Local Veterinary Inspectors carry out pre-export inspections during the hours of darkness. [93039]

Mr. Morley: Information on the time of day when inspections are undertaken is not kept centrally. However, we are aware that many inspections are carried out in buildings under artificial light, irrespective of the time of day when they are undertaken. It is the Local Veterinary Inspector's responsibility as the certifying officer to ensure that the conditions during his inspection are such that he is able to carry out his certifying officer responsibilities properly.

Mr. Prosser: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what arrangements he makes to ensure that his staff at Dover dockside are able to make proper inspections when livestock vehicles are loaded on to the ship during the hours of darkness. [93038]

Mr. Morley: State Veterinary Service staff stationed at Dover are equipped to carry out the necessary inspection of vehicles carrying livestock for export, whatever the time of that inspection.

Mr. Prosser: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what steps he is taking to discourage regular sailings of the vessel which carries live farm animals from Dover to the continent at night; and if he will make a statement. [93040]

Mr. Morley: None. The timing of sailings of any vessel, whether it carries live animals or not, is a matter for the operators of the vessel and their customers, provided that the relevant regulations are obeyed.

Mr. Prosser: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what proportion of the sailings of the vessel carrying live farm animals from Dover to the continent began during the hours of darkness in the last year for which figures are available. [93037]

Mr. Morley: In the period 1 October 1998—30 September 1999, out of a total of 195 sailings of vessels carrying live farm animals 103 (52.8 per cent.) began between 8.00 pm and 6.00 am the following morning.

Mr. Prosser: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many *(a)* live sheep and *(b)* live pigs have been exported for (i) slaughter, (ii) further fattening and (iii) breeding to date in 1999; and how many of each was exported to each individual country of destination. [93036]

Mr. Morley: The tables show the number of live sheep and live pigs exported from the United Kingdom during the period 1 January 1999 to 26 July 1999.

Table 1 shows the number of animals certified for export from the UK to other member states during the period 1 January 1999 to 26 July 1999. These figures are derived from the electronic messages which European law requires exporting countries to send to importing countries to inform them of the number of animals being exported in a given consignment.

The number of pigs exported to the Republic of Ireland for slaughter may have been influenced by a fire in a pig plant in Northern Ireland which reduced slaughtering capacity in the Province.

Table 2 shows data for exports to third countries. Specifically, it shows the number of export health certificates which were prepared and sent to official veterinarians for completion during the period 1 January 1999 to 26 July 1999. In the case of exports to third countries, precise figures of how many animals were ultimately exported are not available as there is no central record kept showing exactly how many animals were certified for export to third countries. The cost of collecting this level of detail would be disproportionate.

There were no exports from Northern Ireland to third countries.

In view of the continual updating of statistics, the figures in Tables 1 and 2 remain provisional and subject to change.

Table 1: Number of live sheep and pigs certified for export to other member states of the EU during the period 1 January 1999 to 26 July 1999

Destination country	*Sheep for breeding*	*Sheep for fattening*	*Sheep for slaughter*	*Pigs for breeding*	*Pigs for fattening*	*Pigs for slaughter*
Belgium	—	—	—	7,275	—	—
Denmark	—	—	757	—	—	—
France	30	70,777	—	2,984	—	—
Germany	1	17,750	—	26,599	—	—
Greece	—	—	—	193	—	—
Italy	—	9,632	—	3,502	—	—
Netherlands	11	77,394	—	10,467	—	—
Portugal	—	—	4,092	177	—	—
Republic of Ireland	31	—	80	57	4,205	55,452
Spain	—	—	—	2,081	—	—
Total	73	175,553	4,929	53,335	4,205	55,452

Source:

GB figures were obtained from the Ministry's CENTAUR/Animo computer system. Department of Agriculture Northern Ireland figures were obtained from ANIMO messages sent to other member states vis the Eurocom computer system. The figures are provisional and subject to change.

Table 2: Number of live sheep and pigs for which export health certificates were prepared for export from Great Britain to Third Counties during the period 1 January 1999 to 26 July 1999

Destination country	*Sheep for breeding*	*Sheep for fattening*	*Sheep for slaughter*	*Pigs for breeding*	*Pigs for fattening*	*Pigs for slaughter*
Canada	—	—	—	268	—	—
China	—	—	—	4,588	—	—
Czech Republic	—	—	—	183	—	—
Japan	—	—	—	264	—	—
Kenya	—	—	—	7	—	—
Latvia	—	—	—	360	—	—
Mexico	—	—	—	26	—	—
Russia	—	—	—	50	—	—
Slovenia	—	—	—	161	—	—
St. Helena	6	—	—	20	—	—
Thailand	—	—	—	40	—	—
USA	—	—	—	114	—	—
Total	6	0	0	6,081	0	0

Note:
There were no exports from Northern Ireland to third countries.
Source:
The Ministry's CENTAUR computer system. This information is provisional and subject to change. The central computer system is updated periodically to remove details of withdrawn export consignments from the records but we cannot guarantee that this information is complete. Confirmation of the actual numbers of animals exported could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

Concordat (Wales)

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will publish before the summer adjournment, the most recent draft concordat between the Department of Agriculture and the National Assembly for Wales. [92331]

Ms Quin: Work on the concordat between this Department and the Cabinet of the National Assembly for Wales is proceeding well. We hope that formal agreement on the text can be reached shortly. We do not intend to publish the concordat in advance of that.

Equal Treatment

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he has established a baseline for policy appraisal against which to measure progress on equal treatment. [93456]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 27 July 1999]:* The Government are committed to making sure that its policies are fair and inclusive and take full account of the needs and experiences of all those affected by them.

As part of this commitment, the Ministry has guidance in place to ensure that those involved in policy development check how the policy or programme will affect, either directly or indirectly, different groups of people and take action if necessary where any adverse differential impact is identified. Whilst this does not involve the establishment of a base line, it does involve the consultation of appropriate groups and consideration of their views. However, the nature of the Ministry's responsibilities means that much of its activity does not have a differential impact on different groups of people.

Fur Farming

Dr. Palmer: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many mink and fox factory farms there are, by county, in England and Wales. [93616]

Mr. Morley: There are currently the following number of mink farms in England:

County	*Number of licensed mink farms*
Cornwall	1
Dorset	1
Hampshire	1
Isle of Wight	1
Lancashire	5
Northumberland	1
South Yorkshire	1
Staffordshire	1
West Yorkshire	1
Total	13

There is no requirement to register fox fur farms. However, I am not aware of any in England.

The situation in Wales is a matter for the National Assembly for Wales to report on.

Market Research

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will list the title and purpose of each item of market and opinion research commissioned by or through his Department, its agencies and non-departmental public bodies since May 1997 stating in each case whether or not the results were published. [89688]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 5 July 1999]:* The information requested could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Departmental Employees

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many persons were employed in his Department *(a)* 10 years ago and *(b)* at the latest available date. [92716]

Mr. Morley: On 1 April 1989, there were 10,577 staff working in my Department and its agencies. On 1 January 1999 (the latest published information available) there

were 9,711 staff working in MAFF and its agencies undertaking broadly comparable functions. In addition, there are 1,528 staff working for the Meat Hygiene Service who undertake functions which were the responsibility of local authorities in 1989.

Government Patents

Mr. Baker: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will list the Government patents held by his Department. [93080]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 26 July 1999]:* The following sets out the key families of UK granted patents and patent numbers currently held by MAFF arising from Research and Development which it has funded. In a number of cases, patents have been granted (or are pending) in other countries.

	Patent Number
UK Patents	
Alignment mechanism (Flax Harvester)	2273942
Bait and Trap	2291776
Biological Control of Post Harvest Disease	2280113
Carbon Monoxide Generating Composition	2300567
Continuous process for the Partial Sterilisation of Horticultural Materials	2166633
Cutting mechanism (Flax Harvester)	2275274
Detection of CNS Disease	2291968
Device for Assessing Processing Stresses	2196740
Equine Arteritis Virus, Peptides and Antibodies and their use in Diagnostic test	2299994
Identification of Fruit Juice Components	2283568
Insect Trap	2240911
Method, Device and Kit for Controlling Insects	2174907
Pest Trap	2305104
Process for the Destruction of Aflatoxin in Agricultural Products	2108365
Refrigeration Apparatus including a Frost Sensor	2143945
Separating mechanism (Flax Harvester)	2273943
Spongiform Encephalopathy Detection Methods	2308659
Spongiform Encephalopathy Detection Methods and Agent which were obtained	2308658
European patents (including UK)	
Detection of Heat Stable Proteins from Meat of Ruminants	0714515
Detection of Microbial Growth	0705347
Method and Kits for Detection of Bacteria	0663016
Method and Test Kits for Detection of Bacteriophage	0714450
Method for Testing for Salmonella	0551325
Methods, Agents and Kits for Detection of Organophosphorus Compounds	0699305
Salmonella Polynucleotide Sequence	0551324

SOCIAL SECURITY

Raynaud's Disease

Mr. Rowlands: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what estimate he has made of the number of young people suffering from Raynaud's disease who are in receipt of the full rate of Disability Living Allowance. [94053]

Mr. Bayley: Specific information on higher rate Disability Living Allowance recipients with Raynaud's Disease is not available. Sample counts show that there are a small number of DLA recipients (possibly around 100) aged under 16 in the wider group whose principal disabling condition is peripheral vascular disease including thrombosis and claudication, but this estimate is based on numbers too small to be reliable.

Family Credit

Mr. Rendel: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how much maintenance is paid to families in receipt of Family Credit. [94049]

Angela Eagle: As at May 1999, there were a total of 790,000 families receiving Family Credit, of which 131,000 were receiving maintenance. The average amount of maintenance in payment was £32.85 a week.

Family Credit was replaced by the new Working Families Tax Credit on 5 October.

Notes:

1. Numbers are not rounded to the nearest thousand.
2. Based on 15 per cent. sample, figures are therefore subject to sampling error.

Source:

Family Credit Statistics Quarterly Enquiry, May 1999.

Lone Parents (New Deal)

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what representations he has received on the progress of the New Deal for Lone Parents *(a)* nationally and *(b)* in the Vale of York; and if he will make a statement. [94158]

Angela Eagle: The New Deal for Lone Parents (NDLP) was launched nationally on 26 October 1998. The results of the national programme and those for North Yorkshire District, which covers the Vale of York, are available up to the end of July 1999. The information is in the table.

	North Yorkshire district	*National programme*
Initial interviews carried out	725	80,130
Number agreeing to participate	639	71,480
Number of jobs obtained	188	18,260

Lone parents and organisations that represent them have welcomed NDLP and a vast majority of those attending an interview with a personal adviser have decided to participate in the programme.

There were two earlier phases: phase one prototypes in eight areas from July 1997 and phase two, for new and repeat claims, from April 1998. The full independent evaluation of the prototype phase is now expected to be published by March next year.

Millennium Compliance

Mr. David Atkinson: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will make a statement of progress on the millennium readiness of his Department's computer systems, and those for which it is responsible in the provision of public services; if contingency plans are in place; and what slippage has occurred since the July Quarterly report to the House. [93570]

Angela Eagle: Details of the Department's and its Agencies' progress in tackling the Millennium bug are set out in our quarterly monitoring returns. These are available in the Libraries of the House and are published on the internet. The results of the October monthly review of progress of Departments and Agencies in tackling the bug are due to be announced shortly by the President of the Council.

The Department's key benefit paying computer systems had all corrective work and testing complete by the end of 1998 allowing a full annual processing cycle before 2000. Additionally, all telecoms systems have been confirmed as compliant and the few remaining critical embedded systems (less than one per cent.) are receiving close management attention and will be cleared by 31 October. Since the President of the Council's quarterly Report to the House in July, there has been some very minor slippage in the embedded systems area, which poses no risk to the delivery of benefit.

Contingency plans are in place; have been rehearsed; and continue to be refined to mitigate the latest assessment of risks, in particular those which specifically relate to the date change. The Department will have a Millennium Control Centre in operation over the period 1–5 January 2000, which will manage a range of readiness checks and pro-active communication on our status. The Departments key Social Security services of paying benefits, pensions and Child Support have been subject to independent assessment and each were assessed as "Blue" prior to Action 2000's National Infrastructure Forum in July. The results of the latest independent assessment of the "pay benefit" sector will be announced at the next National Infrastructure Forum on 21 October.

Benzodiazepine

Mr. Woolas: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what advice he has issued regarding the handling of disability and incapacity benefit claims by people suffering from addiction to benzodiazepine drugs. [93719]

Mr. Bayley: Entitlement to state disability or incapacity benefits is dependent not on the diagnosis but on the functional effects resulting from the condition. The Department provides guidance regarding benzodiazepine and other substance abuse to benefit decision makers and doctors providing advice or undertaking examinations in connection with a State benefit.

The Disability Handbook is available to all decision makers handling claims to Disability Living Allowance and Attendance Allowance. It contains a section which outlines the functional effects of drug abuse, including benzodiazepine abuse, on an individual's care needs. A copy of the Disability Handbook is available for consultation in the Library. Guidance for approved doctors undertaking All Work Test Assessments is contained in the Incapacity Benefit Handbook for Medical Services Doctors, which is also available in the Library.

Social Fund

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will estimate the number of ex-offenders who qualify for a Social Fund grant but do not receive one because of the limited funds available; and if he will make a statement. [93928]

Angela Eagle: The information is not available in the format requested. Such information as is available is that in the financial year 1998–99 less than 10 per cent. of community care grant applications refused were on the grounds of insufficient priority.

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what assessment he has made of the impact of the new Budget Loans system upon single people; what plans he has to improve the system as it affects single people; and if he will make a statement. [93986]

Angela Eagle: The new budgeting loan system is designed to improve fairness to all applicants, including single people, and to provide access to interest-free loans to as many eligible applicants as possible.

Indications from the first six months of the scheme are that the proportion of successful applications from single people has increased.

Monitoring of the new scheme is continuing, and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State will report on the first year of the new scheme in his next annual report on the Social Fund, due for publication next summer.

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security for what reasons local benefit agencies do not have flexibility in respect of their overall expenditure on Social Fund grants; if he will introduce greater flexibility; and if he will make a statement. [93929]

Angela Eagle: The national discretionary Social Fund budget is cash limited. The community care grant budget for 1999–2000 is £98 million.

Allocating the community care grant budget to District offices ensures that local expenditure is targeted on those in greatest need while keeping expenditure under control. However, additional funding can be provided from the centrally held contingency reserve to any District faced with additional expenditure resulting from an emergency in their locality.

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security for what reasons Social Fund grants have been increased by less than inflation over the past two years; what assessment he has made of the impact of this on claimants; and if he will make a statement. [93927]

Angela Eagle: The Community Care Grant budget is reviewed annually. It was increased in April 1998 by £1 million to support greater help for homeless people. This increase, which was the first since 1994, has been maintained in the current year's budget allocation. As a result, the number of homeless people getting help more than doubled.

British Pensioners (Overseas)

Mr. Nigel Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what assessment he has made of the impact on British citizens of the decision of the Australian Government to cease its topping-up procedures to compensate British citizens of pensionable age who live in Australia and whose United Kingdom pension entitlement is frozen. [93741]

Mr. Rooker: The Australian Government announced in July that it intended to terminate the bilateral Social Security Agreement with the United Kingdom. We have

not received formal notice of termination. The Agreement would terminate 12 months after formal notice was received.

The Agreement has a bearing on UK pensioners in Australia only if they have lived there for less than 10 years. It helps them to satisfy Australia's 10-year residence test for its Age Pension. UK pension is deducted from any Age Pension due. About 3,000 UK pensioners in Australia receive Age Pension with the help of the Agreement. They would be unaffected by termination, as anyone already entitled to benefit with the help of the Agreement when it terminated would continue to be covered by its terms.

If the Agreement is terminated, UK pensioners would have to have lived in Australia for 10 years before they could become entitled to Age Pension.

Age Pension is subject to a test of income and assets, so the amount any pensioner receives, or whether they qualify at all, depends on their financial circumstances.

Mr. Nigel Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many British citizens living abroad have had their United Kingdom pension entitlement frozen. [93742]

Mr. Rooker: At present, of the 870,000 UK State Pensions paid to people living abroad, some 470,000 are frozen. That is, annual upratings are not paid after the date the person becomes entitled to the pension, or the date on which they left the UK if that is later.

Mr. Nigel Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will assess the cost of abolishing the provisions which freeze pension entitlement for British citizens living abroad; and if he will make a statement. [93743]

Mr. Rooker: The total annual cost of uprating all frozen UK basic State pensions paid overseas to the rate paid to pensioners resident in the UK would be some £300 million.

War Pensions

Mr. Öpik: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what plans his Department has to change the rules covering disregard relating to war pensions, whereby only the first £10 of a war pension is disregarded when other benefits are calculated; and if he will make a statement. [94452]

Mr. Bayley: The mandatory disregards for War Disablement and War Widows Pensions that already exist in the income-related benefits recognise the special nature of these pensions, and ensure that the pensioners receive preferential treatment. For example, a war pensioner can have between £10 and £181 a week of his pension disregarded on a statutory basis.

A full disregard of War Disablement and War Widows Pension in the income related benefits would cost in the region of an additional £160 million a year.

Income Support

Mr. Öpik: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what plans the Government have to change entitlement to payment of Income Support to claimants who remain in hospital for longer than six weeks; and if he will make a statement. [94584]

Angela Eagle: We have no plans at present to revise the rules regarding the payment of Income Support to people who remain in NHS hospitals for longer than 6 weeks. We continue to keep these rules under review.

Child Maintenance

Mr. Rendel: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) if the child maintenance premium of £10 applies regardless of number of children; or if it applies for each child; [94050]

(2) what estimate he has made of the cost of introducing the £10 child maintenance premium for parents on income support. [94045]

Angela Eagle: The new Child Support system will allow parents with care on Income Support (or income-based Jobseeker's Allowance) to keep up to £10 a week of maintenance paid irrespective of the number of children involved.

The net cost to the Exchequer of introducing the child maintenance premium for existing parents with care is estimated to be £65 million in a full year, after allowing for abolition of the child maintenance bonus.

Mr. Rendel: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will list the categories of those on low incomes who are currently exempted from paying child maintenance, but who will become eligible for payment under the proposals in Cm 4349. [94058]

Angela Eagle: Non-resident parents who have been assessed to pay the minimum amount, including those on Income Support or Income-Based Jobseeker's Allowance, will no longer be exempt from paying maintenance where:

they receive Incapacity Benefit, Maternity Allowance or various disability benefits; or

they have children in their second family.

However, a non-resident parent on benefit will be exempt from the minimum payment where he shares the care of a child for at least 52 nights a year.

Mr. Rendel: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if the late payment penalty to be introduced within the reforms proposed in Cm 4349 will be calculated on the basis of (i) weekly, (ii) monthly and (iii) annually assessed maintenance; whether the fine will be cumulative; what will be the definition of late payment; and what recourse there will be when fines for late payment are not met. [94047]

Angela Eagle: The White Paper "A new contract for welfare: Children's rights and parents responsibilities" (Cm 4349) sets out our plans to introduce a straightforward penalty for late payment. The penalty will help to make sure that payments of child maintenance are made on time and to support negotiations aimed at getting payments flowing regularly.

A late payment penalty of up to 25 per cent. of the amount owed may be imposed. The penalty will be payable to the Secretary of State and may be levied at a discretionary rate for each week in which the maintenance is due but was not paid, but will not be compounded. Imposition of the penalty will be discretionary and reasons for late payment will be taken into account. Where late penalty payments have been imposed but remain unpaid enforcement measures will be taken to recover amounts due.

Mr. Rendel: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security on what basis he has estimated that one million or more children (Cm 4349, page 13) will benefit from child support from the non-resident parent as a result of changes outlined in the White Paper on reform of the CSA (Cm 4349). [94604]

Angela Eagle: The figure of one million is our best estimate of the number of children who will benefit from the reforms over time through a combination of a more effective system which will get more non-resident parents paying and more of what is due actually paid and of the new maintenance disregard in Income Support.

Mr. Rendel: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will estimate the number of non-resident parents who will pay weekly maintenance of *(a)* £5 or less, *(b)* £5 to £5.99, *(c)* £6 to £6.99, *(d)* £7 to £7.99, *(e)* £8 to £8.99, *(f)* £9 to £9.99 and *(g)* £10 and over. [94353]

Angela Eagle: The information requested is in the table.

Number of maintenance assessments of non-resident parents in work under the proposed new scheme

Maintenance assessments under the proposed new scheme	*Caseload (Thousand)*
£5 or less	45
£5 to £5.99	5
£6 to £6.99	5
£7 to £7.99	5
£8 to £8.99	5
£9 to £9.99	5
£10 or over	465
Total	535

Notes:

1. New scheme maintenance modelled using data taken from August 1998 5 per cent. scan of Child Support Computer System.
2. Caseloads calibrated to forecasts of caseload at 'A' day and rounded to the nearest 5,000.
3. Table covers non-resident parents in paid work with a full maintenance assessment. Non-resident parents on benefit will normally be liable to pay £5 a week.

Mr. Rendel: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if compensation will be paid, and overpayments will be recoverable, where the default maintenance rate applied is found to be greater than the full maintenance assessment. [94048]

Angela Eagle: Paragraphs 37 to 39 of Chapter Two of the White Paper "A new contract for welfare: Children's rights and parents' responsibilities" (Cm4349) set out our plans for a default rate of maintenance when maintenance liability cannot be assessed straight away. The purpose of a default rate is to enable children to see the advantages of maintenance as soon as possible and to get non-resident parents into the habit of paying. The proposal is that it is set at or around the average assessment of average earnings.

The full assessment will be payable from the date that all the information needed to complete it is provided. Maintenance liability for the past will only be recalculated if the full assessment is higher than the default rate.

Mr. Rendel: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how much revenue he expects to receive as a result of doubling the proportion of lone parents on benefits who will receive maintenance payments; and by what date he expects this increased figure to have been achieved. [94046]

Angela Eagle: Under the new child support scheme, the increased number of lone parents receiving maintenance payments will result in reduced expenditure on social security benefits. These savings will build up from the introduction of the scheme and are expected to reach around £40 million a year after five years, taking into account the cost of the child maintenance premium and assuming cash compliance of 75 per cent. The reduction in spending will allow us to pay for the administrative costs of introducing the new scheme without increasing Government spending.

Tribunal Hearings

Mr. Wallace: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many appellants from *(a)* Orkney, *(b)* Shetland and *(c)* Scotland had to wait (i) up to three months, (ii) three to six months, (iii) six to 12 months, and (iv) over 12 months from the date of lodging an appeal against the decision of an adjudication officer to the date of the tribunal hearing, in respect of appeals lodged since 1 January 1997. [94371]

Angela Eagle: The information is in the table.

	[illegible]	*Up to 3 months*	*3 to 6 months*	*6 to 12 months*	*Over 12 months*
Total for Scotland[1]	[illegible]	3,864	13,919	22,218	8,934
Kirkwall (Orkney)	69	8	27	31	3
Lerwick (Shetland)	56	5	13	28	10

[1] Including Orkney and Shetland

Notes:

1. Figures relate to appeals registered and cleared at hearing between 1 January 1997 and 30 April 1999.
2. The GAPS computer system was introduced in late 1997. This means that the figures for 1997 are artificially low.

Source:

100 per cent. download from the Independent Tribunals Service GAPS computer.

Housing Benefit

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security, pursuant to his oral answer of 24 May 1999, *Official Report*, column 11, on housing benefit, what account was taken of the needs of students in his Department's review of Housing Benefit. [93956]

Angela Eagle: Most full-time students are not entitled to Housing Benefit as support for students comes through the educational maintenance system rather than Social Security. However, certain students in vulnerable groups, such as lone parents, remain eligible to claim. There are no plans to change this position.

We intend publish a housing Green paper.

Pensions Reform

Mr. Flight: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what recent discussions he has held with his Irish and Canadian counterparts regarding pensions reform; and if he will make a statement. [94458]

Mr. Rooker: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Social Security met Pierre Pettigrew, Canadian Minister for Human Resources Development, on 12 January, and Dermot Ahern, Irish Minister for Social, Community and Family Affairs, on 25 June. They had wide-ranging discussions on a variety of topics of mutual interest, including pension reform.

Benefits

Mr. Alan Williams: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what is his most recent estimate of the number of people receiving each of the benefits administered by his Department. [92375]

Mr. Rooker *[pursuant to the reply, 22 July 1999, c. 577–80]:* The numbers of recipients of each of the benefits administered by the Department are shown in the table below.

Benefit	*Number of recipients (Thousand)*	*Date*	*Sample size (Percentage)*
Attendance Allowance	1,232	February 1999	5
Child Benefit	7,060	June 1999	4
Council Tax Benefit	5,281	August 1998	1
Death Benefit	16	December 1998	100
Disability Living Allowance	2,042	February 1999	5
Disability Working Allowance	16	January 1999	100
Family Credit	788	February 1999	5
Housing Benefit	4,425	August 1998	1
Incapacity Benefit	1,600	November 1998	5
Income Support	3,815	February 1999	5
Industrial Injuries Benefit[1]	276	April 1998	10
Invalid Care Allowance	374	June 1999	100
Jobseeker's Allowance[2]	1,326	February 1999	5
Maternity Allowance	13	August 1998	5
Reduced Earnings Allowance[1]	157	April 1998	10
Severe Disablement Allowance	370	November 1998	5
State Retirement Pension[3]	10,867	March 1999	5
War Pensions[4, 5, 6]	302	June 1999	100
Widows Benefit	268	March 1999	5

[1] Provisional figures.
[2] Jobseeker's Allowance represents all those claiming Unemployment-related benefit. This includes Jobseeker's Allowance (Contributory), Jobseeker's Allowance (income based) and those with National Insurance credits only.
[3] Figures are for all pensioners resident in GB and also overseas.
[4] Figures relate to payments made to War Pensioners in the United Kingdom and overseas.
[5] Figures are based on management information supplied by the War Pensions Agency.
[6] Figures include War Disablement Pensions, War Widows Pensions and Child Allowances.
Note:
Earnings Top-Up figures are excluded, as it is a pilot benefit.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Access to Justice Act

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department when he expects to publish the legal aid Funding Code consequent on its Access to Justice Act 1999 reforms; and if he will make a statement. [94397]

Mr. Lock: The Legal Aid Board published a consultation paper on the new Funding Code in January 1999 at the Lord Chancellor's request. The Board intends to publish a report on that consultation, and a new draft of the Code for further consultation, on 26 October. This will constitute the consultation required by section 8(8) of the Access to Justice Act.

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department on what date the reforms in the Access to Justice Act 1999 relating to *(a)* conditional fee agreements and *(b)* legal aid will come into effect; and if he will make a statement. [94399]

Mr. Lock: On conditional fee agreements, my Department issued a consultation paper, "Conditional Fees: Sharing the Risks of Litigation", on 23 September. This fulfilled our commitment made during the passage of the Access to Justice Act, to consult before implementing the provisions in the Act on recovery of insurance premiums and success fees. Consultation closes on 26 November. Subject to the results, we plan to implement these provisions in the first quarter of next year.

On the legal aid reforms, implementation is planned to take place in several stages. On 4 January 2000, contracts for family, immigration, mental health and advice and assistance work will take effect under the Legal Aid Act 1988. These contracts will be continued when the relevant sections of Part I of the Access to Justice Act come into force in April 2000. The new Legal Services Commission and Community Legal Service will also be established in April; in the same month the Funding Code will take effect (subject to further public comment and parliamentary approval); contracting for individual high-cost cases will begin; and there will be new regulations governing financial eligibility and conditions. In October 2000, the Criminal Defence Service will replace criminal legal aid.

Judicial Appointments

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what assessment he has made of the impact of the Law Society's statements concerning the abolition of Queen's Counsel on the credibility of the Queen's Counsel system; and if he will make a statement. [94400]

Mr. Lock: My noble and learned Friend the Lord Chancellor is very disappointed that the Law Society has seen fit to adopt a concluded public position in advance of the publication of Sir Leonard Peach's report on the operation of the judicial appointments and Silk systems. He regards Silk as a kitemark of quality which engenders public confidence and enables lawyers and clients to identify the leading members of the profession. He and his officials are absolutely committed to ensuring equality of opportunity, and he makes his decisions on Silk only after wide, extensive and highly structured consultation with those who are best placed to judge the applicants against the set criteria. In fairness to solicitor applicants, he will respond to the Law Society's withdrawal of co-operation by developing other channels of consultation to ensure that he can give fair consideration to their applications.

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if he will list the *(a)* individuals and *(b)* organisations consulted as part of the secret soundings for appointments (i) to the judiciary and (ii) to leading counsel; and if he will make a statement. [94402]

Mr. Lock: The Lord Chancellor consults widely among the judiciary and senior members of the legal profession about the suitability of candidates for judicial appointment and Silk. He entirely rejects any suggestion that those arrangements constitute "secret soundings". Information about those who are consulted is publicly available. Assessments are provided in confidence, but many candidates take up the offer of feedback which includes the tenor of the assessments received.

Judicial appointments

In the case of judicial appointments, the list of those consulted depends on the nature of the judicial office to be filled. Those consulted about particular appointments are currently drawn from a list which includes the following individuals and organisations:

Individuals consulted

Lords of Appeal in Ordinary

The Vice-Chancellor

The President of the Family Division

The Senior Presiding Judge, England and Wales

Presiding Judges

Judges of the Supreme Court

Chancery Division Liaison Judges

Family Division Liaison Judges

The Vice-Chancellor of the County Palatine of Lancaster

All Circuit Judges

The President of the Council of Her Majesty's Circuit Judges

An Administrative Law High Court Judge

An Admiralty High Court Judge

The High Court Judge in Charge of the Commercial List

The High Court Judge in Charge of the Non Jury List (Queen's Bench Division)

The Judge in Charge of the Technology and Construction Court

The Judge Advocate General

The Judge Advocate of the Fleet

The Chief Naval Judge Advocate

The Director of Legal Services, RAF

The Chief Metropolitan Stipendiary Magistrate

The Chief Provincial Stipendiary Magistrate

The Chief Immigration Adjudicator

The President of the Immigration Appeal Tribunal

The Chief Social Security Commissioner

The President of the Independent Tribunal Service

The President of the VAT and Duties Tribunal

The President of the Employment Tribunals

The President of the Lands Tribunal

The Chief Chancery Master

The Senior District Judge of the Family Division

The right hon. Lord Justice Aldous, the hon. Mr. Justice Jacob and the hon. Mr. Justice Laddie (Intellectual Property Judges)

The right hon. Lord Justice Schiemann, the hon. Mr. Justice Sullivan and the hon. Mr. Justice Harrison (Judges experienced in Planning)

The hon. Mr. Justice Keene (Judge experienced in Planning and Local Government; Administrative and Public Law)

His Honour Judge Toulmin QC (Judge experienced in EC Law)

His Honour Judge Colyer QC and Mr. K. M. J. Lewison QC (Landlord and Tenant Law)

The President of The Law Society

Bar Mess Chairmen

The Chairman of the Bar

All Circuit Leaders

The Vice-Chairman of the Bar

Mr. J. J. McMullen QC (Employment and Industrial Relations)

Mr. N. J. Forwood QC (EC Law)

Mr. K. P. E. Lasok QC (Restrictive Practices and Monopolies)

Ms W. Backhouse (Housing Law Practitioners)

Any other consultees nominated by the applicant

Organisations consulted

The Law Society
The Technology and Construction Solicitors Association
The Criminal Law Solicitors' Association
The London Criminal Courts Solicitors' Association
The Association of Personal Injury Lawyers
The Solicitors' European Group
The Solicitors' Family Law Association
The Legal Aid Practitioners' Group
The London Solicitors' Litigation Association
The Solicitors' Association of High Court Advocates
The Association of Pension Lawyers
The Employment Lawyers' Association
The Immigration Law Practitioners' Association
The Insolvency Lawyers' Association
The Intellectual Property Lawyers' Association
The Education Law Association
The Local Government Group
The Race Relations Committee of the Bar
The Sex Discrimination Committee of the Bar
The Administrative Law Bar Association
The Technology and Construction Bar Association
The Chancery Bar Association
The Northern Chancery Bar Association
The Bristol and Cardiff Chancery Bar Association
The Commercial Bar Association
The Northern Circuit Commercial Bar Association
The London Common Law and Commercial Bar Association
The Personal Injury Bar Association
The Professional Negligence Bar Association
The Criminal Bar Association
The Employment Law Bar Association
The Bar European Group
The Family Law Bar Association
The Planning and Environment Law Bar Association
The Revenue Bar Association
The Parliamentary Bar Mess
Army Legal Services

Queen's Counsel

For the 1999–2000 procedure, the consultees include:

Individuals consulted

The President of The Law Society
Other Law Society consultees
Lords of Appeal in Ordinary
Lords Justices of Appeal
The Lord Chief Justice
The Master of the Rolls
The President of the Family Division
The Vice-Chancellor
The Senior Presiding Judge
The Vice-President of the Court of Appeal, Criminal Division
The Vice-President of the Queen's Bench Division
All High Court Judges
All Presiding Judges
All Family Division Liaison Judges
The Law Officers
The Recorder of London
The Common Serjeant
Resident Circuit Judges
Designated Civil Circuit Judges
Designated Family Circuit Judges
Central Criminal Court Judges
Chancery Circuit Judges
Mercantile Circuit Judges
Judges of the Technology and Construction Court
The President of the Employment Tribunal
The President of the Lands Tribunal
The President of the Independent Tribunal Service
The President of the Immigration Appeal Tribunal
The Presiding Special Commissioner of Income Tax
The Senior Queen's Bench Master
The Senior District Judge of the Family Division
The Chief Social Security Commissioner
All Circuit Leaders
The Chairman of the Bar Messes on the South Eastern Circuit
The Chairman of the Bar
The Vice-Chairman of the Bar
The Race Relations Committee of the Bar
The Sex Discrimination Committee of the Bar
Judges of the European Court of Human Rights
Judges of the Court of Justice of the EC
A Judge of the International Court of Justice, The Hague
The Advocate General of the Court of Justice of the EC
His Honour Judge Colyer QC (Landlord and Tenant Judge)
N. Forwood QC (EC Law)
Lord Lester of Herne Hill QC (Human Rights Law)
S. Thorley QC (Intellectual Property Law)
K. Lewison QC (Landlord and Tenant Law)
V. Pugh QC and P. Vallance QC (Environmental Law)
N. Blake QC (Immigration Law)
R. Hartley QC (Defamation Law)
J. Lever QC (Restrictive Practices and Monopolies Law)
J. McMullen QC (Employment and Industrial Relations)
R. S. Stone QC (Admiralty Law)
The Chief Planning Inspector
The Legal Adviser, Foreign and Commonwealth Office
The Solicitor of the Inland Revenue
Any other consultees nominated by the applicant

Organisations consulted

The Law Society Equal Opportunities Committee
The Association of Patent Solicitors
The Association of Personal Injury Lawyers
The Association of Pension Lawyers
The Commerce and Industry Group
The Criminal Law Solicitors' Association
The Education Law Association
The Employment Lawyers' Association
The Housing Law Practitioners Association
The Immigration Law Practitioners' Association
The Insolvency Lawyers' Association
The Intellectual Property Lawyers' Association
The Legal Aid Practitioners' Group
The Local Government Group
The London Criminal Courts Solicitors' Association
The London Solicitors' Litigation Association
The Technology and Construction Solicitors' Association
The Solicitors' Association of Higher Court Advocates
The Solicitors' European Group
The Solicitors' Family Law Association
The Administrative Law Bar Association
The Chancery Bar Association
The London Common Law and Commercial Bar Association
The Criminal Bar Association
The Employment Law Bar Association
The Family Law Bar Association
The Local Government and Planning and Environmental Law Bar Association
The Technology and Construction Bar Association
The Parliamentary Bar Mess
The Personal Injury Bar Association
The Professional Negligence Bar Association
The Revenue Bar Association.

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what assessment he has made of the impact of the decision of the Law Society to boycott the secret soundings process on appointments to the judiciary and leading counsel; and if he will make a statement. [94401]

Mr. Lock: The Lord Chancellor is disappointed by the Law Society's decision to withdraw from the existing arrangements for consultation on candidates for judicial and Queen's Counsel appointments, which do not in any way constitute a "secret soundings process". He has valued the help he has received from the Law Society in assessing solicitors as candidates for appointment, and he finds it difficult to see how the interests of solicitors can be advanced by a decision to withhold the assistance previously given. In fairness to solicitor candidates, the Lord Chancellor will continue to consult such representative bodies as the Solicitors' Family Law Association and the London Criminal Courts Solicitors' Association, and proposes also to develop other channels of consultation, potentially including solicitors' firms, senior practitioners and local and regional Law Societies.

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what plans he has to publish the report of Sir Leonard Peach into applications for judicial and QC appointments. [94426]

Mr. Lock: Sir Leonard Peach's report will be published after it has been completed.

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if he will extend the terms of reference of Sir Leonard Peach in his review of appointment arrangements to Queen's Counsel and the judiciary to reflect the views of the Law Society on the secret soundings system; and if he will make a statement. [94398]

Mr. Lock: The system of consultation on candidates for the judiciary and Queen's Counsel is not secret. Information about those who are consulted for assessments of suitability is publicly available. Assessments are sought in a structured way against the specific criteria for appointment; they are provided in confidence, but many candidates take up the offer of feedback, which includes the tenor of the assessments received. The scope for improvements in the consultation arrangements is within the terms of reference of the scrutiny of judicial appointments and Queen's Counsel selection procedures which my noble and learned Friend the Lord Chancellor has asked Sir Leonard Peach to undertake. The Law Society has presented its views on the system to Sir Leonard, who will no doubt take these into account when he reports in due course.

Road Accident Victims

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what steps the Court Service proposes to take to ensure that those representing road accident victims are able easily to comply with the notice requirement of the revised Motor Insurers Bureau uninsured drivers' agreement; and if he will make a statement. [94395]

Jane Kennedy: I do not foresee any action on the part of the Court Service being immediately necessary. However, I am of course willing to consider any suggestions that my hon. Friend may have. My hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State, Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, will be providing a substantive response to this and other associated parliamentary questions, and proposes personally to contact my hon. Friend.

Magistrates Courts (Sign Language)

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what plans he has to provide *(a)* sign language interpreters and *(b)* other facilities to enable people suffering from hearing loss to observe magistrates courts proceedings. [94403]

Jane Kennedy: Arrangements are in place for the provision of sign language interpreters for defendants and witnesses appearing in criminal proceedings in England and Wales. However, there are no plans to provide such interpreters for a member of the public who visits the court to observe the proceedings. The Lord Chancellor's Department has issued guidance to magistrates courts committees and local authorities on the court environment and range of physical facilities that we would expect to be provided to enable those court users with hearing difficulties to observe magistrates court proceedings. Provision of such facilities is a matter for the magistrates courts committee and local authority.

Civil Procedure Rules

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what consultation arrangements are *(a)* in place and *(b)* proposed in relation to proposed amendments to the Civil Procedure Rules; and if he will make a statement. [94396]

Mr. Lock: Papers sent to the Civil Procedure Rule Committee are also circulated to a number of other persons and bodies, including the Bar Council and the Law Society, who thus have an opportunity to comment. Major issues considered by the Committee are the subject of consultation papers, which receive a wide circulation.

Impecunious Litigants

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what assessment he has made of the impact of the levels of court fees on impecunious litigants since the start of the Civil Justice Review; and if he will make a statement. [93730]

Mr. Lock: A new civil court fee structure was introduced on 26 April 1999, at the same time as the Civil Procedure Rules. Impecunious litigants continue either to be automatically exempt from paying fees or able to apply for fee remission or reduction. There have been minor changes to fee remission and exemption provisions: the wording of the hardship criterion is now the same in each Fees Order; Court Service guidelines on fee remission have been amended; and the automatic exemption provisions have been updated to take account of the introduction of Tax Credits. None of these changes has adversely affected the level at which relief is granted.

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what plans he has to reconsider the requirements for litigants who wish to apply for reductions in court fees on the grounds of undue hardship following the Court of Appeal judgment in ex parte Scarth; and if he will make a statement. [94393]

Mr. Lock: My officials are considering whether any changes should be made to the guidelines or legislation governing fee exemption and remission, in the light of the judgment in ex parte Scarth. I shall write to my hon. Friend as soon as I am able to let him know what conclusions I have reached.

Departmental Publications

Mr. Maclean: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if he will list his Department's spending on official publications since May 1997. [93692]

Mr. Lock: The spending on official publications since May 1997 by the Lord Chancellor's Department was £4,407,500. This represents spending by LCDHQ, Court Service, Public Trust Office, Public Records Office, Office of the Official Solicitor and the Land Registry. This excludes the cost of publications produced for internal use. When the Department makes use of a private sector publisher, printing and design costs are generally met by the publisher as part of their acceptance of the risks of publication.

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department how often his Department produces *(a)* LCD News, *(b)* Talkback, *(c)* Hearsay and *(d)* Direct Brief; which of these publications are unclassified; and when each publication was first produced. [93934]

Mr. Lock: "LCD News" is published weekly and circulated to all staff in LCD HQ and the Court Service. It was first produced in 1972. It is unclassified. "Hearsay" is published bi-monthly and is circulated to staff in LCD HQ and the Court Service. It was first published in March/April 1997. It is unclassified. It replaced "Your Court," first published in October/November 1987, which was unclassified. "Talkback" was circulated to all LCD HQ staff on a six-weekly basis on average. It was first published in April 1997 and discontinued in February 1999. It was unclassified. "Direct Brief" is circulated to all Court Service staff. It is published monthly, with up to 3 to 4 "special" editions, as and when required, each year. It was first published in May 1997.

Legal Aid (Northern Ireland)

Rev. Ian Paisley: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if he will list the amount of money paid out of legal aid in Northern Ireland for *(a)* 1995–96, *(b)* 1996–97, *(c)* 1997–98 and *(d)* 1998–99. [94343]

Mr. Lock: Expenditure in relation to civil legal aid, advice by way of representation, Green Form advice and assistance and criminal legal aid for the years 1995–96 to 1998–99 is as follows:

	£ million
Year	
1995–96	25.78
1996–97	26.07
1997–98	28.85
1998–99	30.09

Oral Statements

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if he will list *(a)* the reports published by his Department and its associated bodies, *(b)* the reports received from bodies set up by his Department, *(c)* the decisions his Department has taken and *(d)* events in the UK and elsewhere, since 27 July, which satisfied the criteria he uses for deciding whether to apply to make oral statements to the House when the House is sitting. [93968]

Mr. Lock: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer given by my right hon. Friend the President of the Council on 19 October 1999, *Official Report*, column *429*.

Millennium Compliance

Mr. David Atkinson: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if he will make a statement of progress on the millennium readiness of the Lord Chancellor's Department computer systems, and those for which it is responsible in the provision of public services; if contingency plans are in place; and what slippage has occurred since the July quarterly report to the House. [93563]

Mr. Lock: Year 2000 compliance work on all Business Critical Systems in the Department, its Agencies and other bodies which report to the Lord Chancellor is complete. No slippage on these systems has occurred since the July quarterly report. More details on progress which has been made in tackling the Millennium Bug are set out in our quarterly monitoring returns, available in the Libraries of the House and on the internet. The results of the October monthly progress review of Departments and Agencies are due to be published shortly by the President of the Council.

The Departmental Business Continuity Plan and Millennium Operating Regime is complete and testing is under-way, which will be complete before the end of October.

Our provision of key public services within the Criminal Justice System has been the subject of independent assessment and reported to the National Infrastructure Forum. For the July Forum under the Action 2000 colour coding system, the Magistrates' Courts were assessed as 53 per cent. Blue, 47 per cent. Amber, and the Crown Court 77 per cent. Blue, 23 per cent. Amber. The results of the latest independent assessment of these areas of the Department's responsibility within the Criminal Justice sector will be announced at the next National Infrastructure Forum on 21 October.

Motoring Offences

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what plans he has to appoint specifically trained magistrates to handle road traffic cases. [94527]

Jane Kennedy: The Government is currently considering the report by the Parliamentary Advisory Council Transport Safety (PACTS)—'Road Traffic law and enforcement: a driving force for casualty reduction'—which includes a recommendation that only magistrates with specialised training should deal with motoring offences. There are no plans to appoint specifically trained magistrates to handle road traffic cases, but we are considering the case for additional training for all magistrates in motoring offences, including the causes of road casualties and the means of reducing them.

WALES

Mixed Sex Wards

Mr. Rogers: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what estimate he has made of the costs of conversion of hospitals to mixed sex wards in Wales. [93134]

Mr. Hanson *[holding answer 23 July 1999]:* No estimate of costs of conversion of hospitals in Wales to mixed sex wards was made in the period up to 30 June 1999. Since 1 July, this has been a matter for the National Assembly for Wales.

NHS Patients

Mr. Rogers: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how many NHS trusts in Wales were paying private sector hospitals to treat NHS patients on 1 April; if he will list the hospitals; and what were the costs involved. [93129]

Mr. Hanson *[holding answer 23 July 1999]:* This information is not collected centrally, and since 1 July 1999 this has been a matter for the National Assembly for Wales.

Consultant Posts (NHS)

Mr. Rogers: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will list the number of consultant posts currently vacant in Wales by *(a)* specialty and *(b)* health authority. [93144]

Mr. Paul Murphy *[holding answer 26 July 1999]:* This is now a matter for the National Assembly for Wales. However, as the information is collected annually in September, the most recent figures relate to a time when the matter was the responsibility of the Secretary of State. The information is collected by speciality and by trust rather than by health authority and is contained in the following table as at 30 September 1998.

Trust/speciality	*Number*	*Wte* [1]
Carmarthen and District		
Radiology	1	1.0
Dermatology	1	0.7
Glan Clwyd Hospital		
Traumatic and orthopaedic surgery	1	1.0
Glan Hafren		
Anaesthetics	1	1.0
Glan-y-Mor		
Child and adolescent psychiatry	1	1.0
General medicine	1	1.0
Gwynedd Community		
Mental illness	1	1.0
Forensic psychiatry	1	1.0
Gwynedd Hospitals		
Urology	1	1.0
Cardiology	1	1.0
Anaesthetics	1	1.0
North Glamorgan		
Anaesthetics	1	1.0
Pembrokeshire and Derwen		
Urology	1	1.0
Palliative medicine	1	1.0
Accident and emergency	1	1.0
Child and adolescent psychiatry	2	2.0
Mental illness	2	2.0
Old age psychiatry	1	1.0
Rhondda		
Old age psychiatry	1	0.5
Velindre		
Palliative medicine	1	0.7
Clinical oncology	1	1.0
Total	23	22.0
Health authority area		
Bro Taf	4	3.3
Dyfed Powys	10	9.7
Gwent	1	1.0
Morgannwg	2	2.0
North Wales	6	6.0
Total	23	22.0

[1] Whole time equivalent

Class Sizes

Mr. Rogers: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what plans he has to reduce primary school class sizes in Wales. [93145]

Mr. Hanson *[holding answer 26 July 1999]:* The Secretary of State started to implement plans to reduce primary school class sizes in Wales from September 1998. Following the £3.7 million Welsh Office grant for infant class size reduction in 1998–99, the Schools Census for January 1999 showed that the number of large infant classes in Wales had reduced by 50 per cent. when compared with January 1998. Out of 100,000 pupils just 15,000 remained in classes of over 30.

As a result of the £11.3 million allocated for 1999–2000, it is expected that 90 per cent. of the problem of large infant classes, which existed in 1997, will be solved.

The Secretary of State has no further plans to reduce primary class size, as this is now a matter for the National Assembly for Wales.

Millennium Compliance

Mr. David Atkinson: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will make a statement of progress on the millennium readiness of his Department's computer systems, and those for which it is responsible in the provision of public services; if contingency plans are in place; and what slippage has occurred since the July quarterly report to the House. [93573]

Mr. Paul Murphy: My Department is not responsible for any computer systems which deliver public services. My Department's internal computer systems form part of a larger network which also serves the National Assembly for Wales. A full inventory of every PC on this network has been undertaken, and progress is well advanced.

I understand that contingency plans are in place and I am not aware of any slippage since the July quarterly report in the House. The National Assembly for Wales is responsible for millennium preparations in Wales, and Mrs. Edwina Hart made a statement to the Assembly on 23 September regarding this matter.

Departmental Publications

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will list the titles of the in-house publications and newsletters which were produced for the staff of his Department, excluding non-departmental public bodies and agencies, in the last five years, specifying the dates on which each title was first produced, the frequency with which each title is produced and the current secrecy classification of each title. [93855]

Mr. Paul Murphy: The "Staff Bulletin" was first produced in November 1993. It is issued weekly, and it does not have a security classification.

"Links" is a staff newspaper which was first produced in November 1997. It is issued every two months, or six times a year, and it does not have a security classification.

In addition, a range of ad-hoc publications have been produced by various divisions of the Department for internal distribution to staff, on topics such as the devolution process. Information on each of these individual, and generally one-off, items is not readily available and could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Mr. Maclean: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will list his Department's spending on official publications since May 1997. [93683]

Mr. Paul Murphy: The figures are as follows:

	£
The Welsh Office (May 1997-July 1999)	
May 1997-March 1998	82,611
April 1998-March 1999	139,232
April 1999-July 1999	24,103
The Office of the Secretary of State for Wales	
July 1999–13 October 1999	0

Carbon Dioxide Emissions

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what proportion of the carbon dioxide emissions reduction needed for a 20 per cent. reduction from the UK's 1990 levels by 2010 he expects to be delivered in Wales. [93866]

Mr. Paul Murphy: Following Kyoto in 1997, the United Kingdom has agreed a legally binding target to cut emissions of a basket of six greenhouse gases by 12.5 per cent. below 1990 levels over the period 2008–12. The UK Government also has a domestic goal to cut carbon dioxide emissions by 20 per cent. below 1990 levels by 2010. The Government and the devolved Administrations are currently developing a draft climate change programme, which will set out how the UK will deliver its Kyoto target and move towards its domestic goal. Consultation on the draft programme will take place towards the end of the year.

Ministerial Engagements

Mr. Walter: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will list the agriculture shows in Wales he has *(a)* attended and *(b)* intends to visit this year. [94043]

Mr. Paul Murphy: I have not attended any agriculture shows in Wales this year and have no plans to do so at present. However, following my appointment as Secretary of State, and reflecting my keen interest in the future of the Welsh farming industry, I hope to visit Welsh farms and attend agricultural events in Wales in the year ahead.

Welsh Concordats

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what progress has been made on matters relating to concordats with the National Assembly; and if he will make a statement. [94152]

Mr. Paul Murphy: The Memorandum of Understanding and supplementary agreements between the United Kingdom Government, Scottish Ministers and the Cabinet of the National Assembly for Wales was published earlier this month (Cm 4444). Bi-lateral concordats between Whitehall Departments and the Assembly are being finalised.

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what discussions he has had with, and when he next intends to meet, the first Secretary and the Economic Development Secretary, regarding concordats relating to inward investment in Wales. [94174]

Mr. Paul Murphy: One of the supplementary agreements to the Memorandum of Understanding between the UK Government and the devolved Administrations concerned financial assistance to industry. I discussed this with the First Secretary before it was agreed. I meet the First Secretary and the Economic Development Secretary regularly to discuss a variety of topics.

Comprehensive Spending Review

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales when *(a)* he last met and *(b)* he plans next to meet the Chancellor of the Exchequer to discuss the Welsh Block for 2000–01. [94173]

Mr. Paul Murphy: I see the Chancellor of the Exchequer regularly when we discuss a number of issues.

Election Reform

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what discussions he has had with the Electoral Reform Society regarding measures to increase the turnout for elections in Wales. [94181]

Mr. Paul Murphy: None.

Employment Concordats

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what discussions he has had with, and when he next intends to meet, the First Secretary and the Economic Development Secretary, regarding concordats relating to employment in Wales. [94175]

Mr. Paul Murphy: Concordats will set out the administrative arrangements between the Assembly and each Whitehall Department. That dealing with the management of issues relating to employment is for the Assembly to discuss with the Department for Education and Employment.

Beef Exports

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what meetings he has had with the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food to discuss assistance for Welsh beef farmers to export their beef; and if he will publish the minutes of these meetings. [94177]

Mr. Paul Murphy: I am in regular contact with my right hon. Friend and we discuss a range of issues. However, assistance to Welsh beef farmers is a matter for the National Assembly for Wales, which is discussing related matters direct with my right hon. Friend.

Milk Marque

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what discussions he has had with *(a)* the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry and *(b)* the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food regarding the implementation of the findings of the Milk Marketing Council's report on the future of Milk Marque. [94179]

Mr. Paul Murphy: None. The National Assembly for Wales is pursuing this directly with my right hon. Friend.

Traffic Congestion

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions concerning measures to reduce traffic congestion between London and Cardiff; and if he informed the Economic Development Secretary in the National Assembly for Wales of the outcome. [94182]

Mr. Paul Murphy: While I take a keen interest in transport issues in Wales and value the importance of good communications, the development of an integrated transport policy for Wales is the responsibility of the National Assembly. I understand that Assembly officials are in direct contact with officials in the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions.

Welsh Assembly

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what steps he has taken to ensure that the Welsh Assembly complies with section 76(3) of the Government of Wales Act 1998. [94180]

Mr. Paul Murphy: Under Standing Order 6.7. of the Assembly, documents relating to plenary sessions are made available to me at the same time as they are to Assembly Members.

Private Office (Running Costs)

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what was the cost of running his Private Office each year since 1995–96; and what estimate he has made of the cost of running the office in (i) 1999–2000, (ii) 2000–01 and (iii) 2001–02. [94176]

Mr. Paul Murphy: The cost of Ministerial Private Offices in the Welsh Office was as follows:

	£
1995–96	724,230
1996–97	720,625
1997–98	758,763
1998–99	820,240

Estimated costs of the Ministerial Private Offices are:

	£
1999–2000	672,837
2000–01	682,930
2001–02	693,022

Abattoirs

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what discussions he has had with the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food regarding the number of EU export-approved abattoirs in Wales; and if he has informed the Agriculture and Rural Economy Secretary of the Welsh Assembly of the outcome. [94178]

Mr. Paul Murphy: I have held a number of discussions with my right hon. Friend on a variety of issues concerning Welsh Agriculture and I have met representatives of the NFU and FUW. The specific issue of EU export-approved abattoirs in Wales is, however, a matter for the National Assembly for Wales.

Written Answers to Questions

Wednesday 20 October 1999

CABINET OFFICE

Departmental Meetings (United States)

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office how many times *(a)* Ministers and *(b)* officials in her Department have held meetings with the United States Special Envoy for Cryptography, Ambassador David Aaron, since 1 January 1998 on (i) encryption and (ii) other issues; what were the dates and locations of each meeting; and what other (1) British and (2) United States Government Departments took part in each meeting. [94011]

Marjorie Mowlam: Cabinet Office Ministers have not met Ambassador Aaron. Cabinet Office officials have met Ambassador Aaron on four occasions since 1 January 1998. Each of these meetings related to discussions about national and international policies on encryption and possible changes to export controls on cryptographic goods under the Wassenaar Arrangement for Export Controls on Conventional Arms and Dual Use Goods. The dates and locations of these meetings were as follows: 18 May 1998, London; 4 June 1998, Stockholm; 3 September 1998, Ottawa; 3 December 1998, Vienna.

The meetings on 4 June, 3 September and 3 December were also attended by officials from the Department of Trade and Industry and the Government's technical advisers on information security, the Communications Electronic Security Group.

On the United States side, the meetings involved officials from the Departments of State, Commerce, Justice and Defense, and from the National Security Council. With the exception of the 18 May meeting, which was a bilateral visit by Ambassador Aaron to the United Kingdom, these contacts were multinational meetings involving a number of other countries.

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office when officials from her Department attended meetings of the United States Department of Commerce's Technical Advisory Committee to Develop Federal Information Processing Standard for the Federal Key Management Infrastructure. [94010]

Mr. Ian McCartney: No officials from the Cabinet Office have attended meetings of this committee.

Special Advisers

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office, pursuant to the answer of 29 June 1999, *Official Report*, column *128*, on special advisers, how many meetings Mike Trace, deputy to the UK Anti-Drugs Co-ordinator, held with members and officials of the United States Government during his visit to New York on 7 to 10 June 1998; and if she will list the date of each meeting and the names of the United States officials and members present. [93910]

Marjorie Mowlam: The Deputy UK Anti-Drugs Co-ordinator, Mike Trace visited New York as part of the UK delegation to the United Nations General Assembly Special Session from Monday, 7 June to Wednesday, 9 June. During that visit he met the United States 'Drug Czar', General Barry McCaffrey, Director, Office of National Drug Control Policy, Executive Office of the President.

Mr. Trace did not meet any other members of the United States Government on this visit; however, he did meet with numerous representatives from other nations and from non-governmental organisations.

Better Regulation Task Force

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what arrangements the Better Regulation Task Force has for liaising with other Departments. [94638]

Marjorie Mowlam: The Better Regulation Task Force is an independent advisory body supported by officials in the Cabinet Office Regulatory Impact Unit. The Task Force liaises with other Departments through established inter-departmental channels between Cabinet Office officials and their counterparts in other Departments, and through other arrangements as necessary.

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what reviews are currently being considered by the Better Regulation Task Force for 2000. [94503]

Marjorie Mowlam: In the year 1999–2000 the Better Regulation Task Force is undertaking reviews of payroll (tax and benefit integration), the overall impact of regulation on the hotel and restaurant industry, small firms exemptions, public sector regulation, self-regulation as an alternative to state regulation and regulatory protection of vulnerable groups.

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what regulations broken down by department have been reviewed by the Better Regulation Task Force. [94501]

Marjorie Mowlam: The areas of regulation which have been subject to published reviews by the Better Regulation Task Force are as set out together with details of the main Departments involved. The Task Force has also responded to a number of Government consultation documents. Full details of each review are available on the Better Regulation Task Force website, which can be found at www.cabinet-office.gov/uk/bru/index/task.htm.

Review	*Main regulations covered*	*Responsible Department*
Consumer Affairs	A wide range of consumer affairs regulations	Department of Trade and Industry, Home Office
Long Term Care	Registered Homes Act, 1984, and supporting secondary legislation	Department of Health
Early years Education and Day-care	The Children Act, 1989, The Nursery Education and Grant-Maintained Schools Act 1996, the Schools Inspection Act 1996	Department for Education and Employment (DFEE) and Department of Health
Access to Government Funding for the Voluntary Sector	This review examined in general terms the regulatory framework applying to Government funding of the voluntary sector	The review was relevant to all Departments that fund the voluntary sector
Licensing Law	The Licensing Act, 1964, The Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1982, The London Government Act 1963 and related secondary legislation	The Home Office
Enforcement	The review took as case studies the following regulatory frameworks: 1. The Health and Safety at Work, etc. Act, 1974 and 2. The Fire Precautions Act 1971 and The Fire Precautions (Workplace) Regulations 1997	The Health and Safety Executive, The Home Office
Anti-discrimination Legislation	The Disability Discrimination Act 1995, The Sex Discrimination Act 1975, The Equal Pay Act 1970, The Race Relations Act 1976	The Department for Education and Employment, The Home Office
Fit Person Criteria	The Police Act, 1997 and the Rehabilitation of Offenders Act 1974	The Home Office
Regulation and Small Firms	This review considered in general terms the range of regulations that impact on small firms	This review was relevant to most Government Departments

Enforcement Concordat

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office how many local authorities have signed up to the Enforcement Concordat. [94553]

Marjorie Mowlam: There are 142 local authorities in England and Wales and 21 in Scotland that have signed up to the Concordat for all of their regulatory enforcement functions. A further 19 local authorities in England and Wales have adopted the Concordat for some of their regulatory enforcement functions.

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office how many agencies have accepted the Enforcement Concordat; and if she will list them. [94552]

Marjorie Mowlam: Twenty-two central Government enforcement agencies have adopted the Concordat. They are:

Animals, Bylaws and Coroners Unit
Animals (Scientific Procedures) Inspectorate
Civil Aviation Authority
Companies House
HM Customs and Excise
Dairy Hygiene Inspectorate
Drinking Water Inspectorate
Driving Standards Agency
Drugs Branch
Egg Marketing Inspectorate
Engineering Inspectorate
Environment Agency
Export Control Organisation
Health and Safety Executive
Northern Ireland Department of Economic Development's Trading Standards Service
Department of Health
Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority
Inland Revenue
Insolvency Service
Marine and Coastguard Agency
National Bee Unit
Radiocommunications Agency.

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office if the Enforcement Concordat is a new initiative. [94554]

Marjorie Mowlam: The Enforcement Concordat was launched on 4 March 1998. It was formally signed by the then Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office on behalf of central Government and by Councillor John Ryan on behalf of the Local Government Association.

I refer my hon. Friend to the answer the then Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Scarborough and Whitby (Mr. Quinn) on 4 March 1998, *Official Report*, columns 692–94, announcing the publication of the Enforcement Concordat.

Correspondence

Ms Ryan: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what guidance has been given to Ministers on the handling of correspondence from Members of the Scottish Parliament, the National Assembly for Wales and the Northern Ireland Assembly. [95070]

Marjorie Mowlam: The Cabinet Office has recently produced guidance for Departments on the handling of correspondence under devolution. This includes guidance on the handling of correspondence from Members of the

Scottish Parliament, the National Assembly for Wales and the Northern Ireland Assembly. Copies of the guidance have been placed in the Libraries of the House.

Departmental Publications

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office if she will list the titles of the in-house publications and newsletters which were produced for the staff of her Department, excluding non-departmental public bodies and agencies, in the last five years, specifying the dates on which each title was first produced, the frequency with which each title is produced and the current secrecy classification of each title. [93853]

Mr. Ian McCartney: The Cabinet Office has a wide range of in-house publications to keep its people well informed and to ensure the efficient operation of the Department in delivering its objectives. Most publications are now available on the Department's intranet.

Cabinet Office in-house publications and newsletters produced for staff in the last five years

Publication	*Frequency*	*Classification*	*Start date*	*End date*
SCOOPS—Staff magazine	Monthly	Unclassified	1989	Ongoing
The Weekly—weekly round up of news/vacancies etc.	Weekly	Unclassified	1997	Ongoing
Cabinet Office organisation chart[1]	Quarterly	Unclassified	September 1997	Ongoing
Senior Staff Guide	Quarterly	Unclassified	—	Ongoing
Cabinet Office paper directory	Half yearly	Unclassified	—	Ongoing
Infra-red newsletter from IT section	Quarterly	Unclassified	January 1997	Ongoing
New Accommodation project newsletter	Quarterly	Unclassified	November 1998	Ongoing
Resources Accounting and Budgeting Manual	On Intranet	Unclassified	—	Ongoing
Finance and Planning Manual	On Intranet	Unclassified	—	Ongoing
Procurement Manual	On Intranet	Unclassified	—	Ongoing
Fraud and Negligence Manual	On Intranet	Unclassified	—	Ongoing
Little Black Finance Handbook	On Intranet	Unclassified	—	Ongoing
Managing Local Finance Guide	On Intranet	Unclassified	—	Ongoing
Punctuation Basics	On Intranet	Unclassified	—	Ongoing
Planning and Budgeting Round Guidance	Annually	Unclassified	—	Ongoing
Cabinet Office Annual Business Plan	Annually	Unclassified	—	Ongoing
Mid-year Performance Report	Annually	Unclassified	—	Ongoing
Annual Performance Report	Annually	Unclassified	—	Ongoing
Mid-Year Review Guidance	Annually	Unclassified	—	Ongoing
The role of Internal Audit in the Cabinet Office—Leaflet	Issued once	Unclassified	November 1997	—
Guide to Parliamentary business	—	—	—	—
The Parliamentary Directory	—	—	—	—
Conditions of service for Part-Time staff	As required	Unclassified	February 1998	Ongoing
Performance Appraisal Guidance	As required	Unclassified	February 1997	Ongoing
Pregnancy and Work (booklet)	As required	Unclassified	Pre 1994	Ongoing
Training and Development Notices	As required	Unclassified	Pre 1995	Ongoing
Training Directory	Annually	Unclassified	Pre 1995	Ongoing
Grapevine (weekly bulletin of Personnel Division)	Weekly	Unclassified	January 1999	Ongoing
Personnel Division Annual Report	Annually	Unclassified	May 1999	Ongoing
Pay and Grading Consultation Document	—	Unclassified	April 1997	Ongoing
Cabinet Office Management Code	As required	Unclassified	July 1996	Ongoing
Terms and conditions of service Handbook	As required	Unclassified	March 1996	Ongoing
Conduct and Discipline Staff Handbook	As required	Unclassified	February 1995	Ongoing
	As required	Usually Unclassified (depends on subject content)	Pre 1994	Ongoing
Office Notices				
Pay and grading Newsletters	Up to 7 per year	Unclassified	February 1995	Ongoing
Job Advertising Scheme Guidance	As required	Unclassified	July 1995	Ongoing
Banding Guidance	Issued once	Unclassified	September 1997	—
Human Resource Strategy Document	Issued once	Unclassified	1996	—
The Phoenix Project Report (Report on Department's Central Services)	Issued once	Unclassified	December 1994	—
Induction Pack for new entrants	Half yearly	Unclassified	1997	Ongoing

[1] Available on internet

DEFENCE

Strategic Defence Initiative

Mr. Heseltine: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list those contracts, awarded to *(a)* British companies and *(b)* British research facilities under the US Strategic Defence Initiative and their total value in each year since 1985. [94430]

Mr. Hoon: So far as contracts awarded to British Companies are concerned, I refer the right hon. Member to the answer given on 19 July 1999, *Official Report*, column *424*.

So far as contracts awarded to British research facilities are concerned, the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between the UK and US Governments in respect of the Strategic Defence Initiative (SDI), provides for contracts to be placed directly with the other Party's universities, which could include research facilities. As with contracts established directly with British companies, no central or comprehensive record is maintained.

It is believed, however, that most research has been undertaken on a Government to Government basis under an arrangement known as Letters of Offer and Acceptance (LOAs). In such cases research has been undertaken by

the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency (DERA) or its forerunners. The total value of LOAs entered into since 1985 is approximately $150 million. While expenditure on an annual basis is not available in detail, work commenced at approximately $2 million per annum in 1986, building to $12 million over a seven-year period, then falling away to some $5 million currently.

Armed Forces (Strength)

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if Sir Roger Wheeler, Chief of General Staff, cleared with Ministers his comments on armed forces strength and commitments contained in his interview published in the press on 3 August; and if he will make a statement. [94383]

Mr. Hoon *[holding answer 19 October 1999]:* General Sir Roger Wheeler was invited by Ministers to give the interview, and spoke with their full knowledge.

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list *(a)* the current strength and *(b)* the establishment strength of (i) the Royal Navy, (ii) the Army and (iii) the RAF; and if he will make a statement. [94784]

Mr. Spellar: We remain entirely committed to achieving full manning in the Services, a key SDR target. Last year's recruiting performance was excellent; for the Army the best this decade. An Armed Forces Overarching Personnel Strategy is being developed, of which recruitment and retention will be major strands.

The required strength is expressed in terms of trained personnel. As at 1 September 1999, the latest date for which figures are available, the trained strength and requirement of the UK regular armed forces is:

	Trained strength	*Trained requirement*
Naval Service[1]	38,652	40,312
Army	96,381	102,389
RAF	51,395	53,081

[1] Includes Royal Marines

EU Driving Directive

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what assessment his Department has made of the impact of the European Driving directive on the services; and if he will make a statement. [94782]

Mr. Spellar: The Armed Forces are exempt from European Union drivers' hours legislation. It is, however, my Department's policy to comply with the spirit of the legislation, where possible, except during periods of active operations, training conducted under operational conditions, or in certain cases when acting in support of Civil Ministries and Authorities or when operating solely on Crown Land.

Gulf War Syndrome

Mr. Derek Twigg: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will set out *(a)* the results of his Department's funded research programme into the possible interactions between the vaccines and nerve agent pre-treatments that were administered to British troops during the Gulf conflict and *(b)* details of any other of his Department's research relevant to the health effects of organophosphates and carbonates, including nerve agents, organophosphate pesticides and nerve agent pre-treatments. [95072]

Mr. Spellar: The initial phase of the research programme involving a preliminary toxicological study of the effects of the co-administration of vaccines and nerve agent pre-treatments (NAPS) in guinea pigs has recently been completed at CBD Porton Down. An outline of the study's findings was presented at a conference on research into Gulf veterans' illnesses in Washington DC in June. This initial stage of the overall research programme, which was primarily designed to help inform the design of more sophisticated longer-term studies, does not report any remarkable findings on the administration of the combination of vaccines and nerve agent treatments examined.

The results of the study were reviewed by the Independent Panel, which oversees the vaccine interactions research programme, at a meeting earlier this year. The Panel agreed that the researchers should proceed with publication of the results of this initial study through the appropriate scientific channels. The Panel also agreed to more extensive rodent studies, to be carried out at the National Institute of Biological Standards and Controls, and further studies at CBD Porton Down which will include sophisticated techniques to examine any subtle long-term neurophysiological and cognitive effects of the administration of vaccines and NAPS.

I have arranged to have a copy of the information presented at the Washington meeting placed in the Library of the House. A more detailed paper is being prepared for submission to a peer-reviewed scientific journal and will be published as soon as possible. This information will be placed on the Gulf veterans' illnesses page on the MOD website in due course.

I am also today placing in the Library of the House copies of the Defence Scientific Advisory Council's Working Party Report on the Long Term Neurotoxicity of the Anticholinesterases, together with the Ministry of Defence's response to the Report. I am also placing in the Library three previously unpublished studies by CBD Porton Down, and one already published, which are referred to in the Report.

The Report, which is a review of existing literature and research, concludes that there is robust evidence that high doses of organophosphates may have long term toxic effects on the peripheral nervous system; that there is more limited information about the long term toxic effects of low doses of organophosphates on the central nervous system; and that there is little evidence that the prophylactic use of carbamates (such as NAPS) is associated with any long term adverse health effects, although this should be further explored. We hope that it will be a useful source of information on the long-term effects of these compounds. The Ministry of Defence welcomes the Report. We accept the recommendations for further research.

As the MOD's response to the Report makes clear, we continue to carry out a range of research into the health effects of organophosphates and carbamates, including nerve agents and nerve agent pre-treatments. In addition to the research set out there, work is underway at CBD

Porton Down to investigate the question of whether these compounds might have an effect on the immune system. This work, which is following up research reported in the open literature, is in its very early stages and we cannot yet say whether there is any such effect, or what the implications of that might be. We intend to make public the findings of this work as soon as possible, as each part of it reaches scientific maturity.

Colchester Garrison

Mr. Pickthall: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the progress of the Colchester Garrison PFI project. [95211]

Mr. Spellar: I am delighted to announce that, following a thorough evaluation of detailed proposals from three short listed bidders, we have now selected RMPA Services, a consortia comprising Sir Robert McAlpine, Primary Management and W.S. Atkins, as the preferred bidder for the redevelopment of Colchester Garrison.

Detailed contract negotiations will now commence with RMPA Services with the aim of achieving contract signature towards the end of next year.

The benefits which we see flowing from this deal are the replacement of an estate which is mainly old and substandard, poorly laid out and significantly underscale, with one which will provide high quality barracks and facilities which conform to the appropriate accommodation scales, are flexible to use and are capable of further development. Furthermore this will be achieved very much more quickly under the PFI route than would be possible using our own internal procedures. For example, once the contract is signed we expect the redevelopment to be complete within four years compared to the 15 years it could have taken using a conventional, staged approach. It will also free up land for redevelopment close to Colchester town centre and therefore be of benefit to the local community.

Finally, this is a good deal for the taxpayer. As a result of the competitive bids received, we believe that from RMPA Services will offer the MOD excellent value for money resulting from design efficiencies, economies of scale in development and a more cost effective delivery of the support services.

HOUSE OF COMMONS

E-mail

Mr. Linton: To ask the Chairman of the Information Committee if he will make a statement on arrangements for the introduction of a new e-mail system in the House. [94818]

Mr. Allan: As part of the Parliament-wide Information Technology Convergence Programme, which has been endorsed by the Information Committee, all personal computers linked to the PDVN are being converted to a new e-mail system, Microsoft Exchange and Outlook 98. Some older computers linked to the PDVN will need to be upgraded or replaced if they are to continue to use the parliamentary e-mail system. The old e-mail system, Groupwise, will be closed down on 16 November 1999, prior to the beginning of the next Session on 17 November.

The Parliamentary Communications Directorate (PCD) has sent to all Members and their staff information about the computer specifications required to run the new e-mail system and can advise Members and their staff about new central purchasing arrangements through which Members may purchase new equipment which meets those specifications. Members whose staff are linked to the PDVN from their constituencies are being sent a disc and information about remote conversion to use Outlook. Members and their staff based in the parliamentary precincts whose computers have not yet been converted to Outlook can arrange a date for their conversion and for a short training course by contacting PCD on extension 0899. Courses are being arranged for each weekday in October and November.

Breast-feeding

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Chairman of the Administration Committee what assessments he has made of the adequacy of the arrangements for breast-feeding in the buildings for which her Committee is responsible; and if she will make a statement. [94798]

Mrs. Roe: There are no designated facilities for breast-feeding on the Parliamentary Estate. However, I understand that individual hon. Members have made arrangements, through the Serjeant at Arms, for appropriate facilities to be made available as required.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Holocaust Remembrance Day

Mr. Tony Lloyd: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he will consult on the proposal for a Holocaust Remembrance Day. [95213]

Mr. Straw: We issued a consultation paper on 18 October. Copies have been placed in the Library.

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

Urban Renaissance

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the progress of the development of an urban renaissance in the north-west. [94510]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The Government intend to respond to the urban renaissance recommendations by early summer next year. Already in the north-west, an urban regeneration company (URC), Liverpool Vision, has been set up in direct response to one of the recommendations in the Roger's Report and is actively pursuing the regeneration of the city centre. It is likely the URC for east Manchester will be announced shortly.

Vacant Properties

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) how many local government properties are currently unoccupied; [93672]

(2) how many houses were unoccupied at the latest date for which figures are available; and how many had been unoccupied for more than *(a)* six months and *(b)* 12 months. [93677]

Mr. Mullin: The latest available information shows that there were 753,200 dwellings in England vacant on 1 April 1998 of which 81,700 were local authority-owned. A level of vacancy is a usual feature of the stock, reflecting turnover and movement within the stock. However, recent analysis of local authorities reporting problems with unpopular housing contained in the PAT 7 "Unpopular Housing" report shows that low demand neighbourhoods tend to have vacancies at three times the national level.

A breakdown by length of time vacant is not collected centrally for all tenures. The available information is as follows:

Vacant dwellings at 1 April 1998

	Total vacant	*Vacant more than 6 months and less than 12 months*	*More than 12 months*
Local Authority	81,700	10,600	16,000
Registered Social Landlords	29,300	4,100	4,800
Other Public Sector	19,000	not available	not available
Other Private Sector	623,200	not available	220,100
Total Dwellings (all tenures)	753,200	not available	not available

Source:
DETR Housing Investment Programme returns
Housing Corporation RSR forms

Litter Offences (Chelmsford)

Mr. Burns: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions in each of the last five years for which figures are available, how many *(a)* warnings and *(b)* fines were issued for litter offences in the Chelmsford local authority area under the Environmental Protection Act 1990. [94779]

Mr. Hill: The local authority does not collect information on the number of warnings issued for litter offences. No fines have been issued for litter offences in the Chelmsford local authority area under the Environmental Protection Act 1990 in the last five years.

Alandia Stream

Mr. Wallace: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the investigations to establish why the master of the Alandia Stream which broke down in the Fair Isle channel on 26 June delayed notifying the coastguard of his ship's condition. [94602]

Mr. Hill: The vessel when adrift, was never within six miles of the coast or within the designated six mile "area to be avoided" navigational zone around Fair Isle. The vessel fully complied with the MCA requirement to accept a tug and the Anglian Prince was despatched to the scene. A tow was accepted and the vessel taken to Sullom Voe, Shetland as a port of refuge, keeping outside of the "area to be avoided" as per MCA instructions.

Following the Port State Control Inspection of the vessel at Sullom Voe, MCA investigated why six hours had elapsed before the tanker reported to the Coastguard that she was in difficulty.

The Master's response was that he wished to check the problem to see if it could be fixed without assistance. He maintained that the vessel's drift was monitored carefully to ensure that the ship remained outside the area to be avoided.

The MCA advised the Master that the UK Government expect to be immediately informed of any incident that affected the safety of vessels or possible endangerment to the environment even when assistance was not required. The MCA formed the opinion that the Finnish Master well understood the concerns of the UK authorities and would be more willing to keep the Coastguard informed of any future incidents.

The MCA also contacted the Bahamas, the Flag State Administration, notifying them that we would have expected an earlier notification from the Master to the UK Coastguard. The Bahamas have agreed to follow this up with the Finnish owners of the vessel.

Maritime and Coastguard Agency

Shona McIsaac: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he expects to announce the key targets for the Maritime and Coastguard Agency for 1999–2000. [94881]

Mr. Hill: I have today placed in the House Library a copy of the agency's business plan which includes its key targets for 1999–2000. The issue of the plan was delayed pending the publication of the Government's response to the Transport Select Committee's report on the Maritime and Coastguard Agency which recommended de-merger. That response was published on 12 August.

The key targets for the Maritime and Coastguard Agency are:

To complete: (a) at least 95 per cent. of the agreed programme of inspections, and (b) at least 90 per cent. of agreed key tasks.

To decide on the search and rescue (SAR) response to accidents and life-threatening situations, and to initiate action if necessary, within 5 minutes of being alerted in at least 95 per cent. of cases.

To follow up at least 95 per cent. of significant breaches of safety and environmental aspects of Merchant Shipping legislation to determine whether prosecution is appropriate.

To implement the outcomes of the review of the organisation, operations and functions of MCA to be operational by 31 December 1999.

Infrastructure Developments

Mr. Sawford: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he will

publish the Code of Practice on the Dissemination of Information during Major Infrastructure Developments; and if he will make a statement. [95071]

Mr. Raynsford: I have today published the Code of Practice and placed copies in the Library. The purpose of the code is to ensure that people are given as much information as possible at all stages of a development. It does, however, recognise that there may be exceptional circumstances where non-disclosure is justifiable, such as when issues of commercial confidentiality arise.

The provision of a referee who can be approached by members of the public, if they believe that information, which should be forthcoming under the code, has not been provided, is a new element in the code.

A key aspect of our proposals for modernising the planning system is to improve the handling of major infrastructure developments. The new code on the dissemination of information links the planning and implementation phases of such developments.

We are currently analysing the responses to our consultation paper on proposals for streamlining the planning approval procedures for major developments. We are also conducting a fundamental review to improve the system of compulsory purchase and compensation, which are often important aspects of major development implementation.

All Government Departments in England and their Agencies will follow the code. The Scottish Executive and the Welsh Assembly will be making their own arrangements. The code is also commended to local authorities and private sector developers who may be promoting major infrastructure developments.

Greater London Authority

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what further steps he is taking to prepare for the Greater London Authority. [95212]

Mr. Hill: My predecessor, my hon. Friend the Minister for London and Construction, announced on 11 June 1999, *Official Report*, columns *398–99*, that my Department had earmarked provision over the four years 1998–99 to 2001–02 to meet GLA preparation costs and that separate provision was being made to cover the costs of the first elections to the GLA, including publicity, and for establishing Transport for London and the London Development Agency. My Department has now earmarked £20.6 million from within existing budgets to cover these costs.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Ministerial Meetings (United States)

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what meetings she held with members and officials of the United States Government during her visits to the United States on 22 to 24 June 1997 and 14 to 18 April 1998; and if she will list the date and location of each meeting and the names of the members and officials of the United States Government at each meeting. [93955]

Clare Short: I visited New York from 22–24 June 1997 to attend the United Nations General Assembly Special Session (UNGASS) on the follow-up to the UN Conference on Environment and Development. I did not have any bilateral meetings with members and officials of the United States Government.

On my visit to Washington from 14–18 April 1998, I had meetings with:

Mr. Eisenstadt of the US State Department

Mr. Atwood of USAID

Mr. Schuerch of the US Treasury.

Demining

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what is the expected expenditure by her Department on humanitarian demining for 2000 and 2001. [94666]

Clare Short: In 1997 I announced plans to double our annual expenditure on humanitarian mine action to reach £10 million in the financial year 2000–01. The programme is on track to meet this target.

Special Advisers

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development, pursuant to her answer of 6 July 1999, *Official Report*, column *462*, on Special Advisers, if she will list the countries to which her Special Advisers have travelled since 2 May 1997. [93911]

Clare Short: Since May 1997, Special Advisers from my Department travelled to the following countries on official business:

Antigua

Bangladesh

Belgium

Canada

China

France

Hong Kong

Japan

Jordan

Kenya

Nepal

Tanzania

Thailand

Vietnam

West Bank and Gaza.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Animal Health Act 1981

Mr. Baker: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if it is his policy not to amend the arrangements his Department has for applying sections 40 to 49 of the Animal Health Act 1981 and any subordinate legislation made under the same sections of the Act; and if he will make a statement. [93213]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 27 July 1999]*: We have no plans for such amendments.

NORTHERN IRELAND

Decommissioning

8. **Mr. Swayne:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will make a statement about the implementation of weapons decommissioning. [92978]

Mr. Ingram: The Government are determined to see the Agreement implemented in full. We, along with the Irish Government, have appointed Senator Mitchell to review the points of difficulty: an inclusive Executive exercising devolved powers and decommissioning of all paramilitary weapons by May 2000 in a manner determined by the Decommissioning Commission. Senator Mitchell aims to conclude his review speedily.

Good Friday Agreement

9. **Mr. Gerald Howarth:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many prisoners have been released under the terms of the Good Friday agreement. [92979]

Mr. Ingram: To date there have been 298 prisoners who have been released from prison under the terms of the Good Friday agreement. This is drawn from information current at 13 October 1999.

11. **Mr. Gardiner:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will make a statement on progress in implementing the Belfast agreement. [92981]

12. **Mr. Baker:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will make a statement on progress on the peace process. [92982]

15. **Mr. Wilkinson:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will make a statement on the progress he has made towards establishing a power-sharing executive for Northern Ireland. [92986]

Mr. Mandelson: I refer my hon. Friend the Member for Brent, North (Mr. Gardiner) and the hon. Members for Lewes (Mr. Baker) and for Ruislip-Northwood (Mr. Wilkinson) to the answer I gave earlier to my hon. Friends the Members for Amber Valley (Judy Mallaber), for Walsall, North (Mr. Winnick) and for Cleethorpes (Shona McIsaac). 20 October 1999, *Official Report*, columns 424–26.

16. **Mr. Gareth R. Thomas:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what recent meetings he has had with the Irish Government concerning the implementation of the Good Friday agreement. [92987]

Mr. Mandelson: Ministers continue to meet with members of the Irish Government on a regular basis to discuss matters relating to the implementation of the Good Friday Agreement and other areas of interest to the two Governments.

Policing

13. **Mr. Tony Clarke:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what proportion of officers in the RUC are *(a)* Catholics and *(b)* women; and if he will make a statement. [92984]

Mr. Ingram: On 1 July 1999 of the total number of people within the Royal Ulster Constabulary 8.35 per cent. were Catholics and 11.4 per cent. women.

19. **Mr. Browne:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will make a statement on the Patten commission's report on policing in Northern Ireland. [92990]

Mr. Ingram: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I gave earlier to my hon. Friend the Member for Hendon (Mr. Dismore), 20 October 1999, *Official Report*, column 431.

Lifelong Learning

14. **Mr. David Taylor:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what proposals the Government have for lifelong learning in Northern Ireland. [92985]

Mr. McFall: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I gave earlier to my hon. Friend the Member for Lincoln (Gillian Merron), 20 October 1999, *Official Report*, column 428.

Human Rights

17. **Fiona Mactaggart:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what progress has been made by the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission; and if he will make a statement. [92988]

Mr. George Howarth: The Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission was established on 1 March this year. The Commission is required to produce an annual report under the Northern Ireland Act 1998. However, the Commission is an independent body and I have therefore asked the Chief Commissioner, Professor Dickson, to write to my hon. Friend to inform her of the Commission's progress since it was established and I shall place a copy in the Library of the House.

Security

18. **Mr. Ennis:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what steps are being taken to create a more normal security environment in Northern Ireland. [92989]

Mr. Ingram: We are committed to as early a return as possible to normal security arrangements, consistent with the level of threat.

Since the Good Friday Agreement, routine military patrolling has been reduced by almost two thirds. Military installations have been closed and demolished. Since January, there have been under 15,000 service personnel on operational duties in Northern Ireland, except during short periods of heightened tension over the summer. This is fewer than at any time since 1970.

Parades Commission

20. **Ms Moran:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland to what extent the Parades Commission has been able to achieve a local accommodation over the disputed parades this year. [92991]

Mr. Ingram: The role of the Parades Commission is to promote and facilitate local accommodation in relation to contentious parades. Where this cannot be achieved, the legislation requires the Commission to make a determination.

Since its establishment in 1997, the Parades Commission has carried out a unique and very important task in the most difficult circumstances imaginable. The relatively peaceful marching season was due in no small part to the Commission's efforts.

Civic Forum

21. **Mr. Savidge:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what progress he has made on the establishment of a civic forum in Northern Ireland. [92992]

24. **Mr. Michael J. Foster:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what progress he has made on the establishment of a civic forum in Northern Ireland. [92995]

Mr. George Howarth: The report identified the sectoral interests which should be represented and on 16 February 1999 the new Northern Ireland Assembly approved the report of the First and Deputy First Minister (designate) which included arrangements for a consultative civic forum guidelines which should be adhered to by nominating bodies. Work is ongoing to ensure the establishment of the forum within six months of devolution.

Reconciliation

22. **Mr. Hilary Benn:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what steps are being taken to promote reconciliation in Northern Ireland among those whose family members or friends have been killed or injured in the past 30 years. [92993]

Mr. Ingram: Under the Government's Community Relations Programme and the European Union's Special Support Programme for Peace and Reconciliation, funding is provided to a wide range of groups which promote peace and reconciliation. These include groups working with victims, their families and friends.

Inward Investment

23. **Mr. McCabe:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what steps are being taken to encourage inward investment in Northern Ireland. [92994]

Mr. McFall: The Industrial Development Board for Northern Ireland, the agency charged with attracting inward investment, continues its aggressive marketing and sales campaigns worldwide. In particular, they are following up on last year's successful promotional tour of North America, a year in which I am delighted to say they have achieved a record number of new projects.

Equality Commission

25. **Mr. Borrow:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will make a statement on the work of the Equality Commission in Northern Ireland. [92996]

Mr. George Howarth: The Equality Commission for Northern Ireland was appointed on 2 August and took over the functions exercised by its predecessors on 1 October. The commissioners have received training in their new role and are pressing ahead with the broadened equality agenda. The first formal meeting of the commission took place on 14 October 1999.

Planning (Newtownards)

26. **Mr. John D. Taylor:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many homes are proposed in *(a)* those planning applications for which outline planning approval has been issued but construction has not commenced and *(b)* existing planning applications for which the planning decision has not yet been issued in the town of Newtownards. [92997]

Mr. George Howarth: The information is not readily available in the form requested; however, the planning service has recently carried out a detailed analysis of the housing land availability position in Newtownards. This assessment indicates that approximately 51 hectares of zoned land remains available for deployment, with the potential to accommodate some 850 dwellings. In addition, planning permission has been granted, or is currently pending, for some 360 dwellings on unzoned land within the development limits of the town.

British-Irish Council

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what further talks have taken place about preparations for a British-Irish Council. [92980]

Mr. Mandelson: All preparations are now in place for the British-Irish Council and the other institutions created by the Good Friday Agreement. The Council will be established immediately on entry into force of the British-Irish Agreement. This will coincide with the devolution of powers to the Northern Ireland Assembly.

Structural Funds

Mrs. McKenna: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what consultations he is having with industry and the voluntary sector in Northern Ireland on future EU structural funding. [92976]

Mr. Ingram: Representatives of industry and the voluntary sector are members of a core consultative group, established in July 1999, to enable local partners to be consulted on a regular basis regarding future EU funding. In addition, two major conferences have been organised involving many delegates from these sectors and they have also been invited to put forward their views in writing.

Paramilitary Violence

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what assessment he has made of the level of illegal activities by paramilitary forces. [92983]

Mr. Ingram: The situation with regard to the activities of paramilitary groups is closely monitored.

To date this year there have been seven deaths, 67 bombing incidents and 94 shooting incidents. Paramilitary attacks unfortunately also continue with 135 carried out so far this year.

This level of violence is unacceptable. I call on the perpetrators to cease these activities forthwith.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Child Benefit

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security, pursuant to his answer of 9 June 1999, *Official Report*, column *339*, on Child Benefit, when information by parliamentary constituency will become available; and if he will make a statement. [87864]

Angela Eagle: The administration of Child Benefit is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Benefits Agency, Peter Mathison. I have asked him to reply to my hon. Friend.

Letter from Peter Mathison to Mr. Paul Marsden, dated 28 June 1999:

The Secretary of State has asked me to reply to your recent Parliamentary Question pursuant to the answer of 9 June, Official Report, column 339, on Child Benefit, when information by parliamentary constituency will become available.

Due to differing postcode formats used on the Child Benefit computer system and the Department's Analytical Services system, it has been difficult to derive accurate statistics by constituency. However, this is close to being resolved and I expect to be able to forward the figures to you by the end of August, once the necessary computer scans have been completed.

I hope this is helpful.

Winter Fuel Allowance

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security, pursuant to his answer of 26 May 1999, *Official Report*, column *187*, on winter fuel allowance, if he will re-estimate the number of eligible pensioners in Shrewsbury and Atcham who will benefit from the winter fuel payments next winter. [94145]

Angela Eagle: The administration of Winter Fuel Payments is a matter for Peter Mathison, the Chief Executive of the Benefits Agency. He will write to my hon. Friend.

Letter from Peter Mathison to Mr. Paul Marsden, dated 19 October 1999:

The Secretary of State has asked me to reply to your recent Parliamentary Question pursuant to his Answer of 26th May, Official Report, column 187, on winter fuel allowance, if he will re-estimate the number of eligible pensioners in Shrewsbury and Atcham who will benefit from the winter fuel payments (WFP) next winter.

All eligible pensioner households will benefit from the WFP this winter. Pensioners, including pensioner couples who qualify by receiving Income Support or income-based Jobseeker's Allowance which includes one of the pensioner premiums, and who are not permanently in residential care or a nursing home, will be entitled to £100. Eligible pensioners who live alone, or who are the only eligible pensioner in a household, will be entitled to £100. Other eligible pensioners will be entitled to £50.

The estimated number of pensioners in the Shrewsbury and Atcham constituency who will benefit from WFP next winter remains the same as in the previous reply to the Minister of State's answer at column 187 of the Official Report. This information is based on the data held for last year's exercise. Of the estimated 57,000 pensioners who will benefit from WFP, approximately 28,000 will receive £100 payments. We are currently preparing the relevant computer systems for this winter's payments to ensure that all payments are made before Christmas.

I hope this is helpful.

Incapacity Benefit

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many people in North Staffordshire are on incapacity benefit; of those who have been on this benefit for three years or more, how many have been called back on (i) a six-monthly basis, (ii) a 12-monthly basis and (iii) an 18-monthly basis; and with what results. [93659]

Mr. Bayley: The administration of Incapacity Benefit is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Benefits Agency, Peter Mathison. He will write to my hon. Friend.

Letter from Peter Mathison to Ms Joan Whalley, dated 19 October 1999:

The Secretary of State has asked me to reply to your recent Parliamentary Question asking how many people in North Staffordshire are on Incapacity Benefit (IB); of those who have been on this benefit for three years or more, how many have been called back on (i) a six-monthly basis, (ii) a 12-monthly basis and (iii) an 18-monthly basis; and with what results.

Information is recorded on the total number of constituents claiming IB at Hanley Benefit Office which covers the North Staffordshire area. The number of claimants receiving IB from Hanley Benefit Office is 25,940 and of these 15,160 have been receiving that benefit for three years or more.

Statistical information on the timing of re-examination of claims is not maintained by the Benefits Agency. However, it is expected that on a national basis, 4% of claimants will be referred to Medical Services for the All Work Test on a three month basis, 16% every six months, 19% every 12 months and 8% every 18 months.

I hope this information is helpful.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Westminster Foundation for Democracy

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what financial and other assistance has been given to the Westminster Foundation for Democracy during 1998–99; what support the foundation received during 1999–2000; and if he will make a statement on the reasons for giving support to the foundation. [94543]

Mr. Robin Cook: The Westminster Foundation for Democracy received £3,136,970 from the Foreign Office in 1998–99 in Grant-in-Aid and special purpose grants, as well as a grant of £31,845 from DfID. For the current financial year the Westminster Foundation for Democracy has been allocated £4 million in Grant-in-Aid and up to £244,000 for special projects from the FCO and £14,000 from DfID.

In addition to financial assistance, an FCO official serves on the Foundations's Board of Governors in an advisory capacity.

The Westminster Foundation for Democracy exists to promote democratic development worldwide. It has a proven track record in delivering high quality projects in support of democracy building around the world.

Diplomatic Staff

Mr. Fitzpatrick: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how pay rates are set for locally engaged staff in overseas diplomatic missions; and what account is taken of recognised local poverty datum lines. [94162]

Mr. Battle: Pay rates and other conditions of service for locally engaged staff are set by reference to comparable employers based locally. These comparators are usually drawn from other diplomatic missions, private companies, and the local Civil Service. UK missions are also required to follow the terms of local employment law, including legislation on national minimum wage levels.

Sierra Leone

Mr. Eric Clarke: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on relations between Britain and Sierra Leone. [94876]

Mr. Hain: We welcomed the signature on 7 July of the Lomé Peace Agreement between the Government of Sierra Leone and the Revolutionary United Front. Our objective now is to help the Government and people of Sierra Leone to implement the peace agreement, and thus build a framework for lasting peace and security.

We have implemented the £10 million package of assistance which my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary announced on 2 March 1999. This has included: UK military advisers helping to train the new, democratically accountable Sierra Leone Army; a range of equipment for the new Army including uniforms, vehicles, and light weapons; logistical support and equipment for the ECOMOG peacekeeping forces; and support for civil society and Government participation in the negotiation of the peace agreement. The ECOWAS Secretariat confirmed that the weapons could be imported as an exemption to the ECOWAS Small Arms Moratorium; and the UN Sanctions Committee was notified of these exports. We are working with the United Nations to support the early deployment of a UN peacekeeping force to Sierra Leone.

DfID and the MOD are also supporting a range of projects in Sierra Leone. We will take every opportunity, including at the forthcoming Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting in Durban, to encourage further support for Sierra Leone from others in the international community.

GCHQ

Mr. Eric Clarke: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will publish GCHQ's recruitment statistics for 1998 indicating the comparable figures for 1997. [94877]

Mr. Robin Cook: GCHQ notified the Commissioners that as a result of recruitment schemes run in 1998, 182 individuals have joined the department or are awaiting completion of the recruitment process. The 1997 recruitment schemes yielded 236 new entrants. In addition, eight former members of staff were reappointed in 1998 compared with five in 1997.

Millennium Compliance

Mr. Eric Clarke: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement about the preparedness of other countries to deal with the millennium bug. [94878]

Mr. Battle: The Foreign and Commonwealth Office has been actively gathering information about the preparedness of other countries to deal with the millennium bug. This information is being made publicly available on the FCO website at http://www.fco.gov.uk. So far, we have published information on 70 countries and these are continuously updated. More will follow soon. Copies of these statements have been placed in the Libraries of the House.

European Union Council

Mr. Eric Clarke: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list the forthcoming business in the Council of the European Union to the end of October together with the major European Union events for the next six months. [94879]

Mr. Vaz: This calendar is primarily concerned with European Union matters, but certain other relevant events are also included. Events and dates quoted are based on the information available on the date of issue.

Date	*Venue*	*Event*
October 1999		
30 September-1 October	Helsinki	Ministerial Conference on Equality between Women and Men
1	Florence	Trade Ministers (informal)
4–5	Luxembourg	Justice and Home Affairs Council
4–5	Tampere	Regional Policy Ministers
4–8	Strasbourg	European Parliament Plenary
6	Luxembourg	Transport Council
8	Luxembourg	ECOFIN
11–12	Luxembourg	General Affairs Council
12	Luxembourg	Environment Council
15–16	Tampere	Special European Council
18–19	Luxembourg	Agriculture Council
22	Luxembourg	Labour/Social Affairs Council
24–25	Helsinki	Energy Ministers Task Force Meeting
25–29	Strasbourg	European Parliament Plenary
26	Luxembourg	Fisheries Council
28	Luxembourg	Research Council
29	Luxembourg	Justice and Home Affairs Council

Date	Venue	Event
November 1999		
3–4	Brussels	European Parliament Plenary
8	Brussels	ECOFIN
8	Brussels	Consumer Affairs Council
9	Brussels	Industry Council
11	Brussels	Development Council
11	Brussels	Standing Committee Employment
12	Brussels	Labour and Social Affairs Council
11–12	Helsinki	Ministerial Conference on the Northern Dimension
15–16	Brussels	Agriculture Council
15–16	Brussels	General Affairs Council
15–19	Strasbourg	European Parliament Plenary
16	Brussels	EEA Council
18	Brussels	Health Council
22	Brussels	Fisheries Council (possible)
22–23	Brussels	EU-ACP Ministerial Meeting (possible)
23	Brussels	Culture/Audiovisual Council
23	Brussels	Youth Council
25–26	Brussels	Budget Council
26	Brussels	Education Council
29	Brussels	ECOFIN/Labour and Social Affairs Council
30	Brussels	Telecommunications Council
December 1999		
1–2	Brussels	European Parliament Plenary
2	Brussels	Energy Council
2	Brussels	Research Council
2–3	Brussels	Justice and Home Affairs Council
6–7	Brussels	General Affairs Council
7	Brussels	Internal Market Council
9–10	Brussels	Transport Council
10–11	Helsinki	European Council
13	Brussels	ECOFIN
13–14	Brussels	Environment Council
13–17	Strasbourg	European Parliament Plenary
14–15	Brussels	Agriculture Council
14–16	Brussels	Ministerial Conference on following of progress on UN Beijing Platform for Action
16–17	Brussels	Fisheries Council
16–17	Brussels	EU-ACP Council (possible)
January 2000		
14	Brussels	Fisheries Council
18	Brussels	Budget Council
24–25	Brussels	General Affairs Council
24–25	Brussels	Agriculture Council
28–29	Lisbon	Development Council (informal)
31	Brussels	ECOFIN
February 2000		
11–12	Lisbon	Social Affairs Council (informal)
14–15	Brussels	General Affairs Council
21–22	Brussels	Agriculture Council
28	Brussels	ECOFIN
March 2000		
3–4	Lisbon	Justice and Home Affairs Council (informal)
9	Brussels	European Conference
13	Brussels	Social Affairs/ECOFIN Council
16	Brussels	Internal Market
20–21	Brussels	General Affairs Council
20–21	Brussels	Agriculture Council
23–24	Lisbon	European Council
27	Brussels	JHA Council
28	Brussels	Transport Council
30	Brussels	Environment Council

General Affairs Council

Mr. Eric Clarke: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the outcome of the General Affairs Council. [94880]

Mr. Vaz: The GAC adopted the A points listed in document 11573/99 and noted the resolutions, decisions and opinions adopted by the European Parliament in its session of 13–17 September listed in document 10352/1/99. Copies of the documents listing the A points

and resolutions will be placed in the House Libraries as soon as they become available.

Preparation of Tampere European Council

The Presidency briefed the GAC on Finnish Prime Minister Lipponen's tour of capitals. The traditional letter of invitation to Tampere would issue very shortly. The Presidency also briefly mentioned external aspects of Justice and Home Affairs co-operation, in the context of preparation for Tampere. There was no discussion.

Charter of Fundamental Rights

After a very brief discussion, the Presidency concluded that there was agreement on their proposals for the composition and rules of procedure of the body responsible for preparing the first draft of the Charter.

ESDP Military and Non-Military Crisis Management: Preparation in View of the European Council in Helsinki

The Presidency briefed Ministers on work underway on European defence.

Earthquake in Greece

The Greek Foreign Minister reported to the Council on the extensive damage caused by the earthquake in Athens on 7 September. The Council encouraged the Commission to examine all possible ways of assisting Greece, making full use of the possibilities offered under the structural funds, on the basis of a specific evaluation of the damage.

Northern Caucasus/Chechnya

Ministers expressed their strong concern at the deteriorating human rights situation in Chechnya and at the risks of the conflict spreading. They supported the Commission package of 1.2 million euro of humanitarian aid.

Western Balkans

The Council agreed the Commission's proposal for a pilot of the "Energy for Democracy" programme in Serbia, which will supply heating oil and diesel to the towns of Nis and Pirot, where opposition parties run the local administration. The Council discussed the possibility of lifting the flight ban on Serbia, but no consensus was reached.

The Council welcomed initiatives proposed by the UK on tackling organised crime in Kosovo. The Council asked the Commission and other relevant bodies to come up with proposals. Foreign Ministers will discuss the issue further when they meet at the Tampere Special European Council.

Burma

Foreign Ministers expressed their concern at the lack of progress on human rights in Burma. Ministers offered their full support for the forthcoming mission of the UN Secretary General's Special Representative to Burma and hoped that it would lead to an improvement in human rights and the promotion of democracy. The Council extended the EU's Common Position on Burma for a further six months, agreeing to review it after Mr. de Soto's mission.

EU Code of Conduct on Arms Export

The GAC approved the first consolidated report on the operation of the EU Code of Conduct on Arms Exports and agreed to publish the report in the *Official Journal*. The report summarises actions taken by member states to implement the provisions of the Code and outlines priorities for future action.

East Timor

Foreign Ministers welcomed the deployment of the International Force in East Timor. The Commission announced its intention to provide further EC funds for the UN Mission in East Timor and for the eventual UN Transitional Authority in East Timor.

Preparation for Seattle Ministerial

The GAC continued to discuss the EU's approach to the negotiations on a new multilateral trade round. They confirmed the EU's strong support for a comprehensive round to be launched at the WTO Ministerial conference in Seattle (30 November–3 December).

Foreign Ministers had lunch with the Israeli Foreign Minister, David Levy. Mr. Levy stressed the Israeli government's commitment to the Middle East Peace Process, and the importance of restarting all tracks of the Process. He called for strengthened links between the EU and Israel. The GAC welcomed EU Special Envoy Moratinos' initiative for an 'EU-Israel Forum'.

Meeting with Serb Opposition leaders

The GAC met with representatives of democratic forces in the FRY. Foreign Ministers underlined the EU's readiness to support the people of the FRY in their efforts to promote democracy, human rights and the rule of law, and the development of good regional and international relations.

Co-operation Councils with Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia

The first ever Co-operation Councils with the three South Caucasus states took place on 12 October. Discussion covered political co-operation, trade and investment, democracy and human rights and co-operation in Justice and Home Affairs.

HEALTH

Cancer

Miss Kirkbride: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many extra *(a)* radiographers and *(b)* oncologists he plans to recruit in each NHS region by April 2000 to implement his proposal that no cancer patient referred by a GP should wait more than two weeks. [94022]

Mr. Denham: It is for individual National Health Service trusts and health authorities to determine the number, grade and mix of staff they will require to deliver services. An additional £10 million has been made available to facilitate the two-week all cancers waiting time standard.

Oral Statements

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list *(a)* the reports published by his Department and its associated bodies, *(b)* the reports received from bodies set up by his Department, *(c)* the decisions his Department has taken and *(d)* events in the UK and elsewhere, since 27 July, which satisfied the criteria he uses for deciding whether to apply to make oral statements to the House when the House is sitting. [93974]

Ms Stuart: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer given to him yesterday by my right hon. Friend the President of the Council, 19 October 1999, *Official Report*, columns *429–30*.

Performance Indicators

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will incorporate total and classification group average figures for each of the tables listed in the high level performance indicator set for next year; and if he will make a statement. [94062]

Mr. Denham: The high level performance indicator set supports a comprehensive assessment of the performance of the National Health Service across the range of its activity, including services that are provided alongside social services. The current set was the first to be published and we are committed to making improvements over time. The Department is currently reviewing the content and presentation of figures for the next publication of performance indicators.

NICE

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what estimate he has made of the costs of establishing the National Institute for Clinical Excellence. [93918]

Mr. Denham: The cost of establishing the National Institute for Clinical Excellence was in the region of £734,000.

This figure includes accommodation costs for the Institute, costs of recruiting staff for the Institute and staffing costs of officials in the Department.

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what constraints the National Institute for Clinical Excellence will be able to place upon a clinician's ability to prescribe. [93874]

Mr. Denham: Clinicians are expected to take National Institute for Clinical Excellence guidance fully into account when exercising their clinical judgment. Such guidance represents the views of an eminent body of senior practitioners who have had the opportunity of carefully considering the available evidence. However, NICE guidance does not override a doctor's individual responsibility to exercise his or her clinical judgment in determining what treatment is appropriate and necessary for a patient.

Primary Care Groups

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when information regarding maximum and minimum per capita management allowances for 1999–2000 payable to primary care groups in England will be available. [93870]

Mr. Denham: This information is currently being collected and validated. Full details will be published as soon as possible.

Health Professions Regulatory Body

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he will bring forward regulations to govern professions allied to medicine; and if a period of consultation will precede them. [93909]

Mr. Hutton: The Health Act 1999 provides for the replacement of the Professions Supplementary to Medicine Act 1960 by an Order and the eventual repeal of the 1960 Act when replacement arrangements are in place. We are committed to full and wide ranging consultation on the proposals for new legislation as well as the three month statutory consultation on the draft Order, with a Report to Parliament on the outcome, when the Order is laid.

Commission for Health Improvement

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what representations he has received regarding loss of clinical freedom by clinicians consequent upon the establishment of the Commission for Health Improvement; and if he will make a statement. [93921]

Mr. Denham: The aim of the Commission for Health Improvement was clearly set out in the consultation document "A First Class Service" (July 1999). This was to work with clinicians to assure, monitor and improve the quality of care provided by the NHS. Clinicians will remain responsible for their clinical judgment in relation to individual patients, although they will be expected to take account of national clinical guidance and of the evidence on which it is based.

Most responses to "A First Class Service" were supportive of the proposals for the Commission for Health Improvement and the Government's quality strategy as a whole.

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what estimate his Department has made regarding the additional manpower required for the Commission for Health Improvement. [93920]

Mr. Denham: The Commission will be an independent body and it will therefore be for the Commission itself to decide its manpower requirements. In doing so, it will need to be aware of its duty to carry out its functions effectively, efficiently and economically.

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement regarding the powers of the Commission for Health Improvement to criticise individual doctors. [93922]

Mr. Denham: It is not the aim of the Commission for Health Improvement to assess or publicise the performance of individual clinicians. The Commission will look at organisational systems to assure and improve the quality of services.

The Commission's powers to disclose confidential information about individuals is strictly limited in the Health Act 1999. In line with these restrictions, if the Commission does find evidence of individual poor performance it will draw this to the attention of the employing organisation for them to take action. It may also, if appropriate, draw this to the attention of the professional regulatory body concerned.

NICE/CHIMP Running Costs

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what estimate he has made of the annual running costs of *(a)* the National Institute for Clinical Excellence and *(b)* the Commission for Health Improvement. [93919]

Mr. Denham: The National Institute for Clinical Excellence's total budget is £9.8 million. NICE will determine its own running costs. However, we expect them to maintain their running costs at a reasonable level to ensure that as much funding as possible is made available for its work programme.

The Explanatory Notes for the Health Act 1999 cited the estimated annual running costs for the Commission for Health Improvement for 2000–01 at around £7 million.

Staff Shortages Survey

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when the findings of his staff shortages survey will be published. [93876]

Mr. Denham: The results of the recruitment, retention and vacancies survey were published on 10 September and have been placed in the Library.

Drug Prices

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement regarding the change in the number of category D entries appearing in the Drug Tariff published by The Stationery Office each month since February. [93878]

Mr. Hutton: Drugs are added to Category D of Part VIII of the Drug Tariff when community pharmacies are having difficulty obtaining supplies of generic drugs at Drug Tariff price. The closure of a significant manufacturer of generics last December, combined with the relocation of some manufacturing facilities at the beginning of the year, and the transfer of products from bulk to smaller packs has meant that a wider range of products than normal have been in short supply, and hence an unusually large number of products have been included in Category D.

Special Advisers

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Health on what dates Special Advisers from his Department have visited the United States of America on official business since 1 May 1997; which of his Special Advisers took part in each visit; and if he will list the meetings which these Special Advisers held with members and officials of the United States Government during each visit, specifying the date and location of each meeting and the names of the US members and officials at each meeting. [93945]

Ms Stuart: Between 1 May 1997 and 18 October 1999, the Special Advisers to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health have visited the United States of America on two occasions in an official capacity as listed.

Date: 4–7 February 1998

Destination: Washington DC

Special adviser: Simon Stevens.

Accompanying my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister and my right hon. Friend the Minister of Health to meeting with President Clinton.

Date: 21–23 October 1998

Destination: Washington DC

Special adviser: Simon Stevens.

Accompanying my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State at the International Health Policy meeting and meeting with the Secretary for Health and Human Services.

All travel complied with the requirements of the Ministerial Code and the Civil Service Management Code.

Hospital Beds

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he expects to publish the findings of the inquiry into the level of provision of beds in NHS hospitals; and if he will make statement. [94794]

Mr. Denham: The National Beds Inquiry is nearing completion. Its findings will be published in due course.

PRIME MINISTER

Engagements

Sir Peter Tapsell: To ask the Prime Minister if he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 20 October. [94071]

The Prime Minister: This morning I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in the House I shall have further such meetings later today.

Written Answers to Questions

Thursday 21 October 1999

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

Coral Nurseries

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what progress has been made in the development of measures to protect coral and related nurseries for fish. [93493]

Mr. Mullin: The UK is a founding member of the International Coral Reef Initiative (ICRI), a co-ordination mechanism aimed at promoting coral reef protection and sustainable use of coral reef resources world-wide. One of the functions of ICRI is to provide a framework for supporting the development of the Global Coral Reef Monitoring Network (GCRMN).

Since February 1997 the UK Government have funded the development of the South Asia node of the GCRMN in India, the Maldives and Sri Lanka. This has already successfully established the foundations of an effective coral reef management mechanism in the region.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Environment, Transport and the Regions visited the Maldives earlier this year and saw this programme in action. Whilst he was there, he was able to announce £300,000 of additional UK funding from the Department for International Development, which will assist countries of the region further to strengthen their national coral reef information systems. It will also enable local people to be trained in a wider range of data analysis and its use in coral reef management and will provide continuing advice to the national institutions implementing the monitoring programme.

In the past, the failure to undertake routine monitoring has been a significant constraint to effective protection and management of coral reefs. This UK funded programme has established a model which can be applied to other reef systems as a basis for helping poor coastal communities to optimise sustainable benefits from coral reef resources, including fisheries.

Biosafety Protocol

Joan Ruddock: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what representations he has received from non-governmental organisations concerned with development issues regarding the United Kingdom Government's position on the Biosafety Protocol; and if he will make a statement. [94871]

Mr. Meacher: My Department has received no representations to date. Development incomes would be a matter for the Department for International Development.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Sub-post Offices

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on the implications for sub-post offices of the industrial tribunal ruling of 27 September that sub-postmasters and mistresses are entitled to receive the national minimum wage. [95175]

Mr. Alan Johnson: It is too early to comment on any broader implications for the sub-post office network of the Inverness Employment Tribunal's decision on the pre-hearing of the case brought by Mrs. Elizabeth Bain, the sub-postmistress at Tore, that she is entitled to be paid the national minimum wage. I understand from the Post Office that nationally there are fewer than 1,500 sub-postmasters and post-mistresses for whom the Tribunal's decision is likely to affect their remuneration arrangements with the Post Office.

Fixed Rate Export Finance Scheme

Mr. Win Griffiths: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on the future of the ECGD's Fixed Rate Export Finance scheme. [95430]

Mr. Caborn: ECGD is in active discussion with representatives of the British Bankers Association on a successor to the FREF Scheme that expired on 30 September. To allow time for these discussions to be completed, and for an appropriate successor scheme to be put in place, the scheme has been rolled forward for a further two months to the end of November.

Millennium Compliance

Ms Lawrence: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what progress has been made by UK offshore oil and gas producers and oil companies in dealing with the millennium bug; and what measures have been taken by his Department to ensure the security of concessionary coal supplies over this period. [95427]

Ms Hewitt: I can now report the findings of the independent assessment process established by the DTI which confirms that UK oil and gas producers and oil suppliers have now attained a 100 per cent. blue status against the Action 2000 assessment criteria and are now assessed as ready to ensure that it will be business as usual and that there should be no major disruption to supplies due to the Year 2000 threat to computer systems. The DTI has been pleased to take on the role of "responsible body" reporting to the Action 2000 national infrastructure forum on the year 2000 preparations being made by the oil industry and UK's offshore oil and gas producers.

The DTI has approached this task in a systematic and thorough way, making full use of the industry's own resources. It has engaged WS Atkins Consultants Ltd.—an internationally known and highly respected engineering consultancy with extensive experience within the oil and gas industry—to validate independently the process adopted and its results. The industry has fully supported this important work and provided full and frank access to all the relevant information and staff.

The independent verification approach adopted by DTI has been agreed with Action 2000 and designed to build on the work already in hand by offshore and onshore companies to avoid duplication of effort. It has been closely supported by the relevant trade associations (UKOOA—offshore oil operators association, UKPIA—UK Petroleum Industry Association and AUKOI—Association of UK Oil Independents).

For the offshore sector, DTI arranged for companies to conduct a stringent assessment process supported by UKOOA, which involved preparation of a report on each operator's state of readiness and its independent confirmation by either a "peer group assessor" or an external consultant.

To enhance further the independent element in this process, WS Atkins carried out a programme of visits to review the process adopted, the supporting data and its conclusions. The format and extent of the visit programme was determined by WS Atkins. It covered all the key elements of the offshore oil and gas industry including production and onshore terminal/pipeline facilities, and was designed to ensure they could reach a fair view on the overall status of the upstream industry.

For the downstream oil sector covering the supply and distribution of refined oil products, WS Atkins were engaged to carry out a more intensive role. They prepared and issued on behalf of DTI a detailed and closely targeted questionnaire to all the main downstream players. Following a detailed analysis of the responses WS Atkins conducted a series of detailed on site follow-up visits designed to validate the questionnaire responses. Officials from DTI and other interested Government Departments also participated in some of the visits.

Again, the visit programme was determined by WS Atkins and designed to ensure that they were able to form a fair view of the overall status of the downstream industry. The programme was carefully planned to cover all aspects of the industry. It looked vertically through the supply chain and covered refining, pipelines, distribution terminals, and retail outlets. It embraced all sectors of the industry from the majors, and hypermarkets through mid-size players to smaller retailers. It extended throughout the UK covering locations in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.

Throughout the process, DTI has worked closely with Action 2000, other responsible bodies and the various trade bodies to ensure nothing was overlooked and ensure that the process adopted reflected good year 2000 practice.

At the National Infrastructure Forum meeting in January 1999, the industry attracted an overall "amber" assessment against the standard colour code adopted by Action 2000. I am pleased to report that WS Atkins have confirmed that the industry has since then made substantial progress both onshore and offshore, and has now attained 100 per cent. "blue" status. A copy of their summary reports have been placed in the Libraries of the House, and copies made available on the DTI internet site. WS Atkins have also confirmed that the validation process adopted by DTI provides an effective means of independently validating the industry's state of progress, both in terms of its suitability to the offshore/onshore sector, and general good practice in relation to year 2000 risk assessment.

In detail WS Atkins have awarded 100 per cent. "blue" status in respect of the upstream sector which covers firms engaged in the production and transport to shore of oil and gas, and related gas interconnectors. 100 per cent. "blue" status was also attained by those companies assessed in the downstream oil sector. The assessed companies are responsible for over 90 per cent. of UK oil supplies and cover the receipt, refining, distribution and retail of oil products.

The DTI has agreed a follow up plan with WS Atkins, to continue to monitor progress and carry out a further independent check visits to monitor the industry's ongoing readiness throughout the millennium period.

Regarding coal, the Department is responsible for supplying concessionary fuel to some 90,000 former employees of British Coal. This accounts for 20–25 per cent. of all solid fuel for domestic use. Currently, two large coal companies are under contract to DTI for the supply and distribution of concessionary fuel (CPL Distribution Ltd. and T. H. Fergusson).

The Department appointed Aon Risk Services Ltd. (risk management consultants) to assess the security of supply of concessionary fuel over the millennium period. This covered the fuel distributors as well as a number of major producers. In addition, Aon was asked to advise on the position in the wider retail market for household coal in so far that the same systems are used by the companies under contract to DTI for distributing concessionary supplies. Aon's conclusions are equally encouraging with all the main operators now assessed as achieving 100 per cent. blue rating. Aon will be involved in continued monitoring of the position.

Gas and Electricity Regulation

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on the Government's response to consultation on proposals to reform the system of gas and electricity regulation, and on his plans to assess the regulatory, environmental and equal treatment impact of the proposed Utilities Bill as a whole. [95429]

Mrs. Liddell: In October last year, the Government published a consultation paper on their proposals for reforming the system of gas and electricity regulation. After considering the responses, I have published a document which sets out the Government's proposals on the issues raised ("The Future of Gas and Electricity Regulation: The Government's Proposals for Legislation", DTI, 13 October 1999, ref. URN 99/1049). These proposals will form part of the Utilities Bill which the Government intend to introduce when parliamentary time permits.

My Department has also published draft regulatory impact, environmental and equal treatment appraisals of the provisions to be sought in the Utilities Bill, requesting comments by 15 November.

Copies of the documents have been placed in the Library of the House, as has a list of the names of those who responded to the consultation document and who

were content for their names and views to be made public. The responses themselves, with the exception of those from parties who made a request for confidentiality, have been placed in the library of the Department of Trade and Industry, where they are available for inspection.

Subsidence Compensation Scheme

Mr. Pickthall: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when he expects to receive the Coal Authority's Fifth report on the administration of the Coal-Mining Subsidence Damage Repair and Compensation scheme. [95431]

Mrs. Liddell: I have now received this report from the Coal Authority and have arranged for copies to be placed in the Libraries of both Houses today.

Employment Relations Act 1999

Mr. Rooney: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry which sections of the Employment Relations Act 1999 have been implemented and on what date; and what is the timetable for the remaining sections. [94791]

Mr. Alan Johnson: The first commencement order (S.I. 1999/2509) for the Act was made on 8 September, bringing sections 38 and 42 into force on 9 September and section 18(6) on 30 September.

The second commencement order (S.I. 1999/2830) was made on 14 October. Under it, sections 2, 3, 13(1) to (3), 18(1) to (5), 19 to 23, 26 to 33, 34(4), 35, 36(1) (in part), 37, 39, 40 and 43, Schedules 2 and 6 and paragraphs 1, 2, 5 (in part), 6 and 8 of Schedule 7 will come into force on 25 October and sections 7 to 9 and Schedule 4 will come into force on 15 December. The corresponding provisions of section 44 and Schedule 9 (repeals) will come into force on 25 October or 15 December as appropriate.

It is intended that the remaining provisions in the Act should be brought into force over the coming year, including, by Easter, new rules on industrial action ballots and notices (section 4 and Schedule 3), new protections for unfairly dismissed strikers (section 16 and Schedule 5) and better access for national security staff to employment tribunals (section 41 and Schedule 8), and, shortly thereafter, the new right to be accompanied in disciplinary and grievance hearings (sections 10 to 15) and the statutory trade union recognition scheme and associated provisions (sections 1, 5, 6 and 25 and Schedule 1).

Raventhorpe Power Station

Mr. Watts: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when he will announce his decision on ABB Energy Development Co Ltd's application to construct and operate a combined cycle gas turbine power station at Raventhorpe, Scunthorpe. [95428]

Mrs. Liddell: I have today decided to give a direction under section 14(3) of the Energy Act 1976 to prevent the building of a 450 MW generating station to be fuelled by natural gas at Raventhorpe, Scunthorpe, North Lincolnshire.

Copies of the press notice and decision letter are being placed in the Library of the House.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Household Incomes

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security when he expects to publish the next analysis in the Households Below Average Income series. [94700]

Angela Eagle: Results to 1997–98 were published on 14 October and copies have been placed in the Library.

We hope to publish the next edition in the summer of 2000.

Departmental Publications

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will list the titles of the in-house publications and newsletters which were produced for the staff of his Department, excluding non-departmental public bodies and agencies, in the last five years, specifying the dates on which each title was first produced, the frequency with which each title is produced and the current secrecy classification of each title. [93847]

Mr. Bayley: The information is as follows:

"The Quarterly"; forerunner of "DSS News". First produced Autumn 1991, (ceased publication 1998), was issued quarterly.

"DSS News"; information for staff on current Departmental issues—input from Ministers and Permanent Secretary. First produced April 1998 and issued every two months.

"Leisure"; sports and social information on recreational events/activities for DH/DSS staff. First produced pre 1994 and issued monthly.

"The Weekly"; staff vacancies and moves, personnel issues, general issues affecting staff. First produced in current format pre 1994 and issued weekly.

"Cascade"; single information sheet issued by senior officials to inform staff of current policy or personnel issues. First produced 1998 and issued on an ad hoc basis as and when needed.

"Network" (now renamed "Oracle"); update by senior official on policy issues for staff in policy branches. First produced 1997 (ceased publication 1999). Issued monthly.

None of these publications carries a protective security marking.

In addition to those listed, individual branches may, from time to time, issue newsletters to their own staff. These have limited circulation and would not be distributed generally. Letters may also be issued to staff from time to time on an ad hoc basis on issues affecting staff.

Cold Weather Payments

Mr. Caplin: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security when he expects to announce the outcome of the annual review of the cold weather payments scheme; and if he will make a statement. [95495]

Angela Eagle: Following advice from the Meteorological Office, the annual review of the Cold Weather Payments scheme has now been completed. Amending regulations were laid on 11 October 1999 and will come into force on 1 November, in time for the beginning of the winter period.

Four of the weather stations used in the scheme last winter have been replaced. Abbotsinch (Glasgow Airport), Turnhouse (Edinburgh Airport), Portland and

Southampton. They will be replaced respectively by the stations at Bishopton, Edinburgh Gogarbank, Isle of Portland and Thorney Island. Thorney Island is an existing weather station which is already used in the scheme. In addition, a station at Lake Vyrnwy in North Wales has been added to the scheme to improve representation in that area. There have also been some changes by Royal Mail to postcodes which have been reflected in the amending regulations.

Cold weather payments are separate from, and in addition to, winter fuel payments which are paid only to pensioners.

I have written to each of the hon. Members affected by the changes.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Public Lending Right

Mr. Sheerman: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how many authors have received their maximum entitlement from the Public Lending Right. [94457]

Mr. Alan Howarth: In the last financial year, 1998–99, 100 authors received the maximum entitlement of £6,000 from the Public Lending Right.

Mr. Sheerman: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (1) what assessment he has made of the operation of the Public Lending Right. [94455]

(2) what plans he has to increase funding of the Public Lending Right. [94456]

Mr. Alan Howarth: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and I are currently considering a range of proposals, following a review of the scheme by the Public Lending Right's Advisory Committee. We will be consulting on our response to the review very shortly. The Department greatly values the Public Lending Right scheme and last year found extra funding to maintain the rate per loan. We have also provided increases in funding for the next three years and are currently consulting on an increase in the rate per loan from £2.07 to £2.18. However, we have no plans at present to raise further the allocation to the Public Lending Right. Any bid for increased funding would need to be considered alongside the Department's other programmes.

Digital Terrestrial Signals

Mr. Rowlands: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what estimate he has made of the number of relay stations which will require alteration to deliver digital terrestrial signals to 95 per cent. of households. [94445]

Janet Anderson: The Independent Television Commission and the BBC are jointly responsible for the provision of digital terrestrial television services in the UK. They are considering, in consultation with the digital broadcasters, the Government, and other interested parties, how to develop the coverage of digital television throughout the UK so that the 99.4 per cent. of consumers who currently receive analogue television can receive the main free-to-air channels digitally.

No estimate is yet available of the number of relay stations which may be required in respect of digital terrestrial signals. The Government have indicated separately that they want to make sure that 95 per cent. of consumers have access to digital equipment before analogue switch-over is completed.

PFA Annual Dinner

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what plans he has to attend the next Professional Footballers' Association annual dinner; and if he will make a statement on his policy in relation to *(a)* his attendance and *(b)* his officials' attendance at future PFA social occasions. [94384]

Kate Hoey *[holding answer 19 October 1999]:* Since the last general election no DCMS Minister or official has attended the PFA annual awards dinner. My Department has not yet received any invitations for future PFA social events to date.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Oral Statements

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will list *(a)* the reports published by her Department and its associated bodies, *(b)* the reports received from bodies set up by her Department, *(c)* the decisions her Department has taken and *(d)* events in the UK and elsewhere, since 27 July, which satisfied the criteria she uses for deciding whether to apply to make oral statements to the House when the House is sitting. [93980]

Clare Short: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer given by my right hon. Friend the President of the Council on 19 October 1999, *Official Report*, column *429*.

Montreal Conference

Joan Ruddock: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what representations she has received from the Like-Minded Group on the forthcoming negotiations at the Extraordinary Conference of the Parties in Montreal in January 2000; and if he will make a statement. [94870]

Clare Short: I have not received any representations from the like-minded group of 120 developing countries on the forthcoming negotiations in Montreal.

SCOTLAND

Environment Protection Agency

Mr. Russell Brown: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland when the third annual report of the Scottish Environment Protection Agency will be published. [95459]

Dr. Reid: The Scottish Environment Protection Agency published its Third Annual Report and Accounts today. The report contains details of the progress made by SEPA during the period 1 April 1998 to 31 March 1999, the Agency's third year of operation. Copies of the Annual Report and Accounts have been placed in the Library.

Departmental Funding

Mr. Swinney: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland (1) if he will provide a breakdown of the running costs of his office to cover *(a)* staff salaries, *(b)* office accommodation, *(c)* residential accommodation, *(d)* administration and *(e)* others; and if he will make a statement; [94055]

(2) if he will provide a breakdown of the difference between the funds allocated to him by Parliament and the funds to be included in the Scottish Consolidated Fund for the years *(a)* 1999–2000, *(b)* 2000–01 and *(c)* 2001–02; and if he will make a statement; [94054]

(3) if he will make a statement on the discussions he has had with the First Minister of the Scottish Executive on the proportion of the funds allocated to the Secretary of State for Scotland that he proposes to use to perform his duties. [94057]

Dr. Reid: The provision for grant payable to the Scottish Consolidated Fund, other grants and the running cost provision for my Department are set out in the Estimates for Class XIII, Vote 1. Details for the current year were set out in the answer I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Eastwood (Mr. Murphy) on 11 June 1999, *Official Report*, columns *412–13*.

I have since been reviewing the role and functions of my Department and I have discussed these matters with the First Minister on a number of occasions. I will make a further statement in due course. No decisions have yet been taken about the provision for the Scotland Office for future years.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Asylum Seekers

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has for an improved level of telephone access for asylum seekers after the Immigration Service takes over responsibility for paying their benefit and responding to inquiries; and if he will make a statement. [93985]

Mrs. Roche: The Home Office will be responsible for providing support to asylum seekers under part VI of the Immigration and Asylum Bill (when enacted and implemented).

Asylum seekers and their dependants who apply to the Asylum Support Directorate within the Immigration and Nationality Directorate will, under the new arrangements, contact staff within the new Directorate for information and inquiries about support.

We propose to have a single inquiry number for the new Asylum Support Directorate. The service provided will incorporate assisted call routing facilities to minimise the likelihood of calls being re-routed.

The number will be publicised and known to agencies with whom potential applicants may have contact prior to making a support application.

Callers requiring application forms will be asked to leave mailing details. Callers who need to speak directly with the caseworker responsible for their support will be able to do so.

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list all the proposed offices the Immigration Service will operate to deal with asylum seekers benefit and inquiries; what hours they will be open; what estimate he has made of *(a)* the average and *(b)* the farthest distance an asylum seeker is likely to have to travel to the nearest office; and if he will make a statement. [93983]

Mrs. Roche: The Asylum Support Directorate will be located in Quest House and possibly other accommodation in Croydon. Quest House will have a public caller unit to enable asylum seekers, who would otherwise be destitute, to seek support. But the Asylum Support Directorate proposes to grant fund the voluntary sector to arrange for them to provide reception centres at some major ports and at one-stop shops around the country. The locations and opening times of these centres have yet to be determined.

Drugs

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) what amount of drugs has been taken out of circulation in each year since 1995 within the UK, by type; [94519]

(2) what amount of drugs have been taken out of circulation annually in Merseyside since 1995, by type. [94520]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The information requested is given in the table, which covers the period 1995–1997, the latest for which date are available. It is hoped to publish 1998 figures by the end of the year.

Quantities of controlled drugs seized in the UK by police and Customs, and by the Merseyside Police Force, 1995–97

1995	*UK police*	*Customs*	*Total*	*Merseyside police*
Class A				
Cocaine	63.5	589.4	652.9	15.0
Crack	9.4	9.8	19.2	0.1
Heroin	362.7	1,031.8	1,394.5	66.6
LSD	352.0	29.8	381.8	2.0
Ecstasy-type	475.8	79.2	555.0	29.8
Methadone	50.7	0.0	50.7	1.6
Other	11.7	10.2	21.9	0.0
Class B				
Cannabis (herbal)	1,134.0	12,737.5	13,871.5	53.8
Cannabis plants	96,208	96	96,304	1,918
Cannabis resin	4,821.7	39,776.2	44,597.9	344.0

Quantities of controlled drugs seized in the UK by police and Customs, and by the Merseyside Police Force, 1995–97

1995	*UK police*	*Customs*	*Total*	*Merseyside police*
Cannabis liquid	2.9	2.7	5.6	0.0
Amphetamines	447.1	372.2	819.3	11.4
Other	0.4	0.9	1.3	0.0
Class C				
Benzodiazepines	4.8	0.0	4.8	0.0
Temazepam	0.1	0.0	0.1	0.0
Anabolic Steroids	—	—	—	—
Other	0.6	0.0	0.6	0.0
Class unknown	8.6	0.0	8.6	0.0

1996	*UK police*	*Customs*	*Total*	*Merseyside police*
Class A				
Cocaine	55.4	1,155.6	1,211.0	1.1
Crack	6.3	2.0	8.3	0.0
Heroin	329.1	741.0	1,070.1	5.1
LSD	98.1	118.4	216.5	0.7
Ecstasy-type	946.9	4,851.1	5,798.0	24.1
Methadone	87.4	0.0	87.4	2.3
Other	32.7	12.4	45.1	0.0
Class B				
Cannabis (herbal)	3,838.4	30,535.9	34,374.3	32.5
Cannabis plants	115,746	472	116,218	4,053
Cannabis resin	20,799.3	46,137.4	66,936.7	116.1
Cannabis liquid	1.4	16.2	17.6	0.0
Amphetamines	1,783.9	840.8	2,624.7	22.6
Other	1.5	0.0	1.5	0.0
Class C				
Benzodiazepines	2.3	0.0	2.3	0.0
Temazepam	3.6	1.8	5.4	0.0
Anabolic Steroids	3.0	0.8	3.8	0.0
Other	51.4	2.0	53.4	0.0
Class unknown	1.1	3.3	4.4	0.0

1997	*UK police*	*Customs*	*Total*	*Merseyside police*
Class A				
Cocaine	279.0	2,071.2	2,350.2	3.3
Crack	31.4	2.1	33.5	2.3
Heroin	488.7	1,747.2	2,235.9	8.6
LSD	162.4	1.7	164.1	3.1
Ecstasy-type	4,643.7	1,461.1	6,104.8	14.0
Methadone	115.8	1.5	117.3	3.0
Other	13.2	18.1	31.3	1.0
Class B				
Cannabis (herbal)	8,289.8	22,830.4	31,120.2	31.1
Cannabis plants	114,948	40	114,988	454
Cannabis resin	64,824.2	54,025.0	118,849.2	612.6
Cannabis liquid	1.8	24.8	26.6	0.5
Amphetamines	2,360.6	935.1	3,295.7	21.2
Other	2.4	0.0	2.4	0.0
Class C				
Benzodiazepines	2.0	0.1	2.1	0.0
Temazepam	4.0	0.0	4.0	0.0
Anabolic Steroids	7.1	448.4	455.5	0.0
Other	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Class unknown	4.9	3.0	7.9	0.0

Notes:

1. All quantities are in kilograms except for LSD and Ecstasy-type (thousands of doses) and cannabis plants (number of plants).
2. Anabolic steroids became controlled under the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971 on 1 September 1996.
3. Figures for 1998 will not be available until the end of the year.

Source:

Drug Research and Statistics Section, Home Office Research Development and Statistics Directorate

Walton Prison

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what remedial assistance people who are convicted and imprisoned of a drug-related crime obtain in Walton Prison. [94518]

Mr. Boateng: All prisoners received into Liverpool prison, known locally as Walton, are screened in relation to drug abuse, regardless of the nature of their offences. Those in need of detoxification are prescribed medication appropriate to their clinical needs, and if necessary located in the health care centre. They are referred to the prison drug clinic the day following reception.

The prison has a designated wing which offers a 12-week programme of education, physical education and group work for prisoners with a substance abuse problem. Prisoners must remain drug free to participate in the programme. Individual counselling is also available.

Each residential wing has a drug liaison officer who works with specialist support providers to offer counselling, advice and support to enable prisoners to remain drug free.

The establishment has a throughcare team, seconded from a local drug agency, to offer support and advice and to help place prisoners with drug support agencies on release.

Cyber Crime

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the progress made towards agreeing a Council of Europe Convention on Cyber Crime. [94129]

Mr. Boateng: Proposals for a Convention have been prepared by a Committee of Experts drawn from 16 member states of the Council of Europe. Experts from a number of other states, including the United Kingdom, attend as observers and in practice participate fully in the discussions.

The Committee, which began its work in September 1997, was due to conclude at the end of this year but, due to the complexity of the issues, its remit has been extended until December 2000. The Committee's proposals, when completed, will be referred for consideration to the European Committee on Crime Problems, on which all member states at the Council of Europe are represented. The Convention will ultimately be referred for adoption to the Committee of Ministers.

The Committee of Experts is examining draft provisions which would:

require state parties to ensure that their criminal law includes offences against the integrity, confidentiality and availability of computer data; copyright and related offences; and content related offences such as the possession and distribution via the internet of child pornography;

minimise the problem of negative jurisdiction conflicts, where perpetrators of computer crime escape prosecution because the conduct and the mischief it causes occur in different jurisdictions;

put in place arrangements for expedited mutual legal assistance between state parties, where delay risks the loss of vulnerable data required as evidence of computer crime. This includes a proposal that state parties should be able to request or require data holders to preserve for a short period information required as evidence for a domestic or foreign criminal proceeding, while a production order is obtained from a judicial authority;

and provide for extradition of persons accused of computer and internet related offences.

The committee is also discussing whether to propose the inclusion of measures to facilitate co-operation between state parties on the tracing, interception or decryption of internet-related communications relating to criminal activity on the internet.

The Government have been taking advice on a number of the issues from the Forum established by the Association of Chief Police Officers with representatives of internet service providers (known as the ACPO/ Government/ISP Forum).

Harassment

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many people were prosecuted for harassment between September 1998 and May 1999; and if he will make a statement on the working of the Protection from Harassment Act 1996. [94389]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The available data from the Home Office Court Proceedings Database, covering the period from September 1998 to March 1999 inclusive, are given in the table. Provisional data for the second quarter of this year will not be available until December.

A research project to assess the use and effectiveness of the Protection from Harassment Act 1996 is in progress. A report is expected to be published at the beginning of next year.

Number of persons proceeded against at magistrates' courts for offences under s2 and s4 of the Protection from Harassment Act 1997, England and Wales, September 1998 to March 1999 [1]

Offence	*September 1998 to March 1999*
Section 2—Offence of harassment (summary)	2,918
Section 4—Putting people in fear of violence	888

[1] All data are provisional

Oral Statements

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list *(a)* the reports published by his Department and its associated bodies, *(b)* the reports received from bodies set up by his Department, *(c)* the decisions his Department has taken and *(d)* events in the UK and elsewhere, since 27 July, which satisfied the criteria he uses for deciding whether to apply to make oral statements to the House when the House is sitting. [93969]

Mr. Straw: I refer to the reply given to the hon. Member by my right hon. Friend, the President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons on 19 October 1999, *Official Report*, columns *429–30*.

Departmental Publications

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the titles of the in-house publications and newsletters which were produced for the staff of his Department, excluding non-departmental public bodies and agencies, in the last

five years, specifying the dates on which each title was first produced, the frequency with which each title is produced and the current secrecy classification of each title. [93845]

Mr. Straw: The Home Office produces a range of in-house publications and newsletters for its staff, falling into the broad categories shown. All of the items in this list are, or were, made available to all or most Home Office staff. Not included in the list are items with a limited distribution or covering specialist areas.

None of these publications had, or has, a secrecy classification.

Newsletters

Title	*Date first produced*	*Frequency of issue*
Inside Track	October 1995	10 issues a year
HO.tline	July 1998	fortnightly
In Touch	July 1998	ad hoc
Home Office Review'	July 1995	13 issues to August 1996
Home Office Bulletin'	March 1991 to July 1995	monthly
Personnel News'	January 1995	ad hoc
IT@Home Office'	January 1996	quarterly
POISE newsletter'	March 1994	monthly

' These items have ceased publication

In addition, the Home Office produces a wide range of office notices and guidance for staff, which is updated as necessary.

Many people now receive their Home Office notices and some other professional guidance electronically through HORIZON, the Home Office intranet, or through disks copied onto their own networks. Only people who do not have access to a network will receive hard copies, which saves on printing costs.

Over 3,500 staff in the Home Office's central estate, at the Immigration and Nationality Directorate in Croydon, and at some outstations now have access to HORIZON.

Guidance on the Code of Practice on Access to Official Information has been made available to all staff in the Home Office notice on Open Government featured in the list, and further information is available on HORIZON and on the internet.

Benzodiazepine

Mr. Woolas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) what plans he has to review the classification of benzodiazepine drugs; [93721]

(2) what action he is taking to prevent the illegal trade of benzodiazepine drugs. [93720]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The benzodiazepine drugs are controlled under the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971 as Class C drugs. They have licit uses as medicines and are subject to controls on their production and supply. They are currently exempted, however, from controls on their import, export and on their possession unless in base form.

The Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs (ACMD) which advises the Government on drug misuse issues reviewed the controls on, and misuse of, these drugs last year. It recommended that additional controls should be introduced on their import, export and possession. The Government are actively considering the Advisory Council's recommendations.

LD50 Test

Mr. Derek Twigg: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what progress has been made on abolishing the LD50 test. [95670]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: We will vary, or revoke, any licence which authorises the use of the LD50 test (as defined by Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development guideline 401) and which was issued since 5 September 1998. On this date, amendments to the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986 came into effect.

We have accepted legal advice that Section 5(5) of the Act as amended does not allow licensing of the LD50 test for the purpose of meeting international regulatory requirements. The general principle is that a test will be licensed only where there is no scientifically valid and reasonably practicable and accepted alternative.

In accord with this principle, we will also review all authorities to use the LD50 test in licences issued before September 1998.

Freedom of Information Bill

Mr. Pearson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he intends to make available the responses to the public consultation on the draft Freedom of Information Bill. [95671]

Mr. Straw: I have placed copies in the Library today, where they will be held for six months. I intend to announce tomorrow the changes to the draft Freedom of Information Bill which arise from the Government's response to the consultation exercise and pre-legislative scrutiny.

Police Recruitment

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many police officers were recruited to police forces in England and Wales in each of the last three years for which figures are available and in total for the period; and if he will make a statement. [94767]

Mr. Straw: The total number of police officers recruited by police forces in England and Wales in each of the last three years are:

Year	*Number*
1996–97	6,450
1997–98	6,543
1998–99	5,391
Total	18,384

These figures include transfers between forces and have been supplied by the Home Office Research and Statistics Directorate.

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many police officers are planned to be recruited to police forces in England and Wales in each of the next three years and in total for the period; and if he will make a statement. [94768]

Mr. Straw: In my announcement on 30 September about the Crime Fighting Fund, the planning estimate I used was 11,000 recruits over the next three years. The basis of this estimate is currently being examined. I shall report the outcome to the House as soon as possible. We shall shortly be asking forces for detailed estimates of their planned recruitment over the next three years in order to assess their bids for money from the Crime Fighting Fund.

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many police officers retired, resigned or were dismissed from police forces in England and Wales in each of the last three years for which figures are available and in total for the period; and if he will make a statement. [94769]

Mr. Straw: The information requested is shown in the table.

Total wastage for all police forces in England and Wales from 1996–97 to 1998–99[1] (all figures obtained from Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary)

	1996–97	*1997–98*	*1998–99*
Retirements[1]	4,478	4,807	4,204
Resignations	739	924	1,189
Dismissals	126	154	176
Total	5,343	5,885	5,569

[1] Covers both ordinary retirements and ill health retirements

Case Record and Management System

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) if he will make a statement concerning progress on implementing the information technology Case Record and Management System in the probation service; [94771]

(2) how many probation services currently use the Case Record and Management System; and if he will make a statement. [94774]

Mr. Boateng: Forty-four probation services are currently using Case Record and Management System. Of these:

Six are currently training their staff to use it;

Twenty-seven use it and classify themselves as fully dependent on it; and

Eleven classify themselves as partially dependent on it (they are using only some functions or it has only been deployed to some of their offices).

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to replace the Case Record and Management System with an alternative information technology system; if a tender has been put out for an alternative system to CRAMS; and if he will make a statement. [94772]

Mr. Boateng: Case Record and Management System now needs to be re-developed in order better to support the modernisation of the probation service, including important developments such as the evidence-based programmes to reduce the likelihood of re-offending, the new joint probation-prisons offender assessment system (OASys), and the new National Standards for the supervision of offenders. Its successor will also need to facilitate connections to other parts of the criminal justice system and the time is now right to take advantage of the further advances in information technology.

A user requirement is currently being developed and the work will be put out to tender in due course.

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what has been the total cost to date of developing and implementing the Case Record and Management System in the probation service; what was the original expected cost of the system; and if he will make a statement. [94773]

Mr. Boateng: There have been four major release versions of Case Record and Management System. The total development cost of these was £3.2 million which is in line with original estimates. The total implementation cost of the four versions was £1.4 million. This is £300,000 more than the estimated cost of implementation, largely for reasons of Year 2000 compliance.

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if a year 2000 compliant version of the Case Record and Management System has been made available to probation services; how many probation services are using such a system; and if he will make a statement. [94775]

Mr. Boateng: A year 2000 complaint version of Case Record and Management System is currently being rolled out to probation services. The rollout is on schedule and by the end of this week 26 probation services will have it. The rollout is due to be completed by 17 November.

HEALTH

Drugs

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what representations he has received from the health trusts in Lancashire with regard to the availability of drugs through the NHS; and what discussions he has held with them. [94186]

Mr. Hutton *[holding answer 19 October 1999]:* We have received no such representations, neither have we discussed the matter with any of the trusts concerned.

Dentists

Miss Kirkbride: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the number of NHS dentists by region in each year since 1995. [94316]

Mr. Hutton: The table sets out the number of National Health Service dentists providing treatment under the NHS in the General Dental Service, Salaried Dental Service, Hospital Dental Service and Community Dental Service by region in England at 30 September each year.

The number of general [1], salaried [2], community [3] and hospital dental service [3] dentists by health region, England

Health regions	*30 September 1995*	*1996*	*1997*	*1998*
England	19,563	19,978	20,484	21,041
Northern and Yorkshire	2,513	2,427	2,479	2,532
Trent	1,615	1,704	1,801	1,820
Anglia and Oxford	1,936	1,983	2,088	2,152
North Thames	2,997	3,097	3,286	3,406
South Thames	3,238	3,308	3,312	3,348
South and West	2,711	2,748	2,823	2,985
West Midlands	1,842	1,863	1,939	1,982
North West	2,630	2,737	2,778	2,856

[1] GDS dentists include principals, assistants and vocational dental practitioners.
[2] Salaried dentists are those in post as reported by HAs; 1995 figures are for the Number of contracts.
[3] Dentists are counted in each region in which they work. The figures include some double counting as a dentist may practise in more than one of the dental services. This explains the apparent disparity between the sums of regions and England totals.

World Mental Health Day

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the Government's contribution to World Mental Health Day on 10 October. [94354]

Mr. Hutton: The Department has continued to support the World Mental Health Day campaign co-ordinated by the Health Education Authority. We have allocated £1 million in 1999 to support the campaign, an increase of 57 per cent. over last year. The campaign is an important element of our strategy to challenge discrimination and promote participation and inclusion as key positive steps for mental well being.

Commission for Health Improvement

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what estimate he has made of the costs of establishing the Commission for Health Improvement. [93917]

Mr. Denham: The budget for the Commission for Health Improvement in 1999–2000 is £3 million. This money will be spent on the establishment and early development of the commission and will cover various costs including accommodation, staff recruitment and training, and the development of methodologies.

Drug Prices

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for Health which drugs will be reduced in price and by how much, consequent upon his agreement with NHS suppliers. [94029]

Mr. Denham: Under the 1999 Pharmaceutical Price Regulation Scheme agreed with the Association of the British Pharmaceutical Industry, companies supplying branded medicines to the National Health Service to a value of more than £1 million per annum are required to reduce their prices by 4.5 per cent. from 1 October 1999. As an alternative to an across the board reduction, they are allowed to modulate the prices of these medicines by reductions that equate to an overall level of 4.5 per cent. Companies themselves decide on a commercial basis which medicines should be reduced in price and by how much and supply this information to the Prescription Pricing Authority. The Department monitors the sales of medicines to determine whether the modulation have achieved the necessary reduction.

A list of the price reductions notified to the Department at the outset of the scheme has been placed in the Library. It should be noted that companies can remodulate their prices following the initial reduction. Up to date information on the prices of medicines is maintained in the pharmaceutical trade press, copies of which are in the Library.

DEFENCE

Sierra Leone

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many UK service men and service women were serving or were based in Sierra Leone on 1 September, including those serving on UK warships within the territorial waters of Sierra Leone; and if he will list *(a)* their units and *(b)* the units to which they were attached. [94618]

Mr. Spellar: There were 25 UK service personnel deployed to Sierra Leone on 1 September 1999, and were drawn from the following units:

HQ (London District)

HQ Royal Marines

39 Regiment Royal Artillery

3 Staffords

9/12 Lancers

RAF St. Mawgan

RAF Innsworth

Coldstream Guards

Army Cookery School

Royal Marines

Royal Scots

East of England Regiment

Scots Guards

City of Edinburgh University Officer Training Corps

4 Royal Green Jackets (Volunteers)/Royal Irish

Prince of Wales Royal Regiment

Royal Highland Fusiliers.

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many United Kingdom service men and service women have served or been based in Sierra Leone since the beginning of the summer Adjournment; and to which military units *(a)* they belong and *(b)* they were attached. [94617]

Mr. Spellar: Forty eight UK military personnel have deployed to Sierra Leone since 28 July 1999, of which 27 remain.

Personnel have been drawn from the following units:

Permanent Joint Headquarters
HQ London District
HQ Royal Marines
39 Regiment Royal Artillery
3 Staffordshire Regiment
9/12 Lancers
RAF St. Mawgan
RAF Innsworth
Coldstream Guards
Army Cookery School
Irish Guards
RAF High Wycombe
RAF Linton on Ouse
Commando Training Centre RM
Royal Marine Reserve Bristol
Royal Marines
Royal Scots
East of England Regiment
Scots Guards
City of Edinburgh University Officer Training Corps
Royal Green Jackets (Volunteers)/Royal Irish
Prince of Wales Royal Regiment
Royal Highland Fusiliers
Devon and Dorset
Royal Anglian
Parachute Regiment
Royal Signals
HQ Strike Command.

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many UK service men and service women were *(a)* detained, *(b)* disarmed and *(c)* kidnapped by rebels, irregulars and other military units in Sierra Leone during August; and if he will state the names of their units and the names of units to which they were attached in each case. [94619]

Mr. Spellar: Seven UK military officers serving with UNOMSIL were abducted in early August. They were from the following units:

HQ London District
HQ Royal Marines
9/12 Lancers
39 Regiment Royal Artillery
Coldstream Guards
3 Staffordshire Regiment
RAF Innsworth.

In two subsequent and separate incidents, a UK military observer attached to UNOMSIL was briefly detained. One was from RAF Innsworth, and the other from 39 Regiment Royal Artillery.

All personnel were released unharmed.

UNOMSIL military observers are unarmed.

Personnel

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is his estimate of the cost of providing accommodation and infrastructure for his Department's personnel relocated from Germany to the United Kingdom under the terms of the Strategic Defence Review. [94151]

Mr. Hoon: The current estimate of the cost of providing accommodation and infrastructure for personnel relocating from Germany to the United Kingdom under the SDR is of the order of £150 million. The cost of the programme will be spread over seven years. I expect that a proportion of the works will be delivered through Public Private Partnership. Once withdrawal is complete, I expect operating cost savings of some £13 million a year.

PRIME MINISTER

Performance and Innovation Unit

Mr. Kidney: To ask the Prime Minister what future projects are planned for the Performance and Innovation Unit. [95073]

The Prime Minister: The Performance and Innovation Unit (PIU) was established to improve the capacity of Government to identify and address strategic cross-cutting issues and promote innovation in the development of policy and in the delivery of the Government's objectives. The PIU project teams are drawn from both inside and outside Government, to ensure new thinking and a wide range of experience is brought to bear on the issues. Their reports make an important contribution to policy making.

Further to the work announced in December 1998, the Modernising Government White Paper in March 1999 announced that the PIU is undertaking a project aimed at identifying the long-term strategic challenges facing Government. I have now asked the PIU to take on the following further projects:

The Pursuit and Seizure of Criminal Assets

To consider the role that following the money trail and seizing criminal assets can play in the fight against crime and how to maximise the effective use of these tools. My right hon. Friend the Member for Makerfield (Mr. McCartney), Minister of State, Cabinet Office is the sponsor Minister for this project.

The Post Office network

To identify the contribution made by post offices to the vitality of local communities, consider how the Post Office network can best contribute to the Government's objectives in the future and in the process formulate objectives for the Post Office network. My hon. Friend the Member for Norwich, South (Mr. Clarke), Minister of State, Home Office is the sponsor Minister.

Social, Health, Environmental and Trade Objectives on the Global Stage

To identify a coherent set of principles for comparing trade measures with other national and international measures for addressing social, health and environmental objectives. My hon. Friend the Member for Cunninghame, North (Mr. Wilson), Minister of State, Scotland Office is the sponsor Minister.

The Use of Analysis and Modelling in Central Government

To review Departments' capabilities for quantitative analysis and modelling in key areas of Government policy, including access to and the use made of data, to identify strengths and weaknesses and make cost-effective recommendations for change.

The aim is to complete the first three projects next spring and the last by the end of the year.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Plutonium

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement in respect of the international safety implications arising from the plutonium shipment involving the Pacific Teal and the Pacific Pintail. [94716]

Mr. Hain: The shipment of MOX fuel to Japan was undertaken in full conformity with well established international non-proliferation safeguard procedures and physical protection regimes. In terms of the measures taken to minimise the risk of radiological accidents all shipments by sea are undertaken in full compliance with all the relevant international standards, regulations and recommendations relating to the transport by sea of hazardous cargoes and nuclear materials. The ships and containers used for this shipment met, and in certain cases exceeded, these requirements.

Sierra Leone

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the current political and military situation in Sierra Leone. [94616]

Mr. Hain: There has been clear and welcome progress in recent months in the peace process in Sierra Leone. The overall security situation, however, remains volatile.

We welcome the signing of a Peace Agreement by the Government of Sierra Leone and the Revolutionary United Front in Lomé on 7 July. The Agreement offers the people of Sierra Leone the real prospect of a sustainable peace. We support the deployment of a United Nations peacekeeping operation to Sierra Leone.

We expect all parties to honour the agreement and the accompanying ceasefire, and to implement these fully. An important first step will be early progress on the Disarmament, Demobilisations and Reintegration programme for former combatants.

We welcome the return to Freetown on 3 October of Foday Sankoh, the leader of the RUF, and Johnny Paul Koroma, the leader for the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council. This is an important step forward in the peace process.

I gave further details of how we have implemented our £10 million package of assistance in my written answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Midlothian (Mr. Clarke) on 20 October 1999, *Official Report*, column *599*.

Small Arms Exports

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on policy towards the controlled export of small arms. [94141]

Mr. Hain: Pursuing a responsible and transparent policy on legal transfers of small arms from the UK, and encouraging other arms exporting countries to do likewise, is one of the main elements of our approach to combatting the problem of small arms proliferation.

All licence applications to export goods and technology on the UK Military List, including small arms, are assessed on a case-by-case basis against our national export licensing criteria and those in the EU Code of Conduct on Arms Exports. If there is a clear risk that the proposed export might be used for internal repression or international aggression, or would provoke, prolong or aggravate existing tensions or conflicts in the destination country, the application is refused. We also carefully consider the risk of the goods being diverted to an undesirable end-user and the effect of the proposed export on regional stability.

We have encouraged non EU-member states to respect the principles of the EU Code of Conduct in their exports of military equipment, including small arms. We have also supported moves to address the issue of legal exports of small arms in the Wassenaar Arrangement for Export Controls on Conventional Arms and Dual-Use Goods.

The EU Joint Action on Small Arms of December 1998 commits the UK and other member states to work for international acceptance of the principle that small arms specially designed for military use should be exported only to governments.

India

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will meet with Ms Maneka Gandhi of the Ministry of Welfare in India, and Shri I. P. Gupta, Lieutenant Governor of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, to discuss the Jarawa people. [94391]

Mr. Hain: FCO Ministers have no plans to meet Ms Maneka Gandhi or Shri I. P. Gupta.

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent discussions he has held with the Indian Government regarding the reserve for Jarawa people on the Andaman Islands; and if he will make a statement. [94392]

Mr. Hain: We are aware of reports regarding the Jarawa people of the Andaman Islands and plans for their resettlement. We understand that these are the subject of an individual's application to the High Court of Calcutta (on which judgment has yet to be delivered). We have not discussed these plans with the Indian Government.

Iran

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations he has *(a)* made and *(b)* proposes to make on the forthcoming visit of the Iranian Foreign Minister to the UK and *(c)* on his forthcoming visit to Iran concerning the position of the 13 Iranian Jews detained in Iran on alleged spying charges; and if he will make a statement. [94411]

Mr. Hain: We and our EU partners have pressed the Iranian authorities over this case and will continue to do so. As long ago as 20 May the German EU Presidency expressed concern at these detentions on behalf of EU member states, and a formal EU demarche to the Iranian government took place on 30 June.

We have also told the Iranians of our concern bilaterally, both in Tehran and in London. We have pressed for a fair and open trial, and access for visitors and legal representatives. We have also pressed for access

for independent observers at any trial. Most recently the Foreign Secretary made these points to the Iranian Ambassador on 29 July. I reiterated them to him on 4 August. The Foreign Secretary also pressed Foreign Minister Kharrazi on this issue during their meeting at the United Nations General Assembly on 21 September. Our Ambassador in Tehran has spoken similarly to the Iranian authorities there.

Neither the agenda for the Secretary of State's visit to Iran, nor Foreign Minister Kharrazi's visit here, have yet been decided. Should this issue still not be resolved, we will raise it again.

Burma

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what action he has taken following the imprisonment of James Mawdsley and Rachel Goldwyn in Burma; and if he will make a statement. [94606]

Mr. Hain: We have expressed our concerns to the Burmese authorities about the handling of these cases. Consular staff have visited James and Rachel; both confirmed they were well and had not been ill-treated. We will continue to visit regularly and stay in close touch with families. We have done and will continue to do everything we properly can to help.

Biosafety Protocol

Joan Ruddock: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when the next meeting on the Biosafety Protocol will take place; what preparations are being made by his Department for input into the EU position; and if he will make a statement. [94827]

Mr. Hain: The resumed extra-ordinary conference of the Parties on Biosafety Protocol will take place in Montreal on 24–28 January 2000. My Department is working closely with the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions and other Government Departments in assessing the options put forward by other negotiating groups in the informal consultations in Vienna. Our posts are also active in feeding in information on developments in other countries for consideration in discussion with EU partners.

Joan Ruddock: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of the prospects of the Extraordinary Conference of the parties meeting in Montreal under the auspices of the United Nations Convention on Biodiversity in January 2000 concluding the Biosafety Protocol. [94869]

Mr. Hain: Early agreement of a workable and effective Biosafety Protocol is an important objective for this Government. We welcomed the decision made by Minister Mayr to resume the extra-ordinary Conference of the parties to agree the Protocol and particularly the strong political commitment to complete the Protocol expressed by all negotiating groups at the informal consultations in September. Hard work is still needed to come to final agreement on the outstanding issues to be covered under the Protocol. We will be making every effort to promote successful completion of the negotiations.

Sanctions

Jane Griffiths: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list changes to sanctions regimes implemented by the UK since 26 July. [95494]

Mr. Hain: New measures have been introduced against Indonesia; certain measures against Libya have been lifted; and amendments have been made to measures in place against the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. Details are as follows:

Indonesia

On 16 September, the Council of the European Union adopted a Common Position (1999/624/CFSP) imposing restrictive measures against Indonesia. These measures are an embargo on the export of arms, munitions and military equipment; a ban on the supply of equipment which might be used for internal repression or terrorism; and the suspension of bilateral military cooperation.

The embargo on the export of arms, munitions and military equipment is being applied to all goods and technology on the Military List which forms Part III of the Export of Goods (Control) Order 1994, as amended.

The Common Position shall expire on 17 January 2000.

Following from this Common Position, the EC adopted Regulation 2158/1999 on 11 October which prohibits:

(a) the sale, supply, export or shipment, directly or indirectly, of equipment listed in an Annex to the Regulation, whether or not originating in the Community, to any person or body in the Republic of Indonesia or to any person or any body for the purpose of any business carried on in, or operated from, the territory of the Republic of Indonesia;

(b) the participation in related activities the object of which is, directly or indirectly, to promote the transactions or activities referred to in (a) above.

EU member states may authorise the transactions or activities referred to at (a) and (b) above in respect to certain items in the Annex when they have obtained conclusive evidence that the end use of these items is not for internal repression or terrorism.

The Regulation applies within the territory of the Community including its air space and on board any aircraft or any vessel under the jurisdiction of a member state and to any person elsewhere who is a national of a member state and any body which is incorporated or constituted under the law of a member state.

The Regulation entered into force on 13 October and is directly applicable in the UK. Legislation has been introduced to provide for licensing and enforcement, including penalties. The Indonesia (Supply, Sale, Export and Shipment of Equipment) (Penalties and Licences) Regulations 1999 (SI 1999/2822) came into force on 14 October.

The Regulation shall expire on 17 January 2000.

Libya

On 13 September, the Council of the European Union adopted a Common Position (1999/611/CFSP) lifting a number of EU sanctions against Libya which were imposed in 1986. These measures were restrictions on the freedom of movement of Libyan diplomats and consular personnel; the reduction of staff of diplomatic and consular missions; and stricter visa requirements and procedures. The EU arms embargo against Libya, also imposed in 1986, remains in force.

Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY)

On 3 September, the Council of the European Union adopted a Common Position (1999/604/CFSP) allowing exceptions to the EU oil embargo and flight ban in relation to Kosovo and Montenegro.

Following from this Common Position, the EC adopted two Regulations.

Regulation 2111/1999, adopted on 4 October, repeals and replaces Regulation 900/1999 prohibiting the sale and supply of petroleum and petroleum products to the FRY and provides for member states to authorise the sale, supply, export or shipment of such goods provided that the goods are shipped from the Community to Montenegro or Kosovo without transiting through other parts of Serbia and that the goods shall not leave the territory of Montenegro or Kosovo for any destination elsewhere in Serbia.

The Regulation entered into force on 5 October and is directly applicable in the UK. Legislation has been introduced to provide for licensing and enforcement, including penalties. The Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (Supply, Sale and Export of Petroleum and Petroleum Products) (Penalties and Licences) (No. 3) Regulations 1999 (SI 1999/2821) came into force on 14 October.

Regulation 2151/1999, adopted on 11 October, repeals and replaces Regulation 1064/1999 imposing a ban on flights between the European Community and the FRY and provides for member states to authorise specified flights between the territories of the Community and Montenegro or Kosovo provided that the points of departure, intermediate points and points of final destination in the FRY are located only in Montenegro or Kosovo.

The Regulation entered into force on 12 October and is directly applicable in the UK.

TREASURY

Departmental Publications

Mr. Maclean: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will list his Department's spending on official publications since May 1997. [93694]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The spending on official publications since May 1997—which includes the costs incurred by the Department in publishing, preparation, production and purchase of copies for official use—is estimated to be £1,040,000. This excludes the cost of publications produced for internal use. Where the Treasury makes use of a private sector publisher, printing and design costs are generally met by the publisher as part of their acceptance of the risk of publication.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Special Educational Needs Tribunal

Ms Ryan: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment when he proposes to undertake a review of the Special Educational Needs Tribunal. [95680]

Jacqui Smith: In accordance with the Government's policy of conducting quinquennial reviews of all non-departmental public bodies, the Department is launching today, in conjunction with the National Assembly for Wales, a review of the Special Educational Needs Tribunal. Following Cabinet office guidelines, the first stage of the review will take the form of a "prior options" study with the following terms of reference:

to review the functions of the Special Educational Needs Tribunal, and the likely future need for those functions;

to consider the powers, remit, constitutional status, membership and activities of the Special Educational Needs Tribunal;

to consider whether, on efficiency grounds, some or all of the functions of the Special Educational Needs Tribunal can be carried out within an alternative organisational framework including by another public, private or voluntary body or otherwise within government;

to review the efficiency and effectiveness of the Special Educational Needs Tribunal in carrying out its functions.

The review will have particular regard to:

the overriding objective that special educational provision should meet the needs of individual children; and

compliance with the Human Rights Act 1998.

We should welcome comments on those matters to be covered by the review from all those with an interest in the work of the Special Educational Needs Tribunal. Comments, which may be made public unless respondents specifically request otherwise, should be sent by 15 January 2000 to:

Mrs. Susan Ashford
Special Educational Needs Division
Department for Education and Employment
Sanctuary Buildings
Great Smith Street
Westminster
London SW1P 3BT.

The review should be completed by 29 April 2000. The findings will be published and made available to Parliament.

Student Loans

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what is the current *(a)* number and *(b)* value of loans to students which have not been repaid by their due date; and if he will make a statement. [94742]

Mr. Wicks *[holding answer 19 October 1999]:* The Student Loans Company has informed me that at 31 August 1999 167,716 student loans accounts were in arrears. The total value of the arrears at that date was £70,062,402. These figures are for the United Kingdom. These arrears arise from mortgage style loans taken out under the previous scheme. The new loan system where repayments are directly linked to a borrower's income after leaving university or college and are repaid through the Inland Revenue should result in lower levels of arrears.

Graduation Test

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what steps he will take to ensure the separate identification of those who graduate under the Social Exclusion Unit's concept of graduation at Level 2 and those who graduate after taking a degree. [94765]

Mr. Wicks *[holding answer 19 October 1999]:* The Government have asked the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority to develop and consult on the

options for a common objective obtainable by all young people which will encourage them to participate in learning beyond 16 and to achieve to at least a Level 2 standard, as recommended in the Social Exclusion Report, "Bridging the Gap". As part of its remit, the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority will consider, and consult upon, a name for such a certificate.

Basic Skills Qualifications

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what proposals he has for national qualifications in basic skills for adults. [94763]

Mr. Wicks *[holding answer 19 October 1999]:* Following the launch of "A Fresh Start", the report from Sir Claus Moser's working group on adult basic skills, the Government asked the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority to develop national standards for adult literacy and numeracy at Entry Level and Levels 1 and 2. Draft standards will be issued for consultation shortly. We are expecting the final standards to be published in Spring 2000.

These standards will provide the base for the development of a core curriculum for adult basic skills and national tests at Levels 1 and 2. All recognised qualifications will need to be aligned with the new national standards. We have also asked the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority for advice on the link between national tests and qualifications.

Education Provision

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what arrangements he will make for the coherence of the curriculum and the delivery of education between the post- and pre-16 sectors. [94758]

Mr. Wicks *[holding answer 19 October 1999]:* We have already introduced a number of initiatives which will lead to greater coherence between pre-16 and post-16 education and encourage progression throughout the 14–19 phase, as part of our overall drive to raise standards at all levels of education. We are increasing the range of qualifications on offer, and are increasing curriculum flexibility at Key Stage 4 (14–16) with enhanced opportunities for vocational study.

As a follow up to the National Curriculum Review and in the context of responses to the White Paper "Learning to Succeed", we are looking at ways of increasing coherence in both the curriculum and the delivery of learning. We are working to create a culture where all young people continue in learning until 18 or 19.

Key Skills

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on integration of key skills into the level 3 curriculum. [94737]

Mr. Wicks *[holding answer 19 October 1999]:* The Government want to encourage more young people to develop their key skills as a natural part of their post-16 education and training. We are therefore introducing from September 2000 a new qualification covering communication, application of number and information technology. The intention is that individuals should study at the level appropriate to their own needs and to their main course of study. This will include level 3.

Key Stage 4 Pupils

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many Key Stage 4 pupils there are in schools for which the National Curriculum is currently disapplied. [94733]

Jacqui Smith: The Government are keen to encourage work-related learning at Key Stage 4. Under s363 of the Education Act 1996, two subjects can be disapplied to allow pupils to spend time in further education and work experience. 8,985 pupils followed this route last year. This year's figures are not yet available. This figure does not include pupils with special educational needs or those in the six schools which have applied under s362 of the 1996 Education Act to disapply all or part of the National Curriculum more generally.

Young People

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many people aged 16 to 18 were not in either education, training or work in each of the last five years. [94764]

Mr. Wicks *[holding answer 19 October 1999]:* The latest available information is in the table.

Year	*Number*	*Percentage of population*
1998 (provisional)	173,000	9
1997	167,000	9
1996	160,000	9
1995	152,000	9
1994	148,000	9

Source:
School, college, and trainee records, Labour Force Survey

We are taking a strategic approach to reducing the number of 16–18 year olds not in education, training, or work, and to improving participation and attainment across the board.

An enhanced strategy—called ConneXions—will ensure that far more young people continue in education and training until they are at least 19. Some initiatives under ConneXions, for example, Right to Time Off for Study or Training, will have begun to take effect from September this year. Further details of the ConneXions strategy will be announced shortly.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State is chairing a Ministerial Steering Group to oversee the implementation of action recommended in "Bridging the Gap—New opportunities for 16–18-year-olds not in education employment or training", the Social Exclusion Unit's most recent report.

Local Learning Partnerships

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has for involving students as members of local learning partnerships. [94682]

Mr. Wicks *[holding answer 19 October 1999]:* The White Paper "Learning to Succeed" both endorses the current remit of Learning Partnerships and proposes strengthening their role in reflecting the needs of the community. They are being actively encouraged to involve partners who represent the wider interests of the community, including students and other learners.

Training

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if multinational and multi-site companies will be able to bypass the local learning and skills councils and deal directly at national level in connection with training and qualifications issues. [94741]

Mr. Wicks *[holding answer 19 October 1999]:* It will be important for the Learning and Skills Council at national and local levels to engage employers of all sizes in workforce development which will benefit individuals, improve business competitiveness and strengthen the economy. There are large national companies which find it difficult to work effectively within the current system; and the Learning and Skills Council will be able to develop arrangements which make it easier to provide a national link to such companies. The precise arrangements will be developed in coming months.

New Deal

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what money has been received by Sefton Metropolitan Borough Council from the New Deal programme and how this money has been spent. [94594]

Ms Jowell: This information is a commercially confidential matter between the Employment Service and Sefton Metropolitan Borough Council and cannot therefore be released.

NORTHERN IRELAND

Carbon Dioxide (Emissions Reduction)

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what proportion of the carbon dioxide emissions reduction needed for a 20 per cent. reduction from the UK's 1990 levels by 2010 he expects to be delivered in Northern Ireland. [93867]

Mr. George Howarth: Following Kyoto in 1997, the UK has a legally binding target to cut emissions of a basket of six greenhouse gases by 12.5 per cent. below 1990 levels over the period 2008–2012. The UK Government also have a domestic goal to cut carbon dioxide emissions by 20 per cent. below 1990 levels by 2010.

The Government are currently developing a draft climate change programme which will set out how the UK will deliver its Kyoto target and move towards its domestic goal. We are aiming to publish the draft programme for further consultation towards the end of 1999.

Prison Wings

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what was the paramilitary affiliation of the prison wings in which the six persons charged in May 1997 with the murder of Robert Hamill were imprisoned. [94361]

Mr. Ingram: Five of the six persons charged were held within the UVF wings and one was held within the LVF wing in HMP Maze.

Enforcement Officer Statistics

Mr. McGrady: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many enforcement officers currently operate within the Department of the Environment; and what were the comparable figures for 1992 to 1998. [94450]

Mr. George Howarth: At 1 October 1999 there were 13 enforcement officers attached to the Department's Transport Licensing and Enforcement Branch. The comparable figures for 1992 to 1998 are:

	Number
1992	14
1993	17
1994	15
1995	15
1996	15
1997	14
1998	13

Irish-medium Schools

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what recent discussions he has had with Ministers in the Irish Government about joint funding of Irish-medium post primary schools in the border region; and if he will make a statement. [94766]

Mr. McFall *[holding answer 19 October 1999]:* I have regular discussions with the Irish Minister for Education and Science on topics of mutual interest, including Irish-medium education. Those discussions have not yet involved joint funding of schools, though there is joint funding through the European Peace and Reconciliation Package of teaching materials for Irish-medium primary schools.

Debris

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland on what date bomb debris from the 1974 Dublin and Monaghan explosions arrived in Northern Ireland; what was the recorded weight of debris received; if a continuous chain of custody for the debris can be established whilst it remained in Northern Ireland; what happened to the debris after the Belfast forensic scientist Dr. Hall carried out his examination; and where and in whose custody the debris is today. [93526]

Mr. Ingram *[holding answer 19 October 1999]:* Responsibility for this matter has been delegated to the Forensic Science Agency under its Chief Executive, Mr. R. W. Adams. I have asked him to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from R. W. Adams to Mr. Kevin McNamara, dated 19 October 1999:

I am writing in response to your question regarding debris received at this laboratory in connection with bombings in Monaghan and Dublin in 1974.

Items relating to the above incidents were received from the Garda Siochana at the laboratory in Belfast on 28 May 1974. No weight was recorded for them.

There are no records available in the laboratory in relation to the internal continuity of the items or to their ultimate fate. The presumption is that they were returned to the Garda in line with normal practice for items received from the police.

Fostering

Mr. Peter Robinson: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will list the number of children from Catholic homes who have been placed with Protestant foster-parents and the number of children from Protestant homes who have been placed with Catholic foster-parents for each of the areas within the South and East Belfast Trust. [94524]

Mr. George Howarth: At present, two Catholic children are placed with Protestant foster carers and one Protestant child with Catholic carers in long-term fostering placements. In addition, nine Catholic children are placed with Protestant carers and four Protestant children with Catholic carers in short-term, temporary arrangements. Each of these placements has been made with the consent of the child's parents.

Car Parking

Mr. John D. Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many car parks are provided by (1) the Department of the Environment, (2) the private sector and (3) district councils in the urban areas of *(a)* Dungannon, *(b)* Portadown, *(c)* Armagh City and *(d)* Newry; what is the total number of (i) paid for spaces and (ii) free spaces in each of these urban areas; and what proposals there are to provide additional parking spaces in each of these urban areas. [94625]

Mr. George Howarth: Responsibility for the subject in question has been delegated to the Roads Service under its Chief Executive, Mr. Colin James. I have asked him to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from C. James to Mr. John D. Taylor, dated 21 October 1999:

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland has asked me to respond to your recently tabled parliamentary Question about car park provision in the urban areas of Dungannon, Portadown, Armagh and Newry. The information requested is as follows:

	Urban Area			
	Dungannon[1]	*Portadown*	*Armagh*	*Newry*
DOE(NI) Roads Service				
Car Parks	5	12	8	14
Paid Spaces	362	639	587	526
Free Spaces	218	754	308	814
Private Sector				
Car Parks	—	4	2	2
Paid Spaces	—	540	138	—
Free Spaces	—	775	20	1,950
District Council				
Car Parks	—	1	3	—
Paid Spaces	—	—	130	—
Free Spaces	—	30	60	—

[1] Following a review of car parking at Perry Street 40 paid spaces will become free spaces later this year, i.e., there will be 322 paid spaces and 258 free spaces.

Roads Service has no proposals at present to provide additional car parking spaces in any of the above-mentioned urban areas.

I hope you find this information helpful.

General Social Care Council

Mr. John D. Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if the proposed General Social Care Council will operate in Northern Ireland; and if he will make a statement. [94542]

Mr. George Howarth: The publication of a fundamental review of the Central Council for Education and Training in Social Work (CCETSW) was announced in the House on 22 December 1997, *Official Report*, column *553*. The Secretary of State for Health announced his intention then to establish mechanisms for regulating the personal social services workforce in England and to hand over CCETSW's functions for social services training to the new body.

I have given careful thought to the best arrangements for regulating the social services workforce in Northern Ireland, consistent with the Government's plans as outlined in the Social Services White Papers for England, Scotland and Wales. I have taken into account that there are to be separate regulatory bodies for England, Scotland and Wales.

I have concluded that there should be a separate body for the regulation of the social services workforce in Northern Ireland and that it should, as in England, Scotland and Wales, assume responsibility for CCETSW's training functions. However, the Northern Ireland body must have the closest possible alignment with similar machinery in the other countries of the UK, and officials will be working to ensure that effective links of this kind are put in place.

We also need to have coherent overall arrangements for developing and enforcing high standards of conduct and practice, and for ensuring that workforce and training strategies are directed towards the same standards. I have, therefore, also asked officials to ensure that we bring together the work of the regulatory body and the work in Northern Ireland of any future National Training Organisation for the personal social services.

Children and adults who use the social services in Northern Ireland should be able to rely on a workforce that is properly trained, appropriately qualified and effectively regulated. We will be bringing forward more detailed proposals for the new regulatory body in a social services paper to be published shortly. It is our intention to ensure that the new arrangements in Northern Ireland are available at the same time as in other parts of the United Kingdom.

Policing Review

Mr. John D. Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what is the estimated total cost of implementing the Patten Recommendations on Policing in Northern Ireland; and if he will make a statement. [94351]

Mr. Ingram: It is not possible to estimate the total cost of implementing the recommendations made by the Patten Commission. The Government are currently engaged in a consultation exercise and in assessing the impact of the proposals, including financial implications. The consultation process will continue until the end of November, following which the Secretary of State will make a statement to the House.

Director of Disability

Mr. John D. Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland when the new Equality Commission in Northern Ireland will appoint *(a)* a Director of Disability and *(b)* support staff in the Directorate for Disability; and if he will make a statement. [94561]

Mr. McFall: The Equality Commission is currently making preparations to appoint a Director of Disability and an additional operational post. In August 1999 it temporarily allocated an existing Director to take responsibility for disability issues including making preparations for the new advisory and enforcement powers, accommodation and staffing and organisational structure.

Prostate Cancer

Mr. John D. Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many persons have died due to prostate cancer in each of the past 10 years; what has been taken to address the problem; and if he will make a statement. [94546]

Mr. George Howarth: The information on deaths is as follows:

	Deaths
1989	159
1990	195
1991	175
1992	201
1993	182
1994	209
1995	216
1996	211
1997	208
1998	[1]220

[1] Provisional

Source:
Figures supplied by General Register Office (NI)

Cancer services in Northern Ireland are presently being reorganised to ensure that all cancer patients are managed by specialist cancer teams. Such care is associated with a better quality of life and improved prospects of survival. All patients with prostate cancer, who require surgery will be treated by specialist teams. Current research evidence does not support population screening for prostate cancer.

Sovereign's Portrait

Mr. John D. Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if the portrait of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II is on display within RUC stations; if the Patten Commission report changes the policy of display of the sovereign's portrait; and if he will make a statement. [94349]

Mr. Ingram: The portrait of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II can be on display in RUC stations, though the RUC have advised that there is no formal policy about displaying the portrait. The Patten Commission did not make any specific reference to this issue in its report, however, it did recommend that the police service should maintain a 'neutral working environment'. This proposal, as with all the other recommendations, is part of the current consultation process.

Disability

Mr. John D. Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what is the timetable for the introduction of legislation to provide statutory enforcement powers in Northern Ireland similar to those available in Great Britain under the Disability Discrimination Act 1995; and if he will make a statement. [94560]

Mr. George Howarth: It is intended that the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland will enforce disability rights from April 2000. The legislation to confer the necessary enforcement powers on the Equality Commission will be introduced shortly by means of an Order in Council. If devolution of powers to the Northern Ireland Assembly occurs before the Order has completed all its parliamentary stages the legislation will transfer to the Assembly.

Mr. John D. Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland when the new rights under the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 will become available in Northern Ireland; and if he will make a statement. [94559]

Mr. George Howarth: New rights under the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 were introduced across the UK from 1 October 1999.

School Premises, Portavogie

Mr. John D. Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (1) when the premises, formerly occupied by the East Down Institute for Further Education, adjacent to Portavogie Primary School, New Harbour road, Portavogie, became vacant; what proposals there are for the future user or ownership of these premises; and if he will make a statement; [94431]

(2) how long the school premises at New Harbour road, Portavogie adjacent to the primary school have been vacant; what proposals there are for the future use or disposal of these premises; and if he will make a statement. [94540]

Mr. McFall: The adult education centre in Portavogie was officially closed down by the East Down Institute for Further and Higher Education in June 1998. The South Eastern Education and Library Board carried out a feasibility study into possible renovation of the building but it proved too costly. I understand that the premises will now be offered for public sale.

Ambulance Service

Mr. John D. Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what plans he has to make additional resources available to the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service Trust over the next three years; and if he will make a statement. [94342]

Mr. George Howarth: An additional £15 million has been invested in the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service over the three year period 1999–2002. The first instalment of that investment was announced on 28 June 1999 when £3 million was provided for immediate investment in the provision of accident and emergency ambulances, replacement of equipment, and training and development of ambulance crews. The balance of the £15 million will be deployed in accordance with the outcome of the Comprehensive Review of the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service which is due to report by the end of November.

Housing, Carryduff

Mr. John D. Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland when he expects to publish the Strategic Framework for Northern Ireland; if decisions for planning applications for housing schemes at Carryduff will be delayed until after the publication of the Strategic Framework; and if he will make a statement about the future of housing development in Carryduff and District. [94556]

Mr. George Howarth: The Regional Strategic Framework for Northern Ireland is not expected to be published until Spring 2000. A draft of the Regional Strategy is presently the subject of a Public Examination and the independent panel conducting the examination will not submit its report to the Department of the Environment until the end of 1999. Thereafter, it is expected that the matter will be considered by the new Northern Ireland Assembly before the Regional Strategy is finalised.

As regards decisions on existing planning applications for housing schemes at Carryduff, the position is that these applications are incomplete and cannot be processed until Environmental Statements have been submitted in support of the proposals. Only when the Environmental Statements have been submitted will the Department be in a position to decide how the applications can be progressed.

The matter of future housing in Carryduff and District will be for the forthcoming Belfast Metropolitan Area (BMA) Plan; the BMA Plan will have due regard for strategic principles resolved by, and contained in, the final versions of the Regional Strategy.

British Fluoridation Society

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how much money the British Fluoridation Society received in grant aid from the Northern Ireland office in each of the last five years. [94717]

Mr. George Howarth: The Department of Health and Social Services provides funding to the British Fluoridation Society on an annual basis. In the last five years the following funding has been provided.

	£
1999–2000	2,159
1998–99	2,104
1997–98	2,047
1996–97	2,037
1995–96	1,982

WALES

Oral Statements

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will list *(a)* the reports published by his Department and its associated bodies, *(b)* the reports received from bodies set up by his Department, *(c)* the decisions his Department has taken and *(d)* events in the UK and elsewhere, since 27 July, which satisfied the criteria he uses for deciding whether to apply to make oral statements to the House when the House is sitting. [93979]

Mr. Paul Murphy: None. I refer my right hon. Friend to the answer given by the President of the Council on 19 October 1999, *Official Report*, column *429–30*.

SOLICITOR-GENERAL

Crown Prosecution Service

30. **Mr. Ben Chapman:** To ask the Solicitor-General how many cases have been successfully prosecuted by the Crown Prosecution Service in the last 12 months. [93421]

The Solicitor-General: In the year ending June 1999, the Crown Prosecution Service secured 975,003 convictions in magistrates courts and 69,299 convictions in the Crown Court. This amounts to 98.3 per cent. of cases proceeding to a hearing in the magistrates court and 88.7 per cent. of cases proceeding to a hearing in the Crown Court.

33. **Valerie Davey:** To ask the Solicitor-General if he will make a statement about the work of the Crown Prosecution Service Inspectorate. [93424]

The Solicitor-General: The Chief Inspector is at present implementing the changes necessary to adapt the Inspectorate to the revised (42 Area) structure of the CPS and to give effect to the recommendation of the Glidewell Report that its remit should be widened. These changes will include, at the specific request of my right hon. noble and learned Friend the Attorney-General, the introduction of a substantial lay element in the inspection process. In addition, the Government are already committed to legislation to place the CPS Inspectorate, which is at present internal, on an independent statutory basis.

Mr. Berry: To ask the Solicitor-General if he will make a statement on the implementation of the restructuring of the Crown Prosecution Service areas. [93419]

The Solicitor-General: The restructuring of the CPS into 42 areas was implemented on 1 April 1999. Chief Crown Prosecutors are now preparing outline plans for the implementation of further structural changes as recommended in the Glidewell report. These will involve the creation of new Criminal Justice Units and Trial Units.

Mr. McCabe: To ask the Solicitor-General if he will make a statement on the recent visits by the Law Officers to branches of the Crown Prosecution Service. [93420]

The Solicitor-General: Since taking office last summer I have visited 16 CPS areas throughout England and Wales, as well as CPS Headquarters and CPS Inspectorate. The Attorney-General has visited four areas since taking up the post and has another three visits planned. I have another seven visits planned this year and by next summer I anticipate I will have visited all CPS areas. The visits have given me a valuable insight into the workings of the CPS and how the Glidewell and Narey initiatives are being taken forward.

I have met many Higher Court Advocates and I have been very impressed. The Higher Court Advocates seem to have been accepted well by the judiciary and the local Bar. They have had many years' experience of prosecuting in the magistrates' court and so are well equipped to meet the demands of higher court advocacy. Changes in the Access to Justice Bill allow CPS staff who are barristers to join their colleagues in the Crown Court.

Young Offenders (Trials)

31. **Mr. Robathan:** To ask the Solicitor-General if he will make a statement on the length of time young offenders have to wait between being charged and trial. [93422]

The Solicitor-General: For young offenders' cases where not guilty pleas are entered, the average time from charge to start of the trial was 123 days in February 1999. For all cases in the youth court, the average period from charge to verdict was 67 days in February 1999, compared with 71 days in June 1998 and 81 days in June 1997. Information on the Crown court is not available as case progress information there does not distinguish adult from youth cases.

The Government are committed to reducing unnecessary delay in the youth justice system still further. Chief Crown Prosecutors throughout England and Wales are working closely with other agencies locally to ensure this is achieved.

Owen Oyston

32. **Mr. Campbell-Savours:** To ask the Solicitor-General what recent representations he has received concerning the conduct of the Crown Prosecution Service in the case of Owen Oyston. [93423]

The Solicitor-General: In August this year, the Attorney-General received a copy of a letter from my hon. Friend the Member for Stalybridge and Hyde (Mr. Pendry) to the Secretary of State for the Home Department concerning the case of Owen Oyston.

Charities

Mr. Michael J. Foster: To ask the Solicitor-General if he will make a statement with regard to his role in relation to charities. [93418]

The Solicitor-General: The Attorney-General's role in relation to charities is wide-ranging and of historic origins. The Attorney-General's function is to represent the Crown as *parens patriae* and so to act as protector, both of charity in general and of particular charities.

It falls to the Attorney-General to institute legal proceedings to protect a charity and to represent the charitable interest. The Attorney-General is a necessary party to any litigation in which the objects of a charity need to be separately represented, for example, where the interest of the Trustees do not coincide with the objects of the charity.

In addition, the Attorney-General has the power to authorise ex gratia payments from charitable funds on moral grounds where such payments might otherwise amount to breaches of trust. He also has the power, by derogation from the Sovereign, to give directions under the Sign Manual as to the re-distribution of uncertain charitable gifts under wills.

CABINET OFFICE

Enforcement Concordat

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office if she will make a statement on the workings of the Enforcement Concordat. [94550]

Marjorie Mowlam: The Enforcement Concordat sets out a blueprint for fair, practical and consistent enforcement. It has been developed in consultation with all the key stakeholders in the enforcement process. The Concordat policies and procedures therefore represent a consensus about best practice in regulatory enforcement. The Concordat provides a balanced approach to enforcement based on the philosophy that enforcers should work with businesses who wish to comply while at the same time taking firm action against those who deliberately flout the law or act irresponsibly. The organisations that have adopted it have provided a clear statement to business and others being regulated about what they can expect from enforcement officers. I commend the Enforcement Concordat to all local and central government enforcement officers.

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what procedures are in place to measure the impact of the Enforcement Concordat. [94555]

Marjorie Mowlam: The adoption, implementation and effectiveness of the Enforcement Concordat are all monitored.

The Cabinet Office keeps a record of all the authorities, agencies and other bodies that have adopted the Concordat. Individual implementation plans are sent to the Cabinet Office or the relevant local authority associations. Those plans should include arrangements for

performance appraisal. The Concordat is still relatively new but, once arrangements have been operational for a year, individual annual reports will be submitted following which the Cabinet Office will review the Concordat's effectiveness. There should be sufficient data to begin the first review next spring.

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what are the aims and objectives of the Enforcement Concordat. [94551]

Marjorie Mowlam: The aims and objectives of the Enforcement Concordat are to achieve widespread adoption by both national and local enforcement bodies of simple, business-friendly enforcement procedures.

Regulatory Impact Unit

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office if she will make a statement on the progress and achievements of the Regulatory Impact Unit. [94600]

Marjorie Mowlam: The Regulatory Impact Unit (RIU) was launched in March this year. Since then it has introduced the scrutiny of regulatory proposals to ensure that their impact has been properly assessed. It has published the Guide to Better European Regulation and continues to promote the use of the Better Regulation Guide. It has agreed with Departments that they will include regulatory performance reports in their Annual Reports. It has launched, on the Cabinet Office website and on the intranet of other government departments, an IT based checklist for policymakers.

The RIU has supported the Better Regulation Task Force in the production of its reports, reviews and other activities.

The RIU has also consulted about reform of the Deregulation and Contracting Out Act 1994. The Government intend to bring forward reforms when parliamentary time allows.

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office if she will list the responsibilities, aims and objectives of the Regulatory Impact Unit. [94601]

Marjorie Mowlam: The RIU is part of the Cabinet Office and therefore shares its aims and objectives. In particular it plays a part in the Cabinet Office Public Service Agreement (PSA) to develop public services, programmes and regulation across the public sector which meet the needs of users and which are of a high quality, modern and well co-ordinated. Under the (PSA) it has been committed to introducing arrangements for the audit and evaluation of better government practice including the preparation of Regulatory Impact Assessments.

The RIU:

helps Ministers and Departments find the right legislative balance to achieve proper standards of protection without unnecessary impact on business;

scrutinises regulatory proposals to ensure that they have been properly assessed in line with the best practice that it develops and circulates such as the Better Regulation Guide and the Guide to Better European Regulation;

works with other Member States and the European Commission to improve the quality of legislative proposals at the European level;

promotes the Enforcement Concordat;

operates the Deregulation and Contracting Out Act 1994 and develops proposals for its reform; and

supports the Better Regulation Task Force in the production of its reports, reviews and other activities.

Regulations

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office which regulations have been identified as *(a)* no longer necessary and *(b)* capable of simplification. [94502]

Marjorie Mowlam: The Government have recently announced plans to remove and simplify regulations in a number of areas including; licensing law, the complex rules on tax relief on stakeholder and personal pension contributions, the law on weights and measures and the current system of consumer credit. We are also looking at simplifying regulation of the private recruitment industry, speeding up the way houses are bought and sold, and have announced a major review of farming regulations.

In addition, we are introducing legislation to make it easier for Departments to remove or refocus out-dated regulations by increasing the flexibility of the Deregulation and Contracting Out Act as soon as parliamentary time allows.

Special Advisers

Mr. Tyrie: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office, pursuant to the answer to the hon. Member for Woodspring (Dr. Fox) of 11 June 1998, *Official Report*, column *664*, if the total annual salary cost of £3.6 million of employing special advisers includes the pension contributions listed in the answer of 13 July 1999, *Official Report*, column *173*. [94567]

Marjorie Mowlam: Yes. The figure of £3.6 million included pension contributions of £413,000.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Animal Feed

13. **Mrs. Organ:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what action his Department plans to take to ensure that animal feed which includes genetically modified ingredients is so labelled. [93398]

Ms Quin: The Advisory Committee on Animal Feedingstuffs held its first meeting on 24 September. It will have an important role in considering both the safety and labelling of genetically modified material in animal feed.

Pesticides

16. **Dr. Iddon:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what steps he is taking to reduce the use of pesticides. [93404]

Ms Quin: We actively encourage farmers and growers to minimise their use of pesticides, consistent with effective pest control. We fund extensive R&D programmes; we publish guidance; and we support the work of the Pesticides Forum.

Genetically Modified Foods

17. **Dr. Julian Lewis:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make a statement about the rules for the labelling of imported genetically modified foods. [93405]

Ms Quin: EC regulations require all foods containing genetically modified material to be clearly labelled. These rules apply equally to imported food and foods produced in the UK.

19. **Mr. Chope:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will intervene to ensure that products can only be described as 100 per cent. genetic-modification-free if they have no GM content. [93407]

Ms Quin: EC proposals on the rules to be applied to food described as "genetically modified (GM) free" are expected to be published in the next month or so. Until these rules are agreed any products described in this way will continue to be regulated by the Food Safety Act 1990. This Act makes it an offence to describe, by way of labelling or advertising, a food falsely or in a way likely to mislead a purchaser as to its nature, substance or quality. In addition, the Trade Descriptions Act 1968 makes it an offence for a trader to supply food to which a false trade description has been applied or to which a trade description has been applied which is misleading to a material degree. The interpretation and enforcement of these requirements is initially a matter for local authorities, and ultimately for the courts, to decide.

Fisheries

20. **Mr. Wilkinson:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food when he last met the Fisheries Minister of Iceland to discuss fisheries policy. [93408]

Mr. Morley: I met the Icelandic Fisheries Minister on 30 May 1998.

Climate Change Levy

21. **Mr. Swayne:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what representations he has received from the protected horticulture sector regarding proposals for a climate change levy. [93409]

Mr. Morley: I have received several representations about the impact of the climate change levy direct from members of the protected horticulture sector and from hon. Members representing constituents in the industry. Concerns have been expressed about the high net cost of the proposed levy to protected horticulture businesses and the impact this will have on profitability and competitiveness.

Battery Hens

22. **Mr. Fabian Hamilton:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what steps he is taking to improve the welfare of battery hens. [93410]

Mr. Morley: A new EU Directive on the welfare of laying hens was agreed on 15 June. This requires all member states to ban the conventional battery cage from 1 January 2012 and to apply improved standards to its use in the meantime.

Dairy Farmers

23. **Mr. David Heath:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what recent discussions he has had with representatives of the industry on the future structure of dairy farming and milk processing. [93411]

Ms Quin: Following the publication of the Monopolies and Mergers Commission report into the supply of raw milk in Great Britain on 6 July by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, my right hon. Friend the Minister has had a number of meetings with representatives of all sides of the dairy industry to engage in a constructive debate on the way forward.

24. **Mr. Blizzard:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what assessment he has made of business prospects for small dairy farmers. [93412]

Ms Quin: All dairy farmers face challenging times as a result of reduced milk prices, increasing liberalisation of world markets, and progress on CAP reform. But, the dairy farming sector's ability to respond positively to these challenges will be helped by the high level of producer expertise and commitment, favourable farm structure and ideal climate for milk production.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make a statement on the prospects for dairy farmers. [93401]

Mr. Nick Brown: Dairy farmers face challenging times as a result of reduced milk prices, increasing liberalisation of world markets, and progress on CAP reform. But the dairy farming sector's ability to respond positively to these challenges will be helped by the high level of producer expertise and commitment, favourable farm structure and ideal climate for milk production.

Farming (Less-favoured Areas)

25. **Mr. Greenway:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what representations he has received on plans for reform of support for farming in less-favoured areas. [93413]

Mr. Morley: We issued an initial consultation paper on this subject in April to which we received 81 responses from a wide range of interests. These views are being taken into account as we draw up detailed reform proposals on which we shall consult in due course.

Animal Welfare

26. **Mr. Bill O'Brien:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what initiatives his Department is taking to improve standards of animal welfare; and if he will make a statement. [93414]

Mr. Morley: We have taken a number of initiatives to improve standards of animal welfare. These are detailed in our most recent "State of Play" document, a copy of which has been placed in the Library of the House.

Bovine TB

Mrs. Ann Winterton: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make a statement on the progress of the trials investigating the control and spread of bovine TB. [93402]

Ms Quin: Five triplets have been enrolled in the trial and work has been carried out in all these areas. Progress has been slower than we would have liked, mainly owing to interference by protesters which we regret as it will take longer to find a scientific solution.

Organic Farming

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make a statement on Government support for organic farming. [93400]

Mr. Morley: We have allocated more than £16 million of aid under the Organic Farming Scheme (OFS), we are funding the Organic Conversion Information Service and we are spending more than £2 million this year on organic R&D.

We are currently reviewing the operations of the OFS in the light of trends in the organic sector.

Written Answers to Questions

Monday 25 October 1999

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Climate Change Levy

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what representations he has received on the impact of the Climate Change Levy on the transport industry. [94161]

Mr. Byers: As part of an ongoing process of dialogue and consultation between Government and business on the Climate Change Levy, I held a meeting with business representatives, including the Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders, on 20 October 1999.

Forest Products

Mr. Dafis: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list the environmental non-Governmental organisations with which he has held meetings during the past 12 months to discuss the proposal to establish a World Trade Organisation agreement on forest products. [93834]

Mr. Caborn: My predecessor, Ministerial colleagues from other Government Departments, officials and I myself have held numerous meetings with environmental and other non-governmental organisations over the past 12 months to discuss the proposed new Round of multilateral trade negotiations in the World Trade Organisation. Proposals for tariff reductions on forest products have been dealt with in these meetings in the context of the United Kingdom and European Union approach to trade liberalisation in a new Round.

Europlanner Disc

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many copies of the Europlanner disc have been created; at what cost; and how have they been distributed. [95230]

Mr. Caborn: The EuroPlanner (floppy disc) is a practical, self-help tool to help businesses prepare for the euro. Over 105,000 copies of the EuroPlanner have so far been distributed by Business Links, other intermediaries, the Treasury's euro telephone line (08456 01 01 99) and my Department to business to help them prepare their euro strategy. It is also available on the internet (www.connectbestpractice.com) and on a Euro CD ROM. The development and production costs for 155,000 copies of the disc were £109,000.

My Department launched the EuroPlanner on 23 February in response to requests from UK businesses and Business Support Organisations. It is important that UK firms consider the implications of the single currency and where necessary take steps to prepare. I would encourage British companies to use the EuroPlanner to help them do this.

European State Aid

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list, by country, the total amount of state aid approved by the Commission since the signing of the Single European Act. [95407]

Mr. Caborn: Between 1987 and 1997, the Commission approved a total of approximately 861,438 million euros in State aid throughout the EU, of which 430,240.21 million euros was paid to the manufacturing industry.

These data were compiled from the Commission's surveys on aid to industry across the EU; the most recent being "The Seventh Survey on aid in the EU in the manufacturing and certain other sectors", which was published in March 1999. The Eighth Survey, covering the period 1997–98, has not yet been published. The surveys provide a broad overview on aid granted across the EU, but data on State aid to agriculture, fisheries, coal, steel, transport and the financial services sector are not broken down by country.

The table sets out the total State aid to the manufacturing industry granted by each member state in millions of euro.

Millions of euro

Member state	*Total state aid to industry 1987–97*
Austria[1]	1,600.00
Belgium	13,925.00
Denmark	5,213.79
Germany	144,983.00
Greece	35,998.20
Spain	23,303.10
Finland[1]	1,154.00
France	54,899.80
Ireland	3,986.22
Italy	116,907.00
Luxembourg	503.18
Netherlands	9,268.99
Portugal	5,419.54
Sweden[1]	1,140.00
UK	25,216.60

[1] Austria, Finland and Sweden joined the EU in 1995

Kosovo

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list the total value of contracts awarded to date in Kosovo since the cessation of hostilities, broken down by nationality of company. [95405]

Mr. Caborn: Almost all the contracts awarded to date to agencies and companies have been those to meet the immediate humanitarian needs in Kosovo. There is no central register of the multiplicity of such agencies which have won such contracts either through bilateral aid support or through that provided via other organisations such as the United Nations. However, British Trade International, the recently established joint DTI/FCO trade promotion organisation has, in conjunction with the British Office in Pristina, been asked (through the joint private sector Kosovo Taskforce established by the Secretary of State) to put together a list with details of all British companies which have won contracts in Kosovo.

The most significant of these to date is the concession awarded to a British consortium led by Mott MacDonald to manage the power sector in Kosovo over the next seven

months; this should help ensure that there is sufficient power to enable Kosovo to get through the forthcoming hard winter. British Trade International has put nearly £500,000 into this project; a similar amount has been provided by the European Union.

Sombrero Island

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, pursuant to his answer of 22 March 1999, *Official Report*, column *115*, what is the latest position regarding the possible lease of Sombrero Island for the purpose of launching commercial satellites. [94800]

Mr. Alan Johnson: Officials from the British National Space Centre remain in contact with the Government of Anguilla providing technical advice and assistance on the outer space aspects of the request by the US company Beal Aerospace to lease Sombrero Island for the purpose of launching commercial satellites. Officials are also helping the Anguillans to assess the probable environmental consequences of the proposed activity. ICF Kaizer have conducted an Environmental Impact Assessment on behalf of Beal and a Planning Inspector has been appointed to advise the Anguillan Government. It is hoped that a public consultation with interested parties will soon be conducted.

Hawk Exports

Ann Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry for what reason the ECGD support for the export of the Hawk aircraft was agreed in March 1996 before the export licence was issued in November 1996. [95292]

Mr. Caborn: ECGD's support for the project was conditional upon an export licence being obtained.

Parental Leave

Ms Harman: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what estimate he has made of the numbers and percentages of *(a)* mothers and *(b)* fathers who will choose to take their parental leave entitlements in each of the first five years after that rights comes into force. [95168]

Mr. Alan Johnson: We estimate that about 100,000 parents will take parental leave each year when the rights are fully established in 2004. We have not estimated how many will choose to take parental leave in each of the first five years after the rights come into force. Parental leave is a new right and we do not have enough information to make such detailed estimates.

Poland (Ministerial Visit)

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on the Minister of State's visit to Poland. [94707]

Mr. Caborn *[holding answer 19 October 1999]:* I visited Poland from 21 to 23 September. My visit encompassed ministerial meetings, the opening of an all-British trade fair in Warsaw, visits to British businesses, a visit to Krakow to open the new British Council Offices and to support a project run by a British company to recycle the waste from the steel mill in Krakow.

The main reason for my visit was to raise the profile of British companies in Poland as part of British Trade International's strategy for encouraging more companies to consider the market. However, in meetings with Polish Ministers I also took the opportunity to raise the question of Polish coal exports to the United Kingdom and to underline our support for Poland in the EU accession process.

Airlines

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what action he proposes to take to protect consumers from the effects of predatory pricing activities by low-cost airlines; and if he will make a statement. [94708]

Dr. Howells *[holding answer 19 October 1999]:* Responsibility for ensuring competition laws are not broken lies with the competition authorities, the Office of Fair Trading within the UK or the European Commission for activities which affect trade between member states. I look to these bodies to ensure fair competition, and for those with concerns to put them to the competition authorities for investigation.

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will set up an independent inquiry into predatory pricing activities by low-cost airlines. [94709]

Dr. Howells *[holding answer 19 October 1999]:* We have no such plans. However, if my hon. Friend has any evidence of predatory pricing activities he should bring it to the attention of the competent authorities. In the UK this is the Director General of Fair Trading, and for activities which affect trade between member states it is the European Commission.

Plutonium

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement in respect of the proliferation implications of the plutonium shipment involving the Pacific Pintail and Pacific Teal. [94713]

Mrs. Liddell: The UK's international nuclear trade, including the export of Mixed Oxide (MOX) fuel, is undertaken strictly within the terms of international agreements on nuclear non proliferation, safeguards and physical protection and is entirely consistent with the UK's obligations in these areas. Very stringent physical protection and safeguards measures are applied to MOX at all time, including during transport, to prevent its theft or diversion to non-peaceful purposes. The Government are satisfied that the risk of nuclear weapons proliferation from the manufacture and use of MOX in Europe and its export to Japan is minimal.

NORTHERN IRELAND

Road Works Programme

Mr. McGrady: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (1) what is the financial allocation towards the minor and major road works programme in each roads division in the current financial year; [94451]

(2) what was the financial spending on minor and major road works programmes in each roads division for each year since 1 April 1995 to 31 March 1999. [94469]

Mr. George Howarth: Responsibility for the subject in question has been delegated to the Roads Service under its Chief Executive, Mr. C. James. I have asked him to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from C. James to Mr. Eddie McGrady, dated 21 October 1999:

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland has asked me to respond to your recently tabled Parliamentary Questions about financial allocations and spending on minor and major road works programmes in each Division of Roads Service.

The information you sought in respect of the current financial year is as follows:

Minor and major road works programmes—1999–2000

Financial allocations £000

	Programmes	
Roads Service Divisions	*Minor works*	*Major works*
Northern	1,881	3,106
Southern	1,779	2,014
Eastern	3,022	4,442
Western	1,876	197

You will note that the above table reflects our new Divisional structure following the Roads Service reorganisation on 1 April 1999.

The information you sought in respect of the period 1 April 1995 to 31 March 1999 is as follows:

Minor road works programme—financial spending 1995–96 to 1998–99

£000

Roads Service Division	*1995–96*	*1996–97*	*1997–98*	*1998–99*
Ballymena	2,157	1,723	2,100	1,810
Belfast	2,129	2,227	2,612	2,303
Coleraine	2,093	1,817	1,923	2,013
Craigavon	2,363	2,620	2,369	1,949
Downpatrick	2,254	1,981	2,329	2,035
Omagh	2,272	1,896	2,202	2,167

Major road works programme—financial spending 1995–96 to 1998–99

£000

Roads Service Divisions	*1995–96*	*1996–97*	*1997–98*	*1998–99*
Ballymena	491	2,050	4,523	2,372
Belfast	5,912	6,104	3,521	3,501
Coleraine	629	234	117	96
Craigavon	6,249	2,202	907	683
Downpatrick	712	1,394	2,097	640
Omagh	2,171	1,499	2,585	400

The 2 tables above reflect our former Divisional structure prior to reorganisation on 1 April 1999.

I hope you find this information helpful.

Long-term Unemployed

Mr. McGrady: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what plans he has to address the problem of the long-term unemployed in Northern Ireland. [94464]

Mr. McFall: Responsibility for the subject in question has been delegated to the Training and Employment Agency under its Chief Executive, Mr. Ian Walters. I have asked him to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from Ian Walters to Mr. Eddie Grady, dated 21 October 1999:

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland has asked me as Chief Executive of the Training and Employment Agency to reply to your question about help for the long term unemployed in Northern Ireland.

The number of long term unemployed people (i.e., those who have been unemployed for one year or more) who are claiming Jobseekers Allowance in Northern Ireland has declined substantially in recent years. In September 1999 there were 24000 long term unemployed claimants which is 3000 less than 1 year earlier and 13000 lower than 3 years ago.

It is against this background that New Deal, which is by far the largest programme for helping the long term unemployed back into work in Northern Ireland, is being delivered. Up to £200 million is available for New Deal in Northern Ireland over the lifetime of this Parliament.

The New Deal for 18 to 24 year olds and the New Deal for the over 25s are specifically designed to assist the long term unemployed. The New Deal for 18 to 24 year olds, introduced in April 1998, offers young people who have been unemployed for 6 months or more a tailored programme to improve their employability and enhance their chances of getting a job.

Northern Ireland is one of 29 areas throughout the United Kingdom currently piloting enhanced provision for those aged 25 and over who have been unemployed for 18 months or more. This pilot New Deal was introduced throughout Northern Ireland in November 1998.

Between April 1998 and September 1999, 4874 young people found work through New Deal for 18–24 year olds. In addition, 1980 adults have found work following their participation in New Deal for the over 25s. Many others are improving their prospects for employment by participating in the other available options.

The Work rack programme was introduced at the beginning of August 1999 to complement New Deal. Worktrack is the replacement programme for ACE and is targeted at long term unemployed adults who are ineligible for New Deal assistance. It will provide 1050 high quality temporary employment opportunities with training during the financial year 1999/00 and 2100 opportunities in 2000/01. Worktrack aims to prepare participants for sustainable employment at the earliest opportunity.

New Deal has had a very positive impact in helping to tackle the problem of long term unemployment in Northern Ireland. However, we are not complacent and the Training and Employment Agency will continue to play its part by considering what other measures and interventions would help long term unemployed people back into employment.

I hope you find this reply helpful.

Riverside Development, Comber

Mr. John D. Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland when planning application No. X/98/0820 for the Riverside Residential Development in Comber was received by his Department; if the application allows for the future construction of the next stage of the Comber by-pass road scheme; what matters are outstanding before a planning determination can be made; and if he will make a statement about the time still required before issue of that planning decision. [94377]

Mr. George Howarth: Responsibility for the subject in question has been delegated to the Planning Service under its Chief Executive, Mr. H. S. McKay. I have asked him to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from H. S. McKay to Mr. John D. Taylor, dated 22 October 1999:

The Secretary of State has asked me to reply to your recent Question about the application for planning permission for the Riverside Residential Development in Comber.

The Department received this application on 12 November 1998 and designated it as a major one under the Article 31 procedure of the Planning (Northern Ireland) Order 1991 on 12 March 1999. The Roads Service is actively exploring the options that may be open to the developers to fund or part fund the next stage of the Comber By-Pass. An Environmental Statement in support of the application was submitted on 21 June 1999 and the on-going assessment of this Statement has identified a number of shortcomings that the agent has been asked to address. This information has not yet been received and is of importance because the proposal raises a number of conservation issues which require careful consideration since the site impinges upon the Strangford Lough Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty and adjoins an Area of Special Scientific Interest, a proposed Special Protection Area, a Special Area of Conservation and a Ramsar Site. It is too early yet to say when a decision on the application can be made as it may be necessary to hold a public local inquiry into the proposal.

I do hope this is helpful.

Bowling Green, Cloughey

Mr. John D. Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (1) on what date the planning application for a bowling green at The Warren, Cloughey was received by his Department; how many local people have signed a petition in support of this bowling green; when a planning decision will be issued; and if he will make a statement; [94557]

(2) when the planning application for a bowling green at The Warren, Cloughey, Co. Down was submitted; when an environmental and heritage report was requested; when this report will become available; how many persons have signed a petition in support of this project; when the planning decision will be issued; what is the opinion of Ards borough council; and if he will make a statement. [94558]

Mr. George Howarth: Responsibility for the subject in question has been delegated to the Planning Service under its Chief Executive, Mr. H. S. McKay. I have asked him to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from H. S. McKay to Mr. John D. Taylor, dated 22 October 1999:

The Secretary of State has asked me to reply to your recent Questions about an application for planning permission for a bowling green at The Warren, Cloughy.

Ards Borough Council submitted this application on 29 March 1999 and a petition of 1,200 signatures was received in support of the proposal. The Environment and Heritage Service's comments were sought on 19 April and their response, recommending that planning permission be refused, was received on 3 September. The Council was consulted with a preliminary opinion to refuse planning permission on 14 September, at which time it deferred consideration of the proposal for a site meeting that was held on 1 October. The Planning Service now proposes convening a meeting with the Council and the Environment and Heritage Service to discuss possible options for progressing the application. It is not, therefore, possible at this stage to say when a decision will issue.

I do hope this is helpful.

Traffic, Comber

Mr. John D. Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (1) what is the volume of traffic on the Newtownards road near the cemetery in Comber; if he will assess the benefits of the provision of a pedestrian crossing at this location; how many pupils are enrolled at Comber Primary and Comber High schools; and if he will make a statement; [94370]

(2) what assessment he has made of traffic flow conditions at the junction of Darragh Road with the Newtownards Road in Comber; what plans he has to provide traffic lights at this junction; and if he will make a statement. [94369]

Mr. George Howarth: Responsibility for the subject in question has been delegated to the Roads Service under its Chief Executive, Mr. C. James. I have asked him to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from C. James to Mr. John D. Taylor, dated 21 October 1999:

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland has asked me to respond to your recently tabled Parliamentary Questions about, inter alia, traffic flows in the vicinity of Newtownards Road, Comber.

First, you asked about the volume of traffic on Newtownards Road near the cemetery in Comber, the benefits of a pedestrian crossing at this location and how many pupils are enrolled at Comber Primary and Comber High Schools.

The last comprehensive survey of traffic volumes on Newtownards Road close to the cemetery was carried out in 1996. The survey recorded an annual average 24-hour flow of 12,480 vehicles with a peak hour flow of 1,080 vehicles. A more recent survey of peak hour traffic volumes was carried out on 27 September 1999, when the peak hour flow was found to be 1,250 vehicles. This would equate with an annual average 24-hour traffic flow of 14,500 vehicles.

As regards the provision of a pedestrian crossing at this location, Roads Service carried out a survey of pedestrians and vehicles on Monday 27 September 1999. Our survey found that during each of the 4 busiest hours of the day the level of pedestrian traffic was significantly less than that required to warrant the provision of a pedestrian crossing. In the circumstances, Roads Service has no proposals to provide a pedestrian crossing at this location.

I am advised by my colleagues in the Department of Education that enrolment figures for Comber Primary and Comber High Schools for the academic year 1998–99 were 389 and 448 respectively.

Secondly, you asked what assessment has been made of traffic flow conditions at the junction of Darragh Road and Newtownards Road and what plans there are to provide traffic lights at this junction.

The flow of traffic at this junction has been assessed in the past but, as it is some time since a full appraisal was carried out, we will undertake an appraisal taking account of the volume of traffic, the lengths of traffic queues and the delays experienced.

As regards the provision of traffic lights, such facilities are only provided at junctions where there is significant congestion throughout the day. With the exception of the relatively short duration morning peak period, queues have not been observed at this junction during the course of the working day. Nevertheless, our appraisal of the junction will determine if there is a need for traffic lights at this location and I will write to you again when the results of our appraisal are known.

I hope this information is helpful.

Planning Applications, Carryduff

Mr. John D. Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (1) how many planning applications for residential developments in the Carryduff area are presently being considered; and if he will make a statement; [94547]

(2) how many applications for housing developments of more than 50 units have been submitted for planning approval within the green belt area in Carryduff district; and if he will make a statement. [94548]

Mr. George Howarth: Responsibility for the subject in question has been delegated to the Planning Service under its Chief Executive, Mr. H. S. McKay. I have asked him to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from H. S. McKay to Mr. John D. Taylor, dated 22 October 1999:

The Secretary of State has asked me to reply to your recent Questions about proposed housing developments in the Carryduff area.

The Department is currently considering six applications for residential developments in the Carryduff area. Each of these applications propose more than 50 units in green belt locations.

I do hope this is helpful.

Area Plans

Mr. John D. Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many qualified town planners are employed in the planning service currently; what was the level five years ago; when preparation of the Ards Area Plan will commence; when preparation of the North Down Area Plan will commence; and if he will make a statement on resources available to the Planning Service to review the Area Plan Programme. [94374]

Mr. George Howarth: Responsibility for the subject in question has been delegated to the Planning Service under its Chief Executive, Mr. H. S. McKay. I have asked him to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from H. S. McKay to Mr. John D. Taylor, dated 22 October 1999:

The Secretary of State has asked me to reply to your recent Question about staffing levels and the resources available to the Planning Service for Area Plan work.

For the purpose of the answer, "qualified town planners" are taken to mean those staff who possess either MRTPI membership or a post-graduate diploma in Planning, or a degree qualification in Planning. Based on these criteria, there are currently 137 "qualified" planners (excluding temporary staff) employed by the Planning Service. Regrettably, historical information to this level of detail is not available.

Work started on the Ards Area Plan in January 1999. Work on the Belfast Metropolitan Plan, which will encompass the North Down Borough Council area, is currently scheduled in the Department's Area Plan Programme to commence in the 2000/01 financial year. This Programme is, however, reviewed annually and will be revisited in the forthcoming months when preparing the 2000/01 Business Plan.

Progress with the review of the Area Plan Programme is determined by the resources allocated to this work in the context of the Agency's Corporate and Business Plans as approved by the Minister. The Plans cover the whole range of the Agency's functions and key performance targets, which include the drafting and adoption of specific Plans in this business year, set priorities. In principle, the resources allocated to the Agency are sufficient to deliver these targets although other factors can come into play and affect the outcome.

I do hope this is helpful.

Houston Road (Car Accidents)

Mr. John D. Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland when the hedge at the Houston Road into the plant testing station was last cut; what record there is of car accidents at this location; and if he will make a statement. [94545]

Mr. George Howarth: Responsibility for the subject in question has been delegated to the Roads Service under its Chief Executive, Mr. C. James. I have asked him to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from G. P. Fraser to Mr. John D. Taylor, dated 25 October 1999:

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland has asked our Chief Executive to respond to your recently tabled Parliamentary Question about hedge cutting at the entrance to the Plant Testing Station at Houston Road, Castlereagh, Belfast and car accident records at this location. In the absence of our Chief Executive, I am replying.

The cutting of roadside hedges is the responsibility of relevant landowners and, in this particular case, responsibility falls to the Department of Agriculture for Northern Ireland, which owns the Plant Testing Station. Colleagues from that Department have advised me that the hedges around the Plant Testing Station are cut annually and that they were last cut in November 1998.

You also asked what record there is of car accidents at this location. The RUC has advised that its records indicate that there has been one "damage only" accident at the junction of Houston Road and Knockbracken Road during the last 12 months.

I hope you find this information helpful.

Scrabo Stone

Mr. John D. Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what is the location of the original Scrabo Stone from the former Kinnel Marsh and Kennedy's Bridges at Comber; if it will be saved for the construction of the next stage of the Comber Bypass; and if he will make a statement. [94368]

Mr. George Howarth: Responsibility for the subject in question has been delegated to the Road Service under its Chief Executive, Mr. C. James. I have asked him to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from C. James to Mr. John D. Taylor, dated 21 October 1999:

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland has asked me to respond to your recently tabled Parliamentary Question about the location of the original Scrabo Stone from the former Kinnel Marsh and Kennedy Bridges near Comber.

I should explain that there are 3 former bridges still existing on the line of the Department of the Environment's proposed Comber Bypass, namely Marsh River Bridge, Kennedy's Bridge and Cherryvalley Bridge. All of these bridges are of Scrabo Stone construction. Over the years, stone has been removed from these bridges by persons unknown and recently Roads Service utilised some stone from Cherryvalley Bridge for use on accommodation works at a nearby road improvement scheme.

The Department's proposed Comber Bypass scheme requires the replacement of the Marsh River Bridge and the design carried out to date does not include the use of Scrabo Stone. Consideration could, however, be given to the possible use of the stone.

At present, discussions are ongoing between the Department and a consortium of developers regarding a proposed housing development in the area which might involve the completion of the Comber Bypass earlier than is currently planned. The proposed development may require some minor alterations to the line of the proposed Bypass and possible replacement structures for Kennedy's Bridge and Cherryvalley Bridge. As yet, however, no final decisions have been made regarding this proposal and no detailed design has been undertaken.

I hope you find this information helpful.

Ministerial Meetings (United States)

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland which of his predecessor's special advisers travelled to New York on 6 October 1998; and if he will list the meetings which they held with members and officials of the US Government during this visit, listing the dates and locations of each meeting and the names of the US Ministers and officials at each meeting. [93948]

Mr. Mandelson: Mr. Nigel Warner was the only special adviser to accompany my predecessor during her visit to New York between 7 and 9 October 1998. During the visit he did not hold any official meetings with any members or officials of the US Government.

Wind Farms

Mr. William Ross: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland when the terms of Directive 85/337/EEC were applied to wind farms in Northern Ireland. [94787]

Mr. George Howarth: Responsibility for the subject in question has been delegated to the Planning Service under its Chief Executive, Mr. H. S. McKay. I have asked him to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from H. S. McKay to Mr. William Ross, dated 25 October 1999:

The Secretary of State has asked me to reply to your recent Question about wind farms in Northern Ireland.

Directive 85/337/EEC was applied to wind farms with effect from 14 March 1999, with the coming into operation of the Planning (Environmental Impact Assessment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1999.

I do hope this is helpful.

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

Ministerial Travel

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, pursuant to his answer of 23 July 1999, *Official Report*, column *706*, for what reason he did not state the most recent date on which *(a)* he and *(b)* the Minister for Transport used a train in the course of their duties. [94530]

Mr. Hill: As the then Minister for Transport said in her answer, Ministers travel by public transport on a regular basis on official visits and journeys to their offices. My right hon. Friend and my noble Friend last travelled by train on official business on Monday 18 October.

Driving (Drugs)

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) what assessment he has made of the impact that taking illegal drugs has on the driving ability of motorists; and if he will make a statement; [94511]

(2) what assessment he has made of the impact that taking over the counter medicines has on the driving ability of motorists; and if he will make a statement; [94512]

(3) what initiatives his Department is taking to alert drivers to the hazards associated with drug abuse and driving; [94513]

(4) what plans he has for advertising campaigns to raise the profile of drug abuse related to driving; [94514]

(5) what discussions he has held with the pharmaceutical industry on driving under the influence of drugs. [94515]

Mr. Hill: Some medicinal and illegal drugs can impair driving ability and its is already an offence to drive while impaired through drugs. The Association of Chief Police Officers is researching suitable training for police to recognise the outward signs of drug taking and to assess driver impairment. The Department and the Home Office are supporting that and the development of roadside screening devices to further assist the police in enforcing the law effectively. However, the effect of drugs, both medicinal and illegal, on driving ability is a very complex issue and, in contrast to alcohol, it is very difficult to correlate directly the level of consumption with impairment of driving. Research is ongoing into the extent of the problem—an essential first step in formulating suitable and effective countermeasures. The Department is also participating in European Union research projects to develop roadside devices to screen for the presence of drugs and to detect impairment in a driver.

The Department is considering how the risks of driving under the influence of drugs might be publicised. The acknowledged success of the Department's drink drive campaigns was accompanied by effective enforcement and good knowledge of the way in which alcohol impairs driving. That makes such campaigns effective overall because they are authoritative, well targeted and there is a real threat of getting caught. For drugs (both illegal and medicinal), we would need to target any such campaigns towards the precise nature and extent of the problem and would need to give positive advice informed by well based knowledge.

I understand from the Medicines Control Agency that the current guidelines for pharmaceutical companies dictate that all medicines must comply with European Commission Directive 92/27/EEC on the labelling of medicinal products for human use and on package leaflets. All products have a Summary of Product Characteristics which explains how the medicine acts, how it should be used and any side effects that might be experienced, including a section on the effect of the medicine on the ability to drive. Prescribers are also provided with information on the effects of medicines on the ability to drive in the British National Formulary. This also lists standard pharmacy labels which pharmacists add when dispensing medicines that may affect a patient's ability to drive. Information for patients about medicines, including the effects on the ability to drive, is also provided to patients in Patient Information Leaflets. These should now be supplied with all medicines.

The information included in the Summary of Product Characteristics, including the effects on the ability to drive, is based on data supplied by pharmaceutical company at the time a product licence is applied for. This may be updated as further information becomes available.

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) what estimate he has made of the number of traffic accidents which occurred within the UK as the result of illegal drug abuse from May 1997 to June 1999; [94448]

(2) what estimate he has made of the number of traffic accidents which occurred within the UK as the result of the use of legal over the counter medicines from May 1997 to June 1999. [94449]

Mr. Hill: The road accident statistics do not include information on drug use. The Department is undertaking research into the incidence of drugs in road accident fatalities. However, the presence of drugs, whether legal or illegal, is not of itself evidence of impairment of driver ability or accident causation.

Homelessness

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what initiatives he has launched to combat homelessness within *(a)* the UK and *(b)* Sefton since 1993. [94581]

Mr. Mullin: Since taking office, the Government have strengthened the legislation to give homeless people reasonable preference in the allocation of long-term social housing. My Department has also set up a sounding board with representatives from local and central Government and the voluntary sector to consider further proposals to give effect to our Manifesto pledge to increase the protection afforded to unintentionally homeless people in priority need. We have also set up a joint liaison committee, the Youth Homelessness Action Partnership, to look specifically at issues affecting homelessness among young people.

One of the first priorities the Prime Minister set for the Social Exclusion Unit was to report on Rough Sleeping. They identified that rough sleepers' problems and needs span the responsibilities of several central Government Departments. In response to this, a new Ministerial Committee on Rough Sleeping (MCRS), chaired by the Minister for Local Government and the Regions, has been established to ensure effective co-ordination of Government policy on this.

The Government have also established the Rough Sleepers Unit, which has the tough target of reducing the number of people sleeping rough by two-thirds by 2002. It is directly responsible to the MCRS for progress against the target and has a budget of £145 million over three years. This money is provided from a range of departmental sources (including DETR, DoH, DSS and DfEE) and will be used as a flexible integrated budget to tackle the health, education, training and benefit, as well as housing, aspects of rough sleeping.

We have also announced a £34 million funding over the next three years for over 250 projects outside London under the New Homelessness Action Programme. Sefton has received £44,034 to provide workers for two projects. Early in the New Year we will be inviting further bids for funding from voluntary organisations in the light of the forthcoming national strategy document on rough sleeping.

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what steps he has taken to reduce the number of homeless persons living *(a)* in Merseyside and *(b)* in Sefton. [94647]

Mr. Mullin: We have announced that £34 million will be available under the Homelessness Action Programme over the next three years to fund voluntary agencies to address the problem of homelessness outside London. Organisations in Merseyside have been allocated £458,696 to provide youth, outreach, project and field workers for five schemes. £44,034 of this is for two projects in Sefton. We will be inviting further bids under the programme following the launch of the new national strategy on rough sleeping, which we will be launching before the end of the year.

Uninsured Drivers

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what are *(a)* the proposed duration of the Motor Insurers' Bureau uninsured drivers' agreement and *(b)* its termination provisions. [94409]

Mr. Hill: There is no formal termination date in Agreement. Past agreements have continued until it was clear that there was a need to revise them. There are provisions for termination of the Agreement upon either party giving a year's notice to the other.

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions on what date the revised Motor Insurers' Bureau uninsured drivers' agreement was signed; and on what date it will come into effect. [94407]

Mr. Hill: The new Agreement was signed on 13 August 1999 and it came into effect on 1 October 1999.

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions since the signing of the Motor Insurers' Bureau uninsured drivers' agreement what *(a)* meetings have been held with (i) the insurance industry and (ii) organisations representing victims of road accidents and *(b)* what representations have been made by (i) and (ii); and if he will make a statement. [94408]

Mr. Hill: Since the new Agreement was signed, my noble Friend the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State has met the Association of Personal Accident Solicitors and the Solicitors Indemnity Fund to discuss concerns they had expressed about the terms of the Agreement. I understand that the Motor Insurers' Bureau have also met Association of Personal Injury Lawyers and have arranged to meet the Motor Accident Solicitors Society. My Department stands ready to meet any of these representative organisations to discuss their concerns and, if it proves necessary, to amend the Agreement.

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment of the problems of compliance with the revised Motor Insurers' Bureau uninsured drivers' agreement faced by accident victims or their representatives were made by his Department, prior to its signature; and if he will make a statement. [94406]

Mr. Hill: Representations received over the last 10 years from applicants, their legal representatives and from solicitors' organisations all pointed to a lack of clarity about the 1998 Uninsured Drivers Agreement. In particular there were several complaints about the lack of clear procedures and the absence of defined time limits. These have been addressed in the new Agreement.

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions prior to the signature of the revised Motor Insurers' Bureau uninsured motorists' agreement, what *(a)* meetings were held by his Department with (i) the Motor Insurers' Bureau, (ii) other representatives of the insurance industry, (iii) the Law Society and (iv) organisations representing road accident victims, *(b)* what representations were invited and received from the above and *(c)* what other consultation arrangements were made; and if he will make a statement. [94405]

Mr. Hill: Representations have been received over the 10 years since the last revision from many applicants, their legal representatives and from solicitors' organisations. Representations have also been received from the European Commission. All of these are taken into consideration in the review of the Agreements. Representations were not formally invited from any of these organisations. We have recently received correspondence from the Association of Personal Injury Lawyers, and my noble Friend the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State met them, in September, to discuss their concerns about the new Uninsured Drivers Agreement.

Minicabs

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will issue regulations under the Private Hire Vehicles (London) Act 1998 to require drivers of minicabs to carry the guide dogs of sight-impaired customers. [94692]

Mr. Hill: This is a matter which will be considered when we consult jointly with the Public Carriage Office on proposals for regulating private hire vehicle drivers in London.

Pillion Passengers (Motor Cycles)

Mr. Hood: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what is the minimum age for a child to ride as a pillion passenger on a motor cycle; and if he will make a statement. [94686]

Mr. Hill: There is no minimum age for a child to ride as a pillion passenger on a motor cycle. The decision remains with the rider, who is legally responsible for ensuring that the child is safely supported. Existing legislation places a number of controls on the carrying of pillion passengers.

These legislative requirements, by their nature, restrict the carrying of children as pillion passengers unless that can be undertaken safely.

Mr. Hood: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many children have been *(a)* killed and *(b)* seriously injured in road traffic accidents riding pillion on motor cycles in each of the last five years; and if he will make a statement. [94685]

Mr. Hill: The information requested is shown in the following table:

Child twmv[1] pillion passengers killed or seriously injured: GB 1994–98

Casualties

	Severity		
Year	*Killed*	*Seriously injured*	*Total*
1994	2	54	56
1995	0	46	46
1996	1	51	52
1997	3	48	51
1998	0	34	34

[1] Two wheeled motor vehicles; including motorcycles, combinations, mopeds and motor scooters.

Maritime Pollution

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement in respect of maritime pollution threats involving the "Pacific Pintail", the "Pacific Teal" and the Greenpeace ship. [94714]

Mr. Hill: My Department is not aware of any incident involving the named ships that created a risk of marine pollution. However, the ships were involved in incidents in July this year that resulted in a risk to safety. Greenpeace manoeuvred inflatable boats near the ships owned by Pacific Nuclear Transport Limited. The Greenpeace ship had positioned itself in the approach channel to Barrow. Its crew did not provide information on their intentions, despite several requests that they do so. Without any clear indication of Greenpeace's intentions, there was concern that their activities could result in injury or loss of life. My Department's Maritime and Coastguard Agency therefore issued a direction requiring the M/V Greenpeace to leave specified areas of the UK's territorial sea. We cancelled the direction once there was no longer a risk to safety in the UK territorial sea.

Plutonium Shipments

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement in respect of safety issues arising from the plutonium shipment involving the "Pacific Teal" and "Pacific Pintail". [94715]

Mr. Hill: Mixed oxide fuel is transported in packages that have been approved as meeting the national regulations and international safety standards covering the transport of radioactive materials by sea.

The "Pacific Pintail" and the "Pacific Teal" already meet the highest requirements of the International Maritime Organisation's "Code for the Safe Carriage of Irradiated Nuclear Fuel", "Plutonium and High-Level Radioactive Wastes in Flasks on board Ships" ("INF Code").

Rail Safety Reports

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will require

the Health and Safety Executive to make publicly available *(a)* reports on rail safety hitherto treated as confidential and *(b)* future reports on rail safety. [94701]

Mr. Hill: The results of HSE's investigations into rail safety are already made public. This has been achieved by publishing the findings eg of train accidents, research, passenger accidents and others in the Chief Inspector of Railway's Annual Report into Railway Safety. In the last year, HSE has also made public the result of its investigation into significant incidents as these are completed. Examples include findings following the derailment at Cadoxton and the accidents of Bexley and Winsford. Within the last year, HSE has also published the results of the investigation into the management of signals passed at danger.

HSE intends to make public the results of all such investigations as soon as possible after the completion of the investigation. This is illustrated by the publication of the interim findings into the recent train accident at Ladbroke Grove.

Radioactive Shipments (Irish Sea)

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what controls exist to monitor the number of vessels in the Irish Sea carrying radioactive material; what requirements there are for the registration of such movements and the reporting of incidents which could endanger the public; and what was the average number of such vessels moving in the Irish Sea during the past 18 months. [94672]

Mr. Hill: UK legislation requires ship operators to provide my Department with information on dangerous and polluting cargoes, including radioactive material, carried by ships calling at UK ports. It also requires ship operators to report incidents to HM Coastguard. These requirements give effect to international rules adopted through the International Maritime Organization (IMO) and to an EC directive. We cannot require ships that pass through UK waters without calling at a UK port to provide us with information except in accordance with IMO approved schemes. Any such requirement would conflict with the navigational rights and freedoms enjoyed by foreign ships according to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea 1982, to which the UK is a party. Information on the number of ships passing through the Irish Sea without calling at a UK port is not available.

London Underground

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, pursuant to his answer of 5 July 1999, *Official Report*, column *370*, concerning the agreement signed by London Transport Underground for the future supply of power, if, under the agreement, power for London Underground will cease to be generated in London; who the owners and managers of Power PFI are; to what extent the agreement transfers the responsibility for supply and distribution of electric power to appliances and live rails; what access agreements to linesides, switching equipment and sub-stations have been made with the contractors; and what transfers of personnel there will be. [94813]

Mr. Hill: The Power PFI contract transferred responsibility for the operation, maintenance, finance and renewal of London Underground's high voltage electrical supply network to SEEBOARD Powerlink (a consortium of companies consisting of SEEBOARD, BICC and ABB, owned in the following proportions: 80 per cent., 10 per cent., 10 per cent.). Under this contract, London Underground's power will be obtained from the National Grid. The day to day switching of electrical supplies to track and stations remains with London Underground.

Access by the contractor to linesides, switching equipment and substations is in accordance with the same procedures and conditions imposed for London Underground staff and all contractors working on the railway.

Under the terms of the Power PFI contract, the 315 London Underground staff responsible for the operation and maintenance of the generating stations at Lots Road and Greenwich, the power distribution substations and associated high voltage and control cable networks, transferred to SEEBOARD Powerlink on their existing terms and conditions of employment when the contract commenced on 16 August 1998.

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many fires there have been on the London Underground in each of the last five years. [94793]

Mr. Hill: The numbers of confirmed fire reports for the last five years are as follows:

	Rolling stock	*Trackside*
1994–95	32	244
1995–96	37	347
1996–97	38	286
1997–98	58	327
1998–99	58	258

London Underground define a confirmed fire as any incident that activates a smoke alarm.

These incidents may be as seemingly trivial as a smouldering cigarette end. London Underground advise that these confirmed fires were small in nature, with little or no combustible material available that would lead to the development of a large fire. All such incidents, however small, are treated very seriously.

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, pursuant to his answer of 5 July 1999, *Official Report*, column *370*, concerning revenue and costs of London Underground Limited, if he will provide a breakdown of the £248 million of other costs in 1997–98 into *(a)* main categories of expenditure and *(b)* each line or interchange expenditure; and to what purposes the gross margin of £265 million has been devoted. [94814]

Mr. Hill: *(a)* The breakdown of "other costs" is as follows:

Other costs	*£ million*
Business rates	21
Operational materials and supplies	18
Train and station cleaning	20

Other costs	*£ million*
Repair costs allocated from project work	25
Marketing	4
Insurance	9
EDP costs	13
Consultancy	9
Accommodation and telephone	23
Charge from LT for finance and HR services	26
PFI contract costs	31
Costs of property rental collection	7
Other costs	42
Total	248

(b) A breakdown of these figures on a line by line basis is not available. Some of the costs above are incurred centrally rather than on a line by line basis.

The gross margin of £265 million went towards total LT investment.

Biosafety Protocol

Joan Ruddock: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when the next meeting on the biosafety protocol will be held; by what date his Department has to make its submission for inclusion in the EU position; and if he will make a statement. [94828]

Mr. Meacher: At the informal consultations on the biosafety protocol held by the President of the Extraordinary Conference of the Parties (Ex-COP), Minister Mayr, in Vienna in September, it was decided to resume the Ex-COP between 24–28 January in Montreal. The UK and the EU are considering the options arising from the informal consultations, and the EU position for the resumed negotiations will be established over the coming months. The UK is fully committed to an effective and workable Protocol which can be ratified by all countries active in biotechnology.

Glyphosate

Joan Ruddock: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what reports he has received from the EU concerning the effects of the chemical glyphosate on *(a)* the environment and *(b)* biodiversity; and if he will make a statement. [94819]

Mr. Meacher: The EU has established a programme to review the safety of all pesticides which were authorised (by at least one Member State) for use in agriculture and horticulture on 25 July 1993. Glyphosate is included in the first round of this programme.

The EU review process begins with an evaluation, including effects on the environment, wildlife and other non-target organisms, by a "rapporteur" Member State. Germany was appointed rapporteur for glyphosate and has delivered its assessment to the EU Commission, the UK and other Member States. This evaluation is currently subject to peer review by experts from all Member States.

Transponders

Mr. Wallace: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will report on progress made at a meeting of the IMO sub-committee on the safety of navigation held in September on the subject of the mandatory carriage requirement for transponders; and if he will make a statement. [94603]

Mr. Hill *[holding answer 20 October 1999]:* The International Maritime Organisation's (IMO) sub-committee on the safety of navigation (NVA 45) met from 20–24 September 1999 and developed a draft regulation for the phased introduction of a mandatory carriage requirement for ship identification transponders. The draft Regulation envisages new ships being fitted by 1 July 2002, with step-by-step application to existing ships between then and 2008. The draft will be further discussed at the 72nd session of the IMO safety committee in May 2000.

M60

Mr. Bennett: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he expects the M60 motorway from Denton to Middleton to open; and what assessment he has made of the prospects for opening sections of the motorway at an earlier date. [94831]

Mr. Hill *[holding answer 21 October 1999]:* As this is an operational matter for the Highways Agency, I have asked the Chief Executive of the Highways Agency, Lawrie Haynes, to reply.

Letter from Peter Nutt to Mr. Andrew Bennett, dated 25 October 1999:

The Parliamentary Under Secretary of State, Keith Hill, has asked Lawrie Haynes, the Chief Executive of the Highways Agency, to reply to your recent Parliamentary question about the timing for the opening of the M60 between Denton and Middleton. I am replying in Lawrie's absence from the office.

The date for opening the whole of the Denton to Middleton section of the Manchester Outer Ring Road is Summer 2000. However, the Highways Agency is considering the possibility of opening some individual sections earlier. Whether it would be practical to do so is dependent upon the contractors' programmes for completion of the outstanding works. This will become clearer towards the end of the year. Traffic impact on the local road network is also a major consideration and the Agency is in discussion with the relevant local authorities about this.

I hope this is helpful.

Rail Safety

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the danger to rail travellers of the increased number of cases of broken rails since 1994–95; and what action he plans to take. [95173]

Mr. Hill: Broken rails result from a range of causes including rail age, increased traffic density and particular additional freight carriage. The general upward trend in the number of broken rails demonstrates that infrastructure maintenance, inspection and track replacement efforts must be increased. HSE's Railway Inspectorate (HMRI) has recently ordered Railtrack to define an urgent action plan to improve track maintenance and inspection to significantly reduce the number of broken rails across the network. Extreme damage to rails could potentially lead to train derailment and HMRI take

a strong enforcement action where there could be a safety risk. For example, a prohibition was placed on the use of the Severn Tunnel earlier this year until suitable repairs were carried out.

Bridge Tolls (Buses)

Shona McIsaac: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the current level of bridge tolls for buses, indicating the percentage differential with tolls for cars on the same journey. [94921]

Mr. Hill: The following list shows the current toll levels for cars and buses on toll bridges in England for which the Secretary of State has a statutory responsibility, as Highway Authority or for the determination of the level of tolls. The percentage differential between the toll level for cars and buses is shown:

Undertaking	*Car (£)*	*Minibus (£)*	*Percentage differential*	*Large bus (£)*	*Current tolls: Percentage differential*
Aldwark Bridge	0.15	0.30	100	0.80	433
Clifton Suspension Bridge	0.20	0.20	0	0.20	0
Dartford QEII Bridge	1.00	1.70	70	2.80	180
Dunham Bridge	0.20	0.20	0	0.40	100
Humber Bridge	2.30	3.30	43	12.50	443
Itchen Bridge	0.60	1.00	67	5.00	733
Rixton & Warburton Bridge	0.10	0.12	20	0.12	20
Severn Bridges (Westbound only)	4.20	8.40	100	12.50	198
Shrewsbury Bridge	0.10	0.10	0	0.10	0
Swinford Bridge	0.05	0.05	0	0.20	300
Tamar Bridge	1.00	2.50	150	5.00	400
Whitechurch Bridge	0.08	0.20	150	0.50	525
Whitney on Wye Bridge	0.50	0.50	0	1.00	100

Raddicio Rosso

Joan Ruddock: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what advice his Department has given the European Commission on the Dutch Government's approval for raddicio rosso to be sold in the Netherlands without the approval of the EU. [94868]

Mr. Meacher *[holding answer 21 October 1999]:* Chicory (raddicio rosso) has been approved under Part C of Directive 90/220/EEC for growing in the European Union for the purposes of seed production only. It is not for general cultivation, nor can it enter the food or animal feed chain under this approval.

The application was submitted to the UK and the other member states via the Dutch Competent Authority in 1995. The UK together with the other member states reviewed the application dossier. The UK Competent Authority raised no objection to the product being placed on the European market. The Community's decision was that the cultivation of this particular GM crop for the purposes of seed production posed a low risk to human health and the environment.

Dog Identification

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what studies his Department has commissioned regarding the long-term effects of implanting microchips in animals for the purpose of identification; and if he will make a statement. [94890]

Mr. Hill: The Dog Identification Group, which my Department set up, is considering all the issues relating to dog identification including that of micro-chipping. No decisions will be taken until we have fully considered the report of the Group.

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to bring forward legislation on dog identification; and if he will make a statement. [94891]

Mr. Hill: A Dog Identification Working Group has been set up by my Department to produce a report to reflect a consensus view on all the available options for dog identification. No decisions will be taken until we have fully considered the report.

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to offer dog owners a choice in the method by which they identify their animals, pursuant to the report by the Dog Identification Group. [94888]

Mr. Hill: The Dog Identification Working Group will produce a report to reflect a consensus view on all the available options for dog identification. No decisions will be taken until we have fully considered the report.

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he will publish the report of the Dog Identification Working Group. [94889]

Mr. Hill: The Dog Identification Group has been set up by my Department to report on the available options for dog identification. The report will be made public on its completion during the course of next year.

St. Mary's Hospital, Stannington

Mr. Peter Atkinson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions on what date he received the Planning Inspector's reports on the planning application for the site of St. Mary's Hospital, Stannington, Northumberland. [95104]

Mr. Raynsford: The report by the Inspector who conducted the public inquiry into the called-in planning application for the site of St. Mary's Hospital, Northumberland reached Government officials on 5 February 1999.

The hon. Member will know that the Secretary of State's decision to refuse the application was issued on 21 October.

Parish Councils

Mr. Baldry: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the future of parish councils. [94937]

Ms Beverley Hughes: As stated in our White Paper "Modern Local Government—In Touch with the People" (Cm 4014),

"Parish councils will continue to play a key role in many of our towns and villages".

In our forthcoming Rural White Paper we intend to address further how we see parish councils playing their part in rural local governance.

Freemasonry

Mr. Baldry: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) when he expects to reply to the letter from the hon. Member for Banbury concerning freemasonry and the Planning Inspectorate; [R] [94950]

(2) if he will make a statement on the policy of the Chief Planning Inspector that freemasons will not be eligible to apply for employment with the Planning Inspectorate. [R] [94943]

Mr. Prescott: This policy was incorrect and has been withdrawn. However, all new appointees to the post of Planning Inspector shall have as a condition of appointment a requirement to declare membership of the freemasons (and any later membership to them).

I expect to reply to the hon. Member this week.

Banbury

Mr. Baldry: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he expects to make an announcement on town council status for Banbury. [94941]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The Secretary of State has made a preliminary decision for the creation of a new parish of Banbury. Cherwell District Council was notified on 8 October.

We intend to consult the District Council and other interested parties shortly on a draft Order. Subject to that consultation, the intention is to make the Order before the end of 1999 with the view to first elections in May 2000.

Swanwick Air Traffic Control System

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the impact of the NATS part-privatisation on the implementation date of the Swanwick Air Traffic Control System. [95695]

Mr. Mullin: The Public/Private Partnership for NATS will not have any impact on the target operational date for the Swanwick centre which is spring 2002. At present the development of the centre is proceeding well, and meeting its target milestones. It is likely that by the time the NATS PPP is established, the air traffic control system will be ready for operations, and training of controllers on the new system will be well underway.

The introduction into operation of the Swanwick centre is an integral part of NATS' plans for the future control of air traffic in the UK. The NATS PPP will therefore be obliged to complete the centre and bring it into operation.

Road Safety

Mrs. Brinton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if the issue of deaths caused by negligent or dangerous driving will form part of the proposed White Paper on Road Safety. [95111]

Mr. Hill: The forthcoming road safety strategy will cover a wide range of issues, including those related to negligent and dangerous driving. It will also set out new targets to reduce the numbers of deaths and injuries on Britain's roads.

Rail Freight Terminals

Mr. Dobbin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the rail freight terminals operating in each Government Office region. [95556]

Mr. Hill: Railtrack's "A Guide to Rail Freight", published in April 1999, says that there are around 1,000 active rail freight terminals connected to their network; a terminal can be any interface between rail freight services, other modes and/or storage facilities, and they vary enormously in size and scope from a simple siding through to a large distribution park.

Railtrack's "A Guide to Freight Connections" (Third Edition), published in October 1998, contains at Appendix B1 a list of private siding connections and at Appendix B2 a list of freight operating company sites. Each entry includes its geographical location by Railtrack Zone.

Mr. Dobbin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to support the establishment of new Rail Freight terminals adjacent to motorways. [95578]

Mr. Hill: The Government's freight grants scheme is designed to assist companies in moving goods from road to rail where payment is justified by the environmental benefits. Capital grants are available towards the cost of new or refurbished freight facilities, including terminals, wherever they might be located. The Highways Agency has a Memorandum of Understanding with Railtrack to facilitate effective co-operation and understanding between the two organisations, and one of the areas of mutual interest mentioned in the Memorandum is the development of opportunities for the transfer of freight from road to rail through the provision of interchange facilities with access directly or indirectly from the trunk road network, including motorways.

Transport Safety Statistics

Ms Drown: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many injuries *(a)* per million passenger journeys and *(b)* per million train journeys there have been in each of the last 10 years. [94777]

Mr. Hill: Information about the numbers of casualties per train journey is not available. Information about numbers of casualties per passenger journey and per passenger kilometre on all railway undertakings in Great Britain is as follows:

Railway movement accidents[1]: passenger casualty rates

	Casualties[2] per million passenger journeys	*Casualties[2] per million passenger kilometres*
1989	1.85	0.076
1990	1.73	0.072
1991–92	1.61	0.068
1992–93	1.59	0.066
1993–94	1.52	0.064
1994–95	1.54	0.069
1995–96	1.81	0.080
1996–97[3]	0.46	0.019
1997–98	0.47	0.020
1998–99	0.40	0.018

[1] Train accidents, or accidents due to the movement of railway vehicles (eg passengers entering or alighting from trains). Accidents not connected with the movement of railway vehicles, and casualties connected with trespass and suicide, are excluded.

[2] Until 1996 all accidents to passengers were required to be reported however slight their injuries. Under the Accident Reporting Regulations 1995, which came into effect on 1 April 1996, non-fatal injuries are only reported if the passenger is taken to hospital. Figures since 1996–97 are therefore not comparable with those for earlier years.

Radioactive Waste

Mr. Alexander: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he expects to publish the *(a)* Government's response to the report of the House of Lords Select Committee on Science and Technology on "The Management of Nuclear Waste" (HL Paper 41) published on 24 March, *(b)* High Level Waste and Spent Fuel Disposal Research Strategy project, *(c)* 1998 UK Radioactive Waste Inventory and *(d)* report on the UK's intentions for implementing the OSPAR strategy with regard to radioactive substances. [95881]

Mr. Meacher: I have today written to Lord Tombs, Chairman of the Committee, enclosing the Government response to the Select Committee report on "The Management of Nuclear Waste". Copies have been placed in the Library of the House.

The Government's paramount concern is to protect the safety of both current and future generations. The Government agree with the Select Committee that widespread public consultation must come before a final decision is reached on the most appropriate option for managing radioactive waste. The Government note the Select Committee's conclusion that deep disposal is the only solution which is ultimately sustainable. We shall, however, want to study very carefully the results of the consensus building process, initiated by the consultation which we intend to launch early next year, before coming to a final view. There are, in any case, questions to consider about when any underground repository might be needed and the period over which is should be possible to monitor and retrieve wastes placed in it. There is no need for an immediate decision at this stage.

The Government response is the first stage of the process to identify, develop and implement the best possible management option for radioactive wastes—one which commands widespread public support. It sets out the Government's commitment to a comprehensive policy for long-lived radioactive wastes, developed in an open and transparent way on the basis of widespread consultation to ensure the maximum possible public acceptance. The next stage will be full consultation on the management options for radioactive waste. Subsequent steps will need to be considered in the light of the results from this consultation. There is no question at this stage of looking at the potential suitability of any particular sites. This would only be necessary if, in the light of consultation, underground disposal were the chosen option. In any case, this would be some years away.

The Government have also accepted that it is possible that at least some plutonium may be declared a waste in the future. The response therefore also sets out our intention to consult with BNFL, British Energy and UKAEA on the likely future uses for the UK plutonium stockpile.

I have today published a report which my Department commissioned from consultants Quantisci setting out a research and development strategy for disposing of certain radioactive materials. Copies of the report have been placed in the Library of the House.

The High Level Waste and Spent Fuel Disposal Research Strategy project has identified the scale and nature of the research and development that would be required, if deep geological disposal of high-level waste and spent fuel were to be pursued. The report will inform the forthcoming consultation paper on radioactive waste management.

I have also today published the 1998 UK Radioactive Waste Inventory. Copies of the summary report have been placed in the Library of the House.

The Inventory was jointly commissioned by Nirex and my Department. It describes all stocks of waste held in the UK at 1 April 1998, together with predictions of wastes arising into the future. There has been an increase of around 12 per cent. in the total volume of wastes in stock since the last inventory in 1994 due to the continued accumulation of intermediate and high level wastes in the absence of disposal facilities. However, the predictions of future arising have been revised downwards since the last report (17 per cent. for high level waste; 26 per cent. for intermediate and 2 per cent. for low level waste) due to developments in waste conditioning, better estimates of volume and some changes in the scale and nature of future operations.

The UK is one of the few countries where such information is made publicly available. Organisations involved with the nuclear industry, and relevant non-governmental organisations, will receive a free copy on compact disk. The summary report will also be available on the internet at www.nirex.co.uk.

A report on the UK's intentions for implementing the OSPAR strategy with regard to radioactive substances has been sent to the OSPAR secretariat today. Copies have been placed in the Library of the House. Copies have also been sent to nuclear operators and relevant non-governmental organisations.

Departmental Twinning

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many requests there have been to his Department for placement of officials from Central, East European and CIS states as twins of his officials; how many such officials have been accepted as twins; from which countries *(a)* those who were accepted and *(b)* those who were not accepted came; and which of these twinnings related to the (i) environment, (ii) transport and (iii) regional policy aspects of his Department. [93993]

Ms Beverley Hughes: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer given today by the Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester, East (Mr. Vaz).

CABINET OFFICE

Departmental Twinning

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office how many requests there have been to her Department for placement of her officials from Central, East European and CIS states as twins of her officials; how many such officials have been accepted as twins; and from which countries *(a)* those who were accepted and *(b)* those who were not accepted came. [93992]

Mr. Ian McCartney: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer given today by the Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester, East (Mr. Vaz).

Information Technology

Mr. Bradshaw: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what action the Government are taking to improve its handling of major IT projects. [95754]

Mr. Ian McCartney: We have recently begun a major study into the handling of Government IT projects. It will consider best practice from within Government, the private sector and overseas to produce recommendations to improve performance in this area in the future. The work of the study team will be closely integrated with that on delivering the Corporate IT Strategy announced in the Modernising Government White Paper.

The study will be undertaken by officials in the Cabinet Office's Central IT Unit. It will be completed by next May. I will chair a steering committee that will oversee the study, bringing together senior figures from across Government and the private sector.

Horizontal Questions Working Group

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office if she will list those proposals made by her representative to the Horizontal Questions Working Group indicating the discussions on them. [95309]

Marjorie Mowlam: Officials from my Department have made no proposals to the Horizontal Questions Working Group over the past 12 months.

Equal Opportunities

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office if an action plan for increasing the representation of women in public life has been *(a)* prepared by her Department and *(b)* published since November 1998. [94855]

Marjorie Mowlam: This Government are committed to the equal representation of women and men in public appointments. A plan of action has been drawn up, which includes individual departmental plans for increasing the participation of women in public life. Details of individual departments' are given in "Quangos: Opening up Public Appointments, 1999–2000", published by the Cabinet Office in May 1999. Copies are in the Libraries of the House and on the internet. The plans contain specific goals and objectives for increasing the representation of women on the boards of public bodies, and are updated annually in the light of progress made.

Michael John Smith

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office (1) why undertakings contained in the letter of 7 January 1998 from the Secretary of the Civil Service Commission to Michael John Smith (prison number PR 3345) were not fulfilled; [94569]

(2) when Michael John Smith (prison number PR 3345) will receive a substantive reply to his letter of 10 January 1997 to the Secretary of the Security Commission; and what was the reason for the delay. [94568]

Dr. Mowlam: This is a matter for my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Animal Procedures Committee

Mr. Ivan Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what changes there have been to the membership of the Animal Procedures Committee. [95863]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: I am pleased to be able to say that Mr. Robert McCracken, a barrister, has joined the Committee with effect from 1 September 1999. I am sorry to have to announce the departure from the Committee of Professor Colin Johnston on grounds of ill health.

Millennium Celebrations (Security)

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what additional measures he plans to ensure public order and security on the night of 31 December. [95148]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Maintenance of public order is primarily a matter for chief officers of police. The Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) has established a millennium co-ordinating committee to ensure the readiness of forces and continuity of service over the millennium period. I understand that all forces have millennium planning teams in place to ensure

business continuity and contingency planning for this period. Arrangements are in place for mutual aid between forces should this become essential.

The infrastructure preparedness, supply chains and business continuity plans of police forces in England and Wales have been independently assessed by Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary using a process based on Action 2000 methodology. All forces have been graded as blue (no identified risks of material disruption) and have millennium operating regimes in place.

A police information centre will operate at Scotland Yard on 31 December, reporting to the President of ACPO. In addition, the Home Office's own millennium operating regime will ensure that Ministers are fully appraised of developments on the night.

Millennium Dome (Policing)

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many regular police officers will be on duty at the Millennium Dome during normal opening hours. [95121]

Mr. Charles Clarke: There will be no police officers routinely on duty at the Millennium Dome, as security duties at the Dome site will be undertaken by the appointed Company, Group 4.

The Commissioner of the Police of the Metropolis tells me that a total of 89 additional officers will be seconded to the Greenwich Borough Operational Command Unit to undertake high visibility patrol, traffic patrol and crime investigation duties in anticipation of the increased numbers of people visiting the Dome and Greenwich. The secondment of these officers will last for the duration of the National Millennium Exhibition.

Thames Valley Police

Mr. Baldry: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what funds he intends to make available to the Thames Valley Police during the coming financial year; and what impact he estimates such funding will have on recruitment policy for the Thames Valley Police. [94938]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Last year the Government announced that the police service in England and Wales would receive an additional £1.24 billion over three years from 1999–2000. Our plans allow for police expenditure to increase by around 2.8 per cent. in 2000–01. No final decisions have been taken about the allocation of funding to individual forces for the coming financial year. We expect to announce provisional allocations towards the end of the year.

Police recruitment is not centrally managed from the Home Office. It is a matter for individual chief constables. The Thames Valley Police will be able to bid for a share of the crime fighting fund which the Government have set up to provide for 5,000 extra recruits over three years.

Freemasons (Police)

Mr. Baldry: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what information he expects police authorities to hold concerning the membership of freemasonry among police officers; on what basis such information will be compiled; and to whom it will be available. [R] [94942]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Police authorities will hold no such information. Chief Constables in England and Wales are in the process of establishing voluntary, internal, registers of freemasonry membership in their forces. At this stage, while arrangements for its publication remain to be determined, the information disclosed will be used for internal management purposes and to provide statistical information about the extent of freemasonry membership in the police service.

Refugees (Housing)

Mr. Baldry: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what mechanisms he intends to be used to rehouse refugees throughout the United Kingdom; what consultations he or his Department have had with local authorities; and if there will be extra funding for local authorities to assist with the housing and other costs of accepting refugees. [94951]

Mrs. Roche: The Department has been in extensive consultation with the Local Government Association, the Association of Local Government and a variety of local authorities about the new support arrangements for asylum seekers in Part VI of the Immigration and Asylum Bill which are due to come into effect in April 2000, and the statutory interim arrangements in Schedule 8 of the Bill which are due to come into effect shortly after Royal Assent.

For the statutory interim arrangements, the Government have invited local government to devise a voluntary dispersal scheme which will enable asylum seekers to be dispersed to cluster areas around the country so that no single local authority bears a disproportionate burden. The statutory interim arrangements will underpin this scheme. The statutory interim arrangements also include provisions which will enable dispersal to take place if there is no voluntary scheme in operation.

From April 2000, the new support arrangements will enable the Department to provide support in cluster areas around the country and to disperse to those cluster areas asylum seekers who would otherwise be destitute and who claim the full support package.

For the period of the statutory interim arrangements, local authorities will be able to claim up to £150 per week for single adults and up to £220 per week for families who are being supported. When the new support arrangements are implemented, the Home Office will bear the costs of the provision of support (including accommodation, vouchers, cash, interpreter services and travel).

Dangerous Driving

Mrs. Brinton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to provide a more severe penalty for those convicted of causing death by negligent driving. [95109]

Mr. Charles Clarke: There is no offence of causing death by negligent driving. Grossly negligent driving which results in a death could be charged as manslaughter, which attracts a maximum penalty of life imprisonment.

The Road Traffic Act 1988 contains two offences of causing death. Causing death by dangerous driving and causing death by careless driving while under the influence of drink or drugs both attract a maximum penalty of 10 years imprisonment. The Government have no current plans to increase these penalties.

Mrs. Brinton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to change the charge of careless driving to a charge that recognises the culpability of the driver. [95108]

Mr. Charles Clarke: We have no current plans to change the definition of the offence of "careless driving" under section 3 of the Road Traffic Act 1988. Research is, however, currently being conducted into the way in which cases involving "bad" driving proceed through the criminal justice system. The results of that research will help to establish whether any changes in the law are desirable.

Royal Parks (Demonstrations)

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what is his policy towards the enforcement of byelaws against demonstrating in the royal parks. [95649]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The enforcement of the byelaws is a matter for the Metropolitan Police and for the Royal Parks Police.

Crime and Disorder Act 1998

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) how many reparation orders under the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 have been granted by the courts to date in each of the five pilot areas; how many of those orders have been breached; and if he will make a statement; [94957]

(2) how many applications he has received from local authorities for local child curfews under the provisions of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998; [94961]

(3) how many parenting orders have been granted to date by the courts under the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 in each of the nine pilot areas; how many of those orders have been breached; and if he will make a statement; [94955]

(4) how many child safety orders have been granted by the courts under the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 in each of the nine pilot areas; [94958]

(5) how many action plan orders under the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 have to date been made by the courts in each of the four pilot areas; how many of these orders have been breached; how many have been revoked; and if he will make a statement. [94960]

Mr. Charles Clarke: By 30 September 1999, the latest date for which this information is readily available, the following orders had been made in the pilot areas: 122 Parenting Orders, 829 Reparation Orders, one Child Safety Order and 490 Action Plan Orders. Applying for a local child curfew is an option for local authorities to consider in light of the wider crime and disorder strategies they are developing under the Crime and Disorder Act 1998. No applications have yet been received.

We do not currently have breach figures, but I will write to the hon. Member as soon as they are available.

The youth justice pilots are designed to allow us to assess the operation and costs and savings of the new youth justice measures. They will inform decisions about full implementation. Subject to the evaluation, we intend to implement the new court orders in 2000–2001.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many anti-social behaviour orders have been made by the courts to date under the provisions of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998. [94954]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Information on the number of Orders made is not held centrally but we are aware of six Orders made since 1 April 1999.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many Sex Offender Orders have been made by the courts to date under the provisions of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998. [94956]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Information on the numbers of Sex Offender Orders made is not currently held centrally.

We are, however, aware of 14 such orders having been granted.

Chinese Presidential Visit (Policing)

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) what meetings took place between his Department and the Metropolitan Police about the public order implications of the state visit by the President of China; [95646]

(2) what representations his Department made to the Metropolitan Police about the public order implications of the state visit of the President of China. [95648]

Mr. Charles Clarke: No such meetings or representations took place.

Immigration and Nationality Directorate

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what was the backlog of *(a)* immigration and asylum cases and *(b)* nationality cases in the Integrated Casework Directorate of the Immigration and Nationality Directorate in each month since 30 June. [94972]

Mrs. Roche: The backlog of immigration and asylum cases, and, separately, nationality cases at the end of July, August and September is set out:

Immigration and asylum

Month	*Number of cases*
July	104,464
August	123,454
September	149,013

Nationality

Month	*Number of cases*
July	97,900
August	99,500
September	97,900

We have recruited 340 staff and are planning to recruit another 250 to fill vacancies and expand the Integrated Casework Directorate in order to keep pace with the intake of new cases and eliminate backlogs.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what estimate he has made of the average daily number *(a)* of telephone callers to the Immigration and Nationality Directorate, *(b)* of calls made to that directorate and *(c)* of calls answered by the Telephone Caller Unit, in (i) July, (ii) August and (iii) September. [94965]

Mrs. Roche: The figures relating to telephone calls to the Immigration and Nationality Directorate are provided each month by British Telecom and are actuals rather than estimates. Daily averages, by month, are set out in the table:

	Number of callers	*Number of calls*	*Calls answered*
July	4,307	51,925	1,795
August	4,133	53,352	1,867
September	4,741	37,503	3,668

Since July a number of measures have been introduced to improve the service offered by the Immigration and Nationality Enquiry Bureau (INEB). Significant numbers of new staff are now available to answer calls, a support team undertakes follow-up work generated by calls, and there have been improvements in training staff in call handling techniques and the mentoring of new and existing staff. In recent weeks the service provided by INEB has improved substantially with around 4,000 calls a day being answered (75 per cent. of incoming calls). Further changes are being considered to improve performance.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many cases are now held in the Central Work in Progress Store of the Immigration and Nationality Directorate; and how many of those cases have been outstanding for more than *(a)* six months, *(b)* one year and *(c)* two years. [94968]

Mrs. Roche: There are 83,796 cases held in the Work in Progress Store of the Immigration and Nationality Directorate. This is a reduction of over 26,000 cases since July. Of the cases held in the Work in Progress Store, 12,654 have been outstanding for more than six months, 32,206 have been outstanding for more than one year, and 38,936 have been outstanding for more than two years. A number of measures have been taken to tackle the backlog, including the creation of the After Entry Clearance Team, which has had a major impact on the backlog of the after entry case backlog.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what was the average daily number of personal callers to each public inquiry office of the Immigration and Nationality Directorate in each month since 30 June. [94963]

Mrs. Roche: The average daily number of callers to each public inquiry office in July, August and September is set out in the table:

	July	*August*	*September*
Public Caller Unit Croydon	887	882	903
Asylum Screening Unit Croydon	248	309	327
Midlands Public Enquiry Office	141	133	190
Liverpool Public Enquiry Office	60	46	51
Glasgow Public Enquiry Office	51	52	55
Belfast Public Enquiry Office	33	30	26

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what proportion of letters to the Immigration and Nationality Directorate from *(a)* hon. Members and *(b)* members of the public are currently replied to within the target times set by Ministers. [94969]

Mrs. Roche: The Immigration and Nationality Directorate (IND) defines and monitors public correspondence as set out in the Six Whitehall Standards. The Standards specifically exclude applications and casework related correspondence, that is the majority of correspondence received in IND.

The latest position is that 12 per cent. of letters from hon. Members and 89 per cent. of letters from members of the public to which the Standard applies, met it.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what is the current backlog of cases at the Liverpool Office of the Immigration and Nationality Directorate; and how many of these cases have been outstanding for over *(a)* six months, *(b)* 12 months and *(c)* two years. [94966]

Mrs. Roche: At 30 September 1999, the current estimated backlog of cases in the Liverpool Office stands at 97,900. 72,500 cases have been outstanding for six months; 46,900 have been outstanding for 12 months and 3,500 for two years.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what is the earliest date of unopened travel documents applications held by the Travel Documents Case Management Unit of the Immigration and Nationality Directorate. [94970]

Mrs. Roche: The earliest date is 28 July 1999.

In the past few months, the number of staff allocated to travel documents work has doubled and is set to increase still further in the next few weeks. This combined with streamlined working practices, has resulted in dramatic increases in output from averages of 120 per week during August to well over 700 last week.

In addition, all applications received since 6 September have been opened within 24 hours of arrival in the section, and the majority processed within a matter of days.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what was the average waiting time for nationality cases in *(a)* July, *(b)* August and *(c)* September. [94964]

Mrs. Roche: The average waiting time for nationality cases in July, August and September are listed in the table:

	Months		
Month	*Naturalisation*	*Registration*	*Overall*
(a) July 1999	20.3	5.0	17.6
(b) August 1999	20.3	7.2	18.5
(c) September 1999	20.6	8.4	19.1

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what his plans now are for the implementation of the integrated information technology system in the Immigration and Nationality Directorate. [94971]

Mrs. Roche: As was made clear in reply to the hon. Member's Question on 26 July 1999, *Official Report*, column *63*, from the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, my hon. Friend the Member for North Warwickshire (Mr. O'Brien), the system is currently being tested and that process is not expected to be completed before December. Plans for implementation will be prepared in the light of the information obtained during testing as to the business benefits conferred by the different components of the system.

UK Passport Agency

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will state the date when he approved the Passport Agency's business plan for 1999–2000 and its corporate plan for 1999–2002; and if he will now place copies of both plans in the Library. [94962]

Mrs. Roche: The UK Passport Agency's Corporate and Business Plans for 1999–2002 are under active consideration by my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary and will be published shortly.

Publication of the Agency's Plans has been deferred to enable them fully to reflect the lessons learnt from this year's operational problems.

The Plans will be finalised in the light of the National Audit Office report which will be published on Wednesday 27 October.

Immigration Act 1971 (Detention Powers)

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many people are currently detained solely under Immigration Act 1971 powers in each place used for such detention. [94967]

Mrs. Roche: The latest available information, relating to the snapshot of all persons detained solely under Immigration Act 1971 powers, by location, as at 30 September 1999, is given in the table:

Persons recorded as being in detention[1] in the United Kingdom solely under Immigration Act powers as at 30 September 1999, by place of detention

Location	*Total detainees*
Immigration detention centres[2]	
Campsfield House	174
Dover Harbour	27
Harmondsworth	90
Harwich	2
Heathrow's Queens building	15
Longport	5
Manchester Airport	7
Tinsley House	142
Other immigration centres	1
Prison establishments	
Aberdeen	8
Bedford	3
Belmarsh	10
Birmingham	2
Blakenhurst	5
Brixton	3
Canterbury	15
Dorchester	2
Durham	2
Elmley	5
Feltham	5
Gloucester	2
Haslar	157
High Down	16
Holloway	16
Holme House	2
Lancaster Farms	2
Leeds	5
Liverpool	4
Longriggend	18
Manchester	7
Norwich	2
Pentonville	10
Preston	2
Rochester	191
Swansea	2
Wandsworth	5
Winchester	3
Woodhill	2
Wormwood Scrubs	7
Other prison establishments	9
Total	985

[1] Figures exclude persons detained in police cells (other than at Dover Harbour)
[2] Figures include the use of police cells at Dover Harbour

Asylum Seekers (Dependants)

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what estimate he has made of the number of dependants of applicants for asylum who are currently resident in the United Kingdom; and if he will make a statement. [95650]

Mrs. Roche: The latest published information regarding the number of dependants of applicants for asylum in the United Kingdom is given in Table 7.1 of the Home Office statistical bulletin "Asylum Statistics United Kingdom, 1998", issue 10/99. This shows that there were a total of 12,470 dependants in 1998.

Drug Treatment and Testing Orders

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many drug treatment and testing orders under the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 have to date been made by the courts in each of the three pilot areas; how many of those orders have been breached; how many have been revoked; and if he will make a statement. [94959]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The information is given in the table:

Area	*Orders made*	*Orders revoked*	*Orders breached*
Croydon	29	9	14
Gloucestershire	72	27	41
Liverpool	44	8	22
Total	145	44	77

In all cases, the orders revoked have also been the subject of breach and are included in both figures.

Correspondence

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what is the average time taken by his Department to reply to letters from members of the public. [95652]

Mr. Straw: On the basis of information available, the average time taken by the Home Office to reply to letters from the public between 1 March 1999 and 30 August 1999 was 16 working days.

Hunting

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many representations his Department has received since 30 June on the subject of hunting with dogs; and how many of those representations *(a)* favoured and *(b)* opposed a statutory ban on hunting. [95651]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: No systematic record is kept, but it is estimated that well in excess of 100,000 representations have been received since 30 June 1999. We estimate that the representations are evenly split between those who support a statutory ban on hunting with dogs and those who are opposed to such a ban.

Rural Crime

Mrs. Shephard: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) what measures he is taking to combat crime in rural areas; and if he will make a statement; [95261]

(2) what proportion of his Department's planned expenditure on crime and disorder reduction strategies will be targeted on rural areas; and if he will make a statement; [95258]

(3) what recent representations he has received about the level of crime in rural areas; and if he will make a statement. [95262]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The primary responsibility for tackling crime falls to police forces in conjunction with the local crime and reduction partnerships, established by the Crime and Disorder Act 1998. The policing plans and the strategies developed by the partnerships will deal explicitly with rural crime where that is a significant local issue. Some parts of the £400 million Crime Reduction Programme are likely to be diverted to crime in rural areas. There is no other Home Office provision dedicated exclusively to rural crime.

On 20 October, I met a delegation from 14 rural police authorities in England and Wales to discuss crime and the costs of policing in rural areas. My Department has also received petitions from residents of Norfolk and neighbouring counties about the subject.

Mrs. Shephard: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what consideration is being given to the inclusion in the forthcoming Rural White Paper of proposals to help tackle rural crime. [95259]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The White Paper is the responsibility of my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister and Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions. Home Office officials have been taking part in an inter-Departmental group which considers issues which might be covered in the White Paper. These include rural crime.

Rural Police Forces

Mrs. Shephard: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what recent assessment he has made of the special funding needs of rural police forces; and if he will make a statement. [95257]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The needs of rural police forces are already recognised in the current funding formula. We are considering the findings of an independent research report on the costs of policing in rural areas.

Rural police forces will be able to bid for a share of the new Crime Fighting Fund which the Government have set up to provide for 5,000 extra recruits over the next three years.

Police Station Closures

Mrs. Shephard: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will provide a breakdown by police force area of the number of police stations closed in each of the past two years. [95260]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The information requested is not collected centrally for England and Wales and could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

Fire Services

Mr. Cash: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the levels of spending on fire services per head of population in *(a)* Staffordshire and *(b)* each other county of England (i) in the current year and (ii) in each of the last three years. [94013]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: Fire service spending per head figures for the years 1992–93 until 1997–98, the latest year for which full information is available centrally, were placed in the Library in reply to a question from my hon. Friend the Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham (Mr. Marsden) on 15 February 1999, *Official Report*, column *503*, by the former Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, my hon. Friend the Member for Knowsley, North and Sefton, East (Mr. Howarth). In 1998–99 spending per head on the fire service in Staffordshire County Council was £24.

Wildlife

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many successful wildlife protection prosecutions have been launched by Merseyside Police since 1992. [94654]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Merseyside Police Force's computerised records indicate the following number of successful prosecutions since January 1994 of persons charged with a wildlife offence:

Year in which person was charged	Number of persons convicted
1994	1
1995	0
1996	0
1997	0
1998	3
1999 (to date)	1

Earlier computerised information is not available.

Electronic Communications

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what departmental guidance is currently given, and what administrative rules apply, in relation to the accessing of e-mails and other forms of electronic communications by the security and intelligence services and other law enforcement agencies; and if he will make a statement. [94578]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Any communication, including e-mails and the internet, when it is being transmitted by means of a public telecommunication system, may be intercepted in pursuance of a warrant issued in accordance with the provisions of the Interception Of Communications Act 1985. Appropriate procedures to process such warrants have been laid down.

Departmental Publications

Mr. Maclean: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list his Department's spending on official publications since May 1997. [93691]

Mr. Straw: The spending on official publications since May 1997 by the Home Office, apart from the Prison Service; which includes the costs incurred by the Department in publishing, preparation, production and purchase of copies for official use; was approximately £4.6 million in 1997–98, £4.3 million in 1998–99 and £2.5 million to date in 1999–2000. The figures exclude the cost of publications produced for internal use. Where the Department makes use of a private sector publisher, the publishing, printing and design costs are generally met by the publisher as part of their acceptance of the risks, of publication.

Unfortunately, there is no central record of expenditure incurred on official publications at Prison Service outstations.

Spending on Official Publications since May 1997

£

Home Office Directorate/Agency	1997–98	1998–99	1999–2000
Police Policy	313,745	377,533	45,906
Organised and International Crime	3,669	115,105	1,743
Criminal Policy	1,677,530	1,734,000	43,140
Research Development and Statistics	486,000	438,000	60,100
Immigration and Nationality	16,003	22,650	5,998
Constitutional and Community Policy	8,329	8,330	2,776
Fire and Emergency Planning	46,290	67,424	32,204
Planning and Finance	770	770	257
Other Central Services	13,163	69,913	58,121

Spending on Official Publications since May 1997

£

Home Office Directorate/Agency	1997–98	1998–99	1999–2000
Corporate Resources and Development	4	804	399
Communication	1,962,993	1,411,475	2,256,901
United Kingdom Passport Agency	37,222	64,571	12,435
Fire Service College	7,034	4,012	1,737
Forensic Science Service	28,000	25,000	0
Total	4,600,752	4,339,587	2,521,717

Sexual Harassment (Prison Service)

Mr. Gordon Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, pursuant to his answer of 21 July 1999, *Official Report*, columns *524–25*, what assessment the Prison Service has made of those sexual harassment cases notified to HM Prison Service headquarters since 1998 that have not been settled either by negotiation or by tribunal decision. [93658]

Mr. Boateng: No central assessment of these cases has been made. Complaints are dealt with locally in accordance with the Prison Service's procedure for handling complaints of harassment or discrimination. The Prison Service's equal opportunities team in headquarters keeps statistical records and offers advice on cases as necessary.

Criminal Records Bureau

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what is the scheduled date for the coming into force of the powers of the Criminal Records Bureau to monitor the record of adults working with children; and what representations he has received with regard to an earlier starting date for this scheme and for the provision of information free of charge to potential employers in the voluntary sector. [94671]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The timetable for implementation of the Criminal Records Bureau is under review. I shall make an announcement shortly. We have received some representations calling for the Bureau to be brought into operation as early as possible, and that is my intention. The Government have considered very carefully the many representations that we have received arguing for charges to be waived for checks carried out by the Bureau in the case of volunteers. This presents substantial problems of principle and would inevitably increase costs either for the public purse or for other applicants for certificates. But the concerns which have been expressed have increased our determination that the cost of certificates from the Bureau should be kept as low as possible. The cost of certificates has been previously estimated at between £5 and £10 depending on type of certificate.

DEFENCE

Anti-personnel Mines

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence of the anti-personnel mines stored by the MoD how many and what percentage of the total were destroyed in each year since 1991. [94663]

Mr. Spellar: The UK no longer stores any operational anti-personnel mines. The last of the Army's operational stocks of APMs were destroyed on 22 February this year. The destruction programme for the last of the RAF's operational stocks of APMs—the HB 876 sub-munition for the JP233 weapon system—was completed on 19 October 1999. Available figures for anti-personnel mines destroyed by the UK are shown in the table.

Designation	*Year*	*Quantity*	*Total destroyed (%)*
C3 Elsie	1995–96	374,257	64
	1996–97	106,263	18
	1998–99	99,788	17
	[1]Retained	1,056	Less than 1
		581,364	100
Mine and Discharger Barrel Assembly (Ranger)	1995–96	41,472	3
	1995–97	596,664	39
	1998–99	876,960	58
	[1]Retained	2,088	—
		1,517,184	100
Mine A/Tk L27A1	1995–96	4	Less than 1
	1997–97	4,870	100
		4,874	100
Mine A/P HE M86 JP233	1993–94	204	100
	1997–98	6	0.4
	1998–99	1,385	99.6
		1,391	100

[1] As permitted under Article 3 of the Ottawa Convention, the UK will continue to retain the minimum necessary numbers of live APMs for training and testing in de-mining techniques. Other, inert, training APMs are not included in these figures.

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what target date his Department has set to destroy all the anti-personnel mines it currently holds. [94664]

Mr. Spellar: I am pleased to announce that the last operational UK anti-personnel mines—the HB 876 sub-munition to the RAF's JP 233 weapon system—were destroyed on 19 October. We have completed the UK's destruction programme over three years ahead of the timeframe laid down in the Ottawa Convention. The destruction programme was accelerated to demonstrate to the world the UK's clear and unequivocal commitment to the Ottawa Convention. As provided for in Article 3 of the Ottawa Convention, the UK will continue to hold the minimum necessary numbers of anti-personnel mines for the development of and training in mine detection, mine clearance, or mine destruction techniques.

Royal Tournament

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will review his decision not to continue the Royal Tournament's field gun display; and if he will make a statement. [94067]

Mr. Hoon: The decision to end the field gun competition runs parallel with the decision to end the Royal Tournament. In part this is because the event cannot easily be replicated in a suitable public venue outside Earl's Court, but also because it accounted for more than half the personnel resources used at the Tournament. It is recognised that the field gun competition is an event with much audience loyalty, and is held in special regard by Service personnel, particularly those who have participated in the past. It has also been a tremendous spectacle for over 90 years, and it was fitting that the final run should take place in the centenary year of the action it commemorated.

The event was, however, no longer fully representative of the Royal Navy or its contemporary activities. Consequently, the Royal Navy is keen to look to the future and concentrate on supporting events that more accurately reflect the training and operational activities of the Service in the next millennium.

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence on what grounds the Royal Tournament is to be ended; and if he will make a statement. [94144]

Mr. Hoon: The Royal Tournament has made a major contribution over the years to British life and to the Service charities. I therefore pay tribute to the organisers and participants who have given such great pleasure to so many.

The Royal Tournament had been under scrutiny for some time. In part this was because the event had lost money in recent years—for example, it lost £400,000 last year—and this made the viability of the event questionable, particularly given its charitable status. More fundamentally, however, the format of the event could send only a limited message about the role and operational capabilities of the Armed Forces in the modern world. Moreover, the audience had reduced in recent years and as a result the Tournament neither informed the public nor attracted potential recruits to the extent we would have wished. Despite failing to meet our needs, it still placed a very considerable demand on our personnel, a minimum of 30,000 man-days per annum. This was hard to justify in the light of operational commitments and overstretch. Such considerations led the Services themselves to conclude that the Royal Tournament should end in order to help reduce commitments.

We have thought very carefully as to how we might bring about necessary change while preserving the best of the old Tournament. Next year a one-off event, the Royal Military Tattoo 2000, will be mounted against the spectacular backdrop of Horse Guards Parade. The Tattoo, which has the theme "Defence of the Realm: past, present and future", will involve 1,200 men and women from the Services, 75 per cent. of whom will be musicians. It will be a dramatic 90-minute show, recounting with pride 1,000 years of military history, whilst also celebrating the present and looking to the future. The Tattoo will combine imaginative staging, state-of-the-art technology, pageantry, son et lumière, lasers, fireworks and, I understand, the largest video screen to be seen in Europe. It will be held during the period 10–15 July 2000 and the planning team is working hard to ensure that the event is a great success.

A military Tattoo will continue to be held in London from 2001 onwards. Again using the spectacular backdrop of Horse Guards Parade, the Tattoo will build on the traditional pageantry that has been such a popular element of the Royal Tournament over the years and a special feature of London in Summer. A military festival will also be held outside London at varying locations that will allow the Armed Forces to showcase their equipment and

to demonstrate their capability in an exciting and modern way. The festival will be based on existing and successful Service events starting in 2001 with the Royal Navy's International Festival of the Sea at Portsmouth. It will last for a whole day, enabling spectators to see a wide range of military activities, view the latest military equipment, meet personnel and participate in interactive displays in a way that is not possible with the existing Royal Tournament format.

Gulf War Veterans

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many meetings officials from the Gulf Veterans' Illnesses Unit have held with the United States Department of Veterans Affairs since 1 January, indicating the date and location of each meeting and the names of the United States Department of Veterans Affairs officials at each meeting. [93940]

Mr. Spellar: In the period 1 January 1999 to 15 October 1999, officials from the MOD's Gulf Veterans' Illnesses Unit met US Department of Veterans Affairs officials on the dates and at the locations shown in the table:

	Location
21 January	Washington DC
26 February	Washington DC
2–4 March	Washington DC
14 May	Washington DC
4–8 and 14 October	Washington DC and Baltimore MD

I am withholding the names of the US Department of Veterans Affairs officials who attended the meetings above in accordance with Exemption 1 of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information (which relates to international relations) and Exemption 12 (which relates to privacy of an individual).

In addition to the above, a member of the Gulf Veterans Illnesses Unit (GVIU) based in Washington DC maintains continuous dialogue with United States Department of Veterans Affairs colleagues.

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) what is the formal title of the agreement announced on 28 April by his Department between Britain and the United States of America to share information on Gulf veterans' illnesses research; what progress has so far been made under the agreement; how many working groups and committees will operate under this agreement; on what dates each of these working groups and committees so far have met; on what dates in 1999 each of these working groups and committees are scheduled to meet; which United States Government Departments and organisations are taking part in this agreement; and which other United Kingdom Departments and organisations will take part in the agreement; [93930]

(2) how many agreements on the subject of Gulf veterans' illnesses have existed between Britain and United States of America since 1 May 1997; what are the names of each of these agreements; when each agreement was signed; and what is the purpose of each agreement. [94009]

Mr. Spellar: The agreement announced on 28 April is to be formalised by extending the scope of the UK-US Master Information Exchange Memorandum of Understanding (MIEM). The new agreement is an Information Exchange Annex entitled: "UK-US Master Information Exchange Memorandum of Understanding Annex Concerning Persian Gulf Veterans Health Research". It is not envisaged that the agreement will lead to the formation of new working groups or committees. Work has been and will continue to be taken forward by arrangements already in place. The main participants will be the UK Ministry of Defence, the US Department of Defense, the US Department of Veterans Affairs and the US Department of Health and Human Services. Non-governmental research institutes, academic departments, other organisations and individuals will be involved as appropriate.

Prior to this agreement there were no formal agreements between the US and UK governments on Gulf veterans' illnesses. However, there has been a close history of co-operation between the two governments on Gulf veterans' illnesses matters.

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many meetings officials from the Ministry of Defence's Gulf Veterans' Illnesses Unit have held with the United States Department of Defense since 1 January, indicating the date and location of each meeting and the names of the United States Department of Defense officials at each meeting. [93941]

Mr. Spellar: In the period 1 January 1999 to 15 October 1999, officials from the MOD's Gulf Veterans' Illnesses Unit met US Department of Defense officials on the dates and at the locations shown in the table:

Date(s)	*Location*
21 January	Washington DC
26 February	Washington DC
2–4 March	Washington DC
29–30 March	London
14 May	Washington DC
4–14 October	Washington DC and San Diego CA

I am withholding the names of the US Department of Defense officials who attended the meetings above in accordance with Exemption 1 of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information (which relates to international relations) and Exemption 12 (which relates to privacy of an individual).

In addition to the above, a member of the Gulf Veterans Illnesses Unit (GVIU) based in Washington DC maintains continuous dialogue with United States Department of Defense colleagues.

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence on how many United States *(a)* Government committees, *(b)* boards and *(c)* working groups relating to the issue of Gulf veterans' illnesses his Department's representatives have sat since 1 May 1997; and if he will list the official titles of each of these committees, boards and working groups and the United States Departments to which each committee, board and working group belongs. [93988]

Mr. Spellar: The information requested is provided in the following table:

Title of US Government committee, board or working group	*US Department representation*
Persian Gulf Veterans Co-ordinating Board (PGVCB) Research Working Group, PGVCB Clinical Working Group and PGVCB Benefits Working Group	PGVCB is an inter-departmental board comprising Department of Defense, Department of Veterans Affairs and Department of Health and Human Service
The Center for Disease Control Multiple Chemical Sensitivity Conference Planning Committee	Department of Health and Human Services
Planning Committee meeting for the Military Medicine Conference on Post-conflict Illnesses	Department of Defense
Planning Committee Meeting for the Principal Investigators' Conference	PGVCB is an inter-departmental board comprising Department of Defense, Department of Veterans Affairs and Department of Health and Human Services
The Armed Forces Epidemiology Board	Department of Defense

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence on which dates the Minister of State for the Armed Forces visited the United States of America this year to investigate Gulf veterans' illnesses research; how many meetings he held with members and officials of the United States Government during this visit; and if he will list the dates and locations of each meeting and the names and Departments of the United States members and officials at each meeting. [93990]

Mr. Spellar: On 26 February 1999, my predecessor as Minister of State for the Armed Forces, my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne, North (Mr. Henderson) attended a meeting on Gulf veterans' illnesses with the Senior Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs who was assisted by senior briefing officials from various US Departments. The meeting was held in the Old Executive Office Building, Washington DC. My predecessor also met the Deputy Secretary of Defense on 1 March.

I am withholding the names of the US officials who attended the meetings above in accordance with Exemption 1 of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information (which relates to international relations) and Exemption 12 (which relates to privacy of an individual).

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the co-operation between the Gulf Veterans' Medical Assessment Programme of his Department and the US Department of Defense's Comprehensive Clinical Evaluation Programme; how many meetings the two units have held since 1 January; and if he will indicate the dates and locations of each meeting. [93989]

Mr. Spellar: My Department's Gulf Veterans' Medical Assessment Programme was established in July 1993 to examine UK Gulf veterans who were concerned that their health had been adversely affected by service in the 1990–91 Gulf conflict. Although since 1 January officials from the Medical Assessment Programme have attended conferences at which representatives from the Comprehensive Clinical Evaluation Programme were present, there have been no formal meetings between representatives of the two organisations. The Head of the MOD's Gulf Veterans' Illnesses Unit attended a meeting at the Comprehensive Clinical Evaluation Programme, Walter Reed Army Medical Center, Washington DC on 7 October 1999.

Air Force Board

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence on what dates the Air Force Board has met since 16 July 1998; and if he will place in the Library a list of items discussed at each of the meetings. [93885]

Mr. Kilfoyle: There have been two meetings of the Air Force Board since 16 July 1998. The first of these took place on 3 March 1999. The agenda consisted of a presentation by the Chief of the Air Staff on the RAF in 1999 and the key challenges facing the Service, and managing a forecast shortfall in pilots. The second meeting of the Air Force Board was held on 14 July 1999 and the only item on the Board's agenda was the officer branch structure review.

Procurement Board

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence on what dates the Procurement Board has met since 25 January; and if he will place in the Library a list of items discussed at each of the meetings. [93858]

Mr. Kilfoyle: The last meeting of the Procurement Policy Board was on 25 January. With the formation of the Defence Procurement Agency on 1 April the Board was dissolved. There is no direct successor body to the Procurement Policy Board. Future arrangements are under consideration within the framework of Smart Procurement.

Defence Research Committee

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence on what dates the Defence Research Committee has met since 16 November 1998; and if he will place in the Library a list of items discussed at each of the meetings. [93883]

Mr. Kilfoyle: Since 16 November 1998, the Defence Research Committee has met on one occasion, on 14 April 1999, and discussed Consultation with National Defence Industries Council, Strategy for Applied Research, Corporate Research Guidance, Long Term Costing 99 and Critical Defence Technologies.

Chiefs of Staff

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence on what dates the Chiefs of Staff have met since 23 February; and if he will place in the Library a list of items discussed at each of the meetings. [93884]

Mr. Kilfoyle: I will write to the hon. Member and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

Admiralty Board

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence on what dates the Admiralty Board has met since 1 July 1998; and if he will place in the Library a list of items discussed at each of the meetings. [93861]

Mr. Kilfoyle: I will write to the hon. Member and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

Defence Council

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence on what dates the Defence Council has met since 20 July 1998; and if he will place in the Library a list of items discussed at each of the meetings. [93886]

Mr. Kilfoyle: I will write to the hon. Member and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

Equipment Approvals Committee

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence on what dates the Equipment Approvals Committee has met since 1 January; and if he will place in the Library a list of items discussed at each of the meetings. [93859]

Mr. Kilfoyle: Since 1 January the Equipment Approvals Committee has met in formal session on 17 March, 17 May, 26 May and 14 June. The projects discussed were the Type 45 Destroyer, Eurofighter, the Airborne Stand-Off Radar System (ASTOR) and the Beyond Visual Range Air-to-Air Missile (BVRAAM).

Army Board

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence on what dates the Army Board has met since 24 July 1998; and if he will place in the Library a list of items discussed at each of the meetings. [93860]

Mr. Kilfoyle: I will write to the hon. Member and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

Kosovo

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence, pursuant to his answer of 21 June 1999, *Official Report*, column *303*, if he is now able to estimate the cost to the Exchequer of peacekeeping in Kosovo over the next three years; and if he will make a statement. [94799]

Mr. Hoon: Further to my predecessor's reply of 21 June, I am not yet able to provide an estimate of the future costs. I shall however write to my hon. Friend and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

Overseas Forces

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the locations and strength of British forces overseas; and if he will make a statement. [94785]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 20 October 1999]:* The number of service personnel deployed overseas as at 1 October 1999 is 43,500. Their geographical location is as follows:

	Number
Overseas Commands:	
Germany	25,305
Cyprus	3,208
Falkland Islands	approximate 1,650
Gibraltar	443
Overseas Operations:	
The Gulf	1,412
Bosnia and Croatia	4,103
Kosovo	[1]5,000
East Timor	approximate 330
UN:	
Cyprus	318
Kuwait	11
Sierra Leone	15
Georgia	7
East Timor	2
Democratic Republic of Congo	6
Short Term Training Teams:	
Antarctica[2]	3
Baltic States	4
Jamaica	1
Sierra Leone	15
Namibia	6
Oman	2
Romania	3
Loan Service Personnel:	
Antarctica[2]	3
Antigua	6
Australia	1
Barbados	1
Bahrain	1
Bangladesh	2
Bermuda	3
British Virgin Islands	2
Brunei	57
Baltic States	4
Czech Republic	1
Estonia	1
Ethiopia	1
Germany	22
Ghana	4
Italy	1
Kenya	1
Kuwait	53
Lithuania	1
Malaysia	4
New Zealand	1
Oman	89
Romania	2
Saudi Arabia	64
Sierra Leone	1
Singapore	1
Slovakia	1
South Africa	16
Sri Lanka	1
Turks and Caicos Islands	2
United Arab Emirates	4
USA	1
Zimbabwe	10
Other Overseas Detachments:	
Belize	82
Brunei	957
Canada	213
Colombia	2
Kenya	35

[1] Including FYROM, Greece, Albania and Italy

[2] Attached to the British Antarctic Survey

Indonesia (Training)

Ann Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many Indonesian military and police personnel are currently receiving training or education in the UK at military training establishments and non-military educational establishments; to which establishments they are attached; and what is the nature and cost of the training or education. [95336]

Mr. Spellar: There are currently no Indonesian military personnel receiving training or education in the UK at military training establishments or at HMG's expense in non-military educational establishments. Following agreement at the EU General Affairs Council on 13 September to suspend bilateral military co-operation with Indonesia, no members of the Indonesian military will be allowed to begin studying in the UK at HMG expense or at an HMG-administered training establishment. Although not the responsibility of this Department, we are aware of two officers who are studying privately in the UK. Such studies are not inconsistent with the EU's Common Position. Information on the location of these establishments has been withheld under Exemption 4 of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information.

One Indonesian police officer is studying at a UK University under the FCO funded Chevening Scheme at a cost of around £16,000. This supports enhancing the democratic accountability of the Indonesia National Police following their separation from the Armed Force on April 1. Again, the location of this establishment has been withheld under Exemption 4 of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information.

Ann Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many *(a)* Indonesian military and police personnel are currently receiving training in Indonesia under UK government schemes and *(b)* UK personnel are involved in each case; and what is the nature and cost of the training. [95337]

Mr. Spellar: There are currently no Indonesian military or police personnel receiving training in Indonesia under UK government schemes.

Falkland Islands

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence on how many occasions in each of the past two years RAF flights serving the Falkland Islands have been delayed by mechanical or other failures; and if he will make a statement. [95315]

Mr. Spellar: Between the beginning of September 1999 and the middle of October 1999, there have been 22 legs flown to and from the Falkland Islands (11 outward and 11 return). Of these, five were delayed for serviceability or aircraft availability reasons. This information has only been held centrally since September 1999, following the introduction of a new computer system. Information for flights before then is not held centrally and could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will invite tenders from commercial airlines to provide planes to serve the garrison on the Falklands; and if he will make a statement. [95314]

Mr. Spellar: There are no plans to contract out the airbridge service to and from the Falkland Islands. The Ministry of Defence will of course look at any unsolicited proposals from commercial airlines, to determine best value for money. The examination of previous unsolicited proposals did, however, conclude that, taking into account the operational requirement to retain the Royal Air Force Tristars, the use of military aircraft was the most cost-effective solution.

Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what representations he has made to the US Government regarding the US Senate's refusal to ratify the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty. [95243]

Mr. Hoon: We have made clear to the US Government our deep disappointment with the US Senate's vote against US ratification of the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty. We welcome the US Government's expression of strong continuing support for the Treaty. We will continue to work with the US Government and all other ratifiers and signatories for the Treaty's entry into force as soon as possible.

RAF Menwith Hill

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what was the cost of the new security fence, including cameras, recently erected at RAF Menwith Hill; and what proportion of the costs was met by his Department. [95744]

Mr. Spellar: The construction of the new security fence at RAF Menwith Hill is being funded by the US Government. The UK contribution is limited to some administrative costs relating to professional fees and management of the works programme to which some £24,000 has been allocated to date. The total cost of the project is a matter for the US authorities.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the Articles of the *(a)* Anti Ballistic Missile Treaty and *(b)* Outer Space Treaty, which govern the use of RAF Menwith Hill (i) as part of the National Missile Defense for the USA and (ii) as part of the Space Based Infra Red System (SBIRS). [95747]

Mr. Spellar: The United Kingdom is not party to the Anti Ballistic Missile Treaty. Questions on its interpretation should be addressed to the USA and Russia. Article IV of the Outer Space Treaty requires that the moon and other celestial bodies should be used exclusively for peaceful purposes; prohibits placing weapons of mass destruction in orbit, on the moon or on other celestial bodies; and prohibits placing military facilities, conducting military manoeuvres, or the testing of any type of weapons on the moon and other celestial bodies. It imposes no limitations on other military activities in outer space.

Service Personnel (Compensation)

Mr. Corbett: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when he expects to publish a consultation document following the comprehensive review of arrangements for compensating service personnel or their dependants killed or injured while on service. [95732]

Mr. Spellar: We hope to make an announcement later this year.

Thiepval Barracks

Mr. Donaldson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what other uses he envisages for the land which will become available inside Thiepval Barracks in Lisburn following the planned demolition of married quarters. [95102]

Mr. Spellar: We aim to use some of the land to build a new Garrison Church, to replace the old church which was damaged in the bombing of Tiepval Barracks in 1996, and also to provide improved security arrangements for vehicle parking within the Barracks. The remaining land will provide much-needed flexibility in planning the future layout and utility of the barracks.

Army Retention Study

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when the Adjutant-General's Army Retention Study will be completed; when the findings will be made public; and if he will make a statement. [95524]

Mr. Spellar: The Army's Retention Study is a six-month strategic review to examine the effectiveness of present policies, which includes undertaking field research, and making recommendations for improvements. The work is being carried out by the Hay Management Group and the Institute for Employment Studies, who will report their findings to the Adjutant-General on 30 November 1999. The Retention Study was commissioned to inform the Army's personnel management policies and there are currently no plans to publish the findings externally.

Service Families Task Force

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the initiatives that have come directly from the Service Families Task Force; and if he will make a statement. [95523]

Mr. Spellar: The Service Families Task Force works across Government to tackle the problems caused by the mobile lifestyle of Service personnel and their families. It works with other Departments to address problems identified by the Service Families Associations. It has achieved some impressive results. These include: making it easier for Service spouses to claim Jobseeker's Allowance in the UK; the new DfEE Code of Practice on Schools Admission taking account of the particular needs of Service families; Service representation on Schools Admission Forums in areas where there are large populations of Service children; extra money for pre-five education for Service children in Northern Ireland; and 24 schemes in areas with large numbers of Service families to encourage dentists to take on more NHS patients. Work on other issues is continuing.

The Service Families Task Force is an example of the importance the Government attach to the needs of Service families. A full account of our family friendly policies is contained in our leaflet "A Special Message to Service Families From MOD Ministers", a copy of which has been placed in the Library of the House.

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the participating bodies on the Service Families Task Force; when the Task Force will next meet; if he will publish the agenda for the next meeting; and if he will make a statement. [95552]

Mr. Spellar: I chair the Service Families Task Force. It brings together Ministers from across Government, including from the Department for Education and Employment, Department of Health, Department of Social Services, Scottish Office, and Northern Ireland Office, and separately, the chairs of the Service Family Associations—the Association of Royal Naval and Royal Marines Families, the Army Families Federation and Airwaves. It operates at three levels: a Ministerial Group; a Families Forum; and a Working Group of officials. The Ministerial Group last met on 21 September 1999 and will meet again in the new year. The Families Forum is due to meet on 15 November 1999, and will discuss a range of issues of interest to Service families. The Working Group meets as necessary to deal with issues as they arise.

The Service Families Task Force works across Government to ensure that the particular circumstances of Service families are taken into account in developing and implementing new policies. It is achieving good results.

Nuclear Weapons

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is the Government's policy on no first use of British nuclear weapons; and if he will make a statement. [95735]

Mr. Hoon: In conducting the Strategic Defence Review, the Government concluded that a policy of no first use of nuclear weapons would be incompatible with our and NATO's doctrine of deterrence, and that it would not further nuclear disarmament objectives.

Service Children (Schools Admissions)

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when Department for Education and Employment guidance on schools admissions policy concerning the position of service children was issued and in what form; how it is to be implemented and enforced; and if he will make a statement. [95525]

Jacqui Smith: I have been asked to reply.

DfEE guidance on School admissions policy was issued in February 1999 in the "Code of Practice—School Admissions". The guidance came into force on 1 April 1999. It is the responsibility of local education authorities to implement the guidance and for DfEE to enforce it. The Service Children's Education Agency is working closely with those LEAs with large populations of Service children, to ensure that they are treated equitably.

HOUSE OF COMMONS

Parliamentary Visits

Mr. Keetch: To ask the President of the Council if she will introduce a scheme for hon. Members to visit the Scottish Parliament, Welsh Assembly and Northern Ireland Assembly, in links with visits to the European Parliament; and if she will make a statement. [93924]

Mrs. Beckett: All hon. Members are already able to claim reimbursement for expenditure incurred visiting any part of the United Kingdom on parliamentary business under the extended travel scheme. It is the Government's stated hope that there will be links created at all levels between Members at Westminster and the devolved legislatures. However, access to the premises of the devolved legislatures is a matter for the bodies concerned.

PRESIDENT OF THE COUNCIL

Equal Opportunities

Jackie Ballard: To ask the President of the Council if an action plan for increasing the representation of women in public life has been *(a)* prepared by her Department and *(b)* published since November 1998. [94846]

Mrs. Beckett: It is made clear to all bodies making recommendations for appointments or reappointments that they should consider whether women are properly represented on the bodies concerned. Of the 149 appointments made by Her Majesty in Council, by the Privy Council or by me as President, 55 (37 per cent.) are currently held by women. This compares with the position five years ago when, of 141 such appointees, 43 (30 per cent.) were women.

Departmental Twinning

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the President of the Council how many requests there have been to her Department for placement of officials from Central, East European and CIS states as twins of his officials; how many such officials have been accepted as twins; and from which countries *(a)* those who were accepted and *(b)* those who were not accepted came. [93999]

Mrs. Beckett: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer given today by the Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester, East (Mr. Vaz).

CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

Pastoral Measure (Whitby)

Mr. Quinn: To ask the hon. Member for Middlesbrough, representing the Church Commissioners, if he will make a statement on the conclusions of Pastoral Measure 1983 Whitby St. John Proposed Pastoral Scheme published on 21 September (Ref. PR43/401), setting out how the views of the Whitby Anglican Community have been taken into account by the Commissioners and detailing the method of appeal to the Commissioners against this decision. [95100]

Mr. Stuart Bell: The draft scheme under the Pastoral Measure 1983 proposing the closure of the church of St. John, Whitby was, as with all such schemes, served on, inter alia, the relevant incumbent, team vicar, pcc, archdeacon and rural dean. It was also published in the Whitby Gazette and Middlesbrough Evening Gazette and displayed on the door of the churches of St. Mary, Whitby; St. John, Whitby; and St. Hilda, Whitby. It was open to anyone to make representations and the statement of 21 September 1999 to which my hon. Friend refers sets out who made representations in favour of the scheme and who made representations against. My hon. Friend will have noted that there were views for and against among Whitby churchgoers. An earlier identical draft scheme (which had to be withdrawn when procedural flaws in the diocesan consultations came to light) was the subject of a visit to Whitby by a Sub-Committee of the Commissioners' Pastoral Committee. On that occasion, the Sub-Committee met the incumbent, the Whitby pcc and the St. John's congregation.

All views were most carefully taken into account but ultimately the Commissioners concluded that the case for declaring St. John's redundant had not been made as, in their view, it was required as a chapel of ease in the centre of Whitby.

The Commissioners' Pastoral Committee provided, in effect, a place of appeal against the proposal by the diocese of York to declare this church redundant. The Pastoral Measure 1983 provides no procedure for appeal against a decision by the Commissioners not to proceed with a draft scheme but the diocese is free to promote fresh proposals for pastoral re-organisation in Whitby.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Land Mines

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development how much money annually has been spent by her Department on humanitarian demining since 1991. [94665]

Clare Short: My Department's bilateral disbursements on humanitarian mine action are:

Financial year	*£ million*
1991–92	0.360
1992–93	1.769
1993–94	3.152
1994–95	5.969
1995–96	4.844
1996–97	4.369
1997–98	4.656
1998–99	5.824
1999–2000[1]	12.400

[1] Commitments to date including Kosovo

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development how much money her Department has allocated to assist the victims of mines and on mine awareness in each year since 1991. [94640]

Clare Short: My Department does not set aside resources from its Humanitarian Mine Action budget specifically for land mine survivors. Instead, health care and community-based rehabilitation assistance is provided through DFID's bilateral development co-operation programmes or institutional programme support. The financial records do not disaggregate assistance to land mine survivors from other categories of special needs.

Community based mine awareness activities are usually integrated into mine survey and clearance projects, and are not recorded as a separate disbursement. In addition, disbursements on discrete mine awareness projects are:

Financial year	£
1992–93	6,451
1995–96	15,230
1996–97	70,000
1999–2000[1]	1,400,000

[1] Committed to date

Ministerial Visit (Balkans)

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement on her most recent visit to the Balkans. [95643]

Clare Short: I visited Kosovo on 24–25 August to assess need and plan the shift of the Department for International Development's (DFID) assistance from an emergency to a longer-term programme. The overall message that I received was one of cautious optimism. We found there had been steady progress in rehabilitation, although much remained to be done. We emphasised to UNMIK and the EC the importance of moving quickly and enabling the Kosovars to take on a bigger role in the reconstruction effort. We continue to work with the international community and the local population to help achieve this. Our operations are now in transition to a longer-term programme of assistance. My officials will visit the region early next month to take this process forward.

TREASURY

Euro

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will place in the Library the European Commission's periodic surveys on the progress and impact of the Prince programme on public awareness of the euro. [95303]

Miss Melanie Johnson: I understand that, to date, the European Commission have not carried out any periodic surveys on public awareness of the euro under the Prince Programme.

Winter Mortality

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what has been the excess monthly winter mortality over each of the last five years. [94948]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the Director of the Office for National Statistics. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Tim Holt to Mr. Tim Boswell, dated 25 October 1999:

As Director of the Office for National Statistics (ONS), I have been asked to reply to your parliamentary question on excess monthly winter mortality.

Information on excess deaths in winter months is shown below.

Excess winter deaths, England and Wales, 1993–94 to 1997–98

Year	*Excess winter deaths*
1993–94	25,900
1994–95	27,300
1995–96	40,190
1996–97	47,690
1997–98	22,900

Excess winter deaths are defined as the difference between the number of deaths during the four winter months (December to March) and the average of the number of deaths during the preceding autumn (August to November) and the following summer (April to July).

Cash Management

Mr. Caplin: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on the timing of the transfer of cash management from the Bank of England to the Debt Management Office. [95866]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The Chancellor of the Exchequer announced on 6 May 1997 that the functions of debt management and cash management would be transferred from the Bank of England to the Treasury. The UK Debt Management Office (DMO) was established on 1 April 1998 and took over debt management from that date. The Government's debt management plans for 1999–2000 which were published in the Debt Management Report in March 1999 anticipated that cash management would be transferred from the Bank to the DMO during 1999–2000. This transfer, when complete, will separate the Bank's monetary policy operations from the DMO's debt and cash management operations. This will avoid any perceptions of conflicts of interest between the two operations, and further deliver the Government's policy of predictability and transparency in debt management.

The transfer of cash management from the Bank to the DMO during 1999–2000 will be effected on a phased basis. The phasing is designed to avoid placing undue requirements on the markets in the period before and immediately after the change to the Year 2000 date.

From 15 November, the DMO will become accountable for the new Debt Management Account, which will take over from the Gilt-Edged Official Operations Account as the Treasury account for debt (and later) cash management operations. During January 2000, the DMO will start to issue Treasury bills from the Debt Management Account. During February, the DMO intends to undertake a limited range of bilateral transactions with counterparties. From the end of March 2000, full responsibility for managing the government's daily cash position will be transferred from the Bank to the DMO.

In order to enable the DMO to start the phased introduction of these cash management operations from 15 November, I have today laid before Parliament revised Treasury Bill regulations SI 1999–2907 and made a Commencement Order SI 1999–2908 (C.76) under paragraph 3 of Schedule 26 of the Finance Act 1998. Taken together, these statutory instruments will enable the Debt Management Office to begin accounting for its debt

and cash management operations through the new Debt Management Account, which will be subject to NAO audit. The Gilt-edged Official Operations Account is currently used to bring debt management operations to account. The Commencement Order will also provide for the transfer of the debt assets of the Gilt-edged Official Operations Account to the Debt Management Account.

The Executive Agency Framework Document for the DMO has also been revised to take account of the transfer of the cash management function to the DMO. Copies of the revised Framework Document have been placed in the Libraries of both Houses of Parliament.

Pesticides

Mr. Baldry: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on the Government's intention with regard to a tax on pesticides. [94940]

Mr. Timms: No decision has been taken on whether to introduce a tax on the use of pesticides.

Research commissioned by the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions on a possible tax or charge on pesticides was published on 24 March focusing on various design options for a charge scheme or tax, and attempting to evaluate the potential impact. Views were invited on the issues raised in the research and this consultation exercise closed on 24 June. The Government are considering the findings of the research project and the views expressed in the consultation exercise in deciding how best to proceed.

WALES

British Fluoridation Society

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how much money the British Fluoridation Society received in grant aid from the Welsh Office in each of the last five years. [94718]

Mr. Hanson: Over the last five years, the British Fluoridation Society has received the following in grant aid from the Welsh Office:

	£
1994–95	3,200
1995–96	3,200
1996–97	4,000
1997–98	4,000
1998–99	4,000

Forestry Commission

Mr. Edwards: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what is his policy on the method of sale to be used by the Forestry Commission when selling its forests. [95223]

Mr. Paul Murphy: Forestry matters in Wales are a matter for the Forestry Commission which reports directly to the National Assembly for Wales.

Welsh Office Responsibilities

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will publish details of the responsibilities within the Welsh Office undertaken *(a)* by himself and *(b)* by his Under Secretary. [94776]

Mr. Paul Murphy: My Ministerial colleague and I take a close interest in all matters which come before my Department. The new role of my office lends itself to such an approach. More broadly, however, I deal with constitutional matters, finance and economic policy issues, while my colleague deals with a wide range of social policy issues. We will both take a close interest in legislative matters which come before Parliament.

SCOTLAND

Oral Statements

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will list *(a)* the reports published by his Department and its associated bodies, *(b)* the reports received from bodies set up by his Department, *(c)* the decisions his Department has taken and *(d)* events in the UK and elsewhere, since 27 July, which satisfied the criteria he uses for deciding whether to apply to make oral statements to the House when the House is sitting. [93972]

Dr. Reid: I refer the hon. Member to the reply given by my right hon. Friend the President of the Council on 19 October 1999, *Official Report*, column *429–30*.

Departmental Staff

Mr. Swinney: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how many Civil Service staff there are in his offices in *(a)* London, *(b)* Edinburgh and *(c)* Glasgow. [94056]

Dr. Reid: The number of staff in my office is under review. At present there are 28 staff of the Scotland Office and five staff of the Advocate General based in London. The figures for Edinburgh are 17 and 20 respectively. There are no staff based in Glasgow. In addition, I have three special advisers, one of whom is part-time and unpaid.

Special Advisers

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland, pursuant to his answer of 30 June 1999, *Official Report*, column *193*, on Special Advisers, how many times his Department's Special Adviser held meetings with members and officials of the US Government during the visit of 15 to 19 March; and if he will list the dates and locations of each meeting and the names of the US ministers and officials at each meeting. [93964]

Dr. Reid: My predecessor's Special Adviser did not hold meetings with members or officials of the US Government.

Ministerial Meetings (US)

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what meetings the then Secretary of State for Scotland held with members and officials of the United

States Government during his visits to the United States on 2 to 28 September 1997; and if he will list the date and location of each meeting and the names of the members and officials of the United States Government at each meeting. [93954]

Dr. Reid: The visit took place from 20 to 28 September. No meetings were held with members or officials of the US Government.

Local Councillors (Gender Profiles)

Ms Harman: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will list the percentages of councillors in each local authority who are *(a)* men and *(b)* women. [95169]

Dr. Reid: The information in the table is derived from the Directory of Scottish Local Government, which is produced jointly by the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and the Scottish Local Government Information Unit. It represents the positions at the end of July 1999.

Council	*Total number of councillors*	*Men*	*(%)*	*Women*	*(%)*
Aberdeen City	43	30	70	13	30
Aberdeenshire	68	45	66	23	34
Angus	29	22	76	7	24
Argyll and Bute	36	30	83	6	17
Clackmannanshire	18	14	78	4	22
Comhairle nan Eilean Siar	31	27	87	4	13
Dumfries and Galloway	47	37	79	10	21
Dundee City	29	23	79	6	21
East Ayrshire	32	26	81	6	19
East Dunbartonshire	24	16	67	8	33
East Lothian	23	19	83	4	17
East Renfrewshire	20	17	85	3	15
City of Edinburgh	58	44	76	14	24
Falkirk	32	27	84	5	16
Fife	78	50	64	28	36
Glasgow City	79	57	72	22	28
Highland	80	64	80	16	20
Inverclyde	20	18	90	2	10
Midlothian	18	15	83	3	17
Moray	26	21	81	5	19
North Ayrshire	30	24	80	6	20
North Lanarkshire	70	64	91	6	9
Orkney Islands	21	19	90	2	10
Perth and Kinross	41	32	78	9	22
Renfrewshire	40	28	70	12	30
Scottish Borders	34	30	88	4	12
Shetland Islands	22	17	77	5	23
South Ayrshire	30	20	67	10	33
South Lanarkshire	67	48	72	19	28
Stirling	22	15	68	7	32
West Dunbartonshire	22	17	77	5	23
West Lothian	32	26	81	6	19

Departmental Twinning

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how many requests there have been to his Department for placement of officials from Central, East European and CIS states as twins of his officials; how many such officials have been accepted as twins; and from which countries *(a)* those who were accepted and *(b)* those who were not accepted came. [94000]

Dr. Reid: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer given to him today by the Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester, East (Mr. Vaz).

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

EU Surplus Food Scheme

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what measures he undertook to publicise the EU surplus food scheme; and what categories of the scheme were available in the United Kingdom. [92827]

Ms Quin: My hon. Friend the previous Minister of State issued a News Release announcing details of the scheme for 1998 and invited interested organisations to apply to be designated to distribute canned stewed steak to eligible recipients. The scheme involved only intervention beef.

Forest Land

Mr. Edwards: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what is his policy relating to consultation by *(a)* the Forestry Commission and *(b)* Forest Enterprise with (i) local authorities and (ii) the public prior to the sale of Forestry Commission forest land. [95222]

Mr. Morley: The subject of this question relates to matters undertaken by Forest Enterprise and I have asked the Chief Executive to reply to my hon. Friend direct.

Letter from Bob McIntosh to Mr. Huw Edwards, dated 25 October 1999:

I refer to your question to the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food asking what the Forestry Commission's policy is in relation to consultation on the sale of forest land. I have been asked to reply.

The Forestry Commission and Forest Enterprise notify the Local Authority of all sales of forest land as part of our Continued Public Access policy. This is to inform the Local Authority that we are considering sale of forest land and that we may be in a position to offer the opportunity to enter into an agreement to protect access after sale.

We do not, at the moment, notify forest land sales directly to the public. However we are in the process of reviewing our policy on community participation and involvement and are considering ways in which sales might be notified to local people. Of course when land is offered for sale on the open market it is advertised widely by our selling agents.

PRIME MINISTER

Fox Hunting

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Prime Minister if he will make a statement on the Government's policy in respect of the banning of fox hunting. [94620]

The Prime Minister: We believe that hunting with hounds should be the subject of a free vote, as we said in our manifesto. Right hon. and hon. Members had an opportunity to vote on the issue last year when the House considered the Private Member's Bill of my hon. Friend the Member for Worcester (Mr. Foster). The Bill's progress was frustrated by its opponents and did not become law.

Ascension Airbase

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Prime Minister what progress has been made on discussions between the UK and USA Governments about enabling commercial aircraft to use the airbase on Ascension. [95316]

The Prime Minister: In December 1998 the UK passed a draft treaty to allow certain types of civil flights into Ascension to the US Authorities for consideration.

During the visit of my noble Friend Baroness Scotland to the United States on 4–5 October 1999, the US Government confirmed in principle that the airfield should be opened to certain types of civil flights on a limited basis.

We are encouraging the United States to complete their internal discussions and to secure a mandate for formal negotiations to begin. British Embassy officials in Washington will soon meet US State Department officials to take this issue forward.

Prime Minister's Office

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Prime Minister what changes have been made to the running and organisation of the Government Department which directly serves the Prime Minister since the summer adjournment began; and what further reorganisation or changes in structure he contemplates. [94575]

The Prime Minister: In addition to the staff in my office in 10 Downing street, the Cabinet Office provides support to me as chairman of the Cabinet and Minister for the Civil Service. There have been no changes to the organisation or running of the Cabinet Office since the summer adjournment. Changes in the future will be made as and when necessary.

Government Annual Report

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Prime Minister if he will assess the benefits of commissioning an independent and authoritative body to prepare and publish the Government's annual report. [93717]

The Prime Minister: Both the 1997–98 and 1998–99 Annual Reports drew on publicly available facts and figures, all of which were provided by Departments. As a Government report it would not be appropriate for the Annual Report to be produced by an independent body. The National Audit Office provides independent information, advice and assurance to Parliament and the public about all aspects of the financial operations of Government Departments.

Asylum Seekers

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Prime Minister what representations the Government have received from other EU countries with regard to reviewing asylum procedures for applicants from eastern Europe. [95412]

The Prime Minister: None.

Ilisu Dam

Mr. Brake: To ask the Prime Minister what meetings have taken place between him or his office and Balfour Beatty on the matter of the Ilisu Dam. [95099]

The Prime Minister: None.

European Police College

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Prime Minister what is the purpose of the European Police College; and what will be studied there. [95078]

The Prime Minister: Tackling Europe's organised crime problem effectively means that we have to ensure that police officers are properly trained and encouraged to co-operate with forces in other countries. We see the role of the European Police College, which will start off as a network of existing national training institutes, as fulfilling these functions by supporting the establishment of a common approach to tackling transnational organised crime, and by drawing together work already being carried out by individual Member States on training police officers to tackle organised crime effectively. We envisage that, over time, those trained by the college will form a Europe-wide body of expertise about European policing and cross border operations. My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary, together with colleagues in other Member States, will take forward the work on establishing the College.

Secretary of State for Scotland

Mr. Jim Murphy: To ask the Prime Minister if he will make a statement on the executive functions of the Secretary of State for Scotland. [95975]

The Prime Minister: As a consequence of the new constitutional arrangements under the Scotland Act 1998, I have approved a reallocation of certain functions of the Secretary of State for Scotland to other Ministers of the Crown with appropriate functional responsibilities. Copies of an Order which was made by Her Majesty in Council on 12 October and which transfer certain of these functions have been laid before Parliament.

In addition to the transfer effected by this Order, it is proposed that certain other statutory executive functions of the Secretary of State that are currently exercised by the Secretary of State for Scotland, but which could be exercised by any other Secretary of State, should also be transferred. No legislation is required to give effect to these transfers which will be carried out by administrative arrangement. One of these is the transfer to the Home Secretary of the Secretary of State for Scotland's functions in relation to the issuing of warrants for the

interception of communications or interference with property for national security purposes where the person or property named on the warrant is, or is reasonably believed to be, located in Scotland at the time the warrant is issued.

I have placed a paper in the Libraries of both Houses that briefly describes the content of the Transfer of Functions Order and lists the other executive functions that are to transfer.

Domestic Violence

Mr. Blizzard: To ask the Prime Minister what steps he is taking to ensure that relevant Departments work together to tackle problems related to domestic violence. [95521]

The Prime Minister: In June the Government published their integrated approach to tackling violence against women "Living with Fear".

My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary is taking forward this work, together with that in relation to domestic violence generally. A unit within the Home Office is responsible for ensuring that there is a coherent, consistent and properly co-ordinated approach across Government in the development and implementation of policy on tackling violence against women. Co-ordination at Ministerial level is through the Cabinet sub-Committee on Women's issues.

Drugs

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Prime Minister what action Her Majesty's Government are taking to ascertain details of precursor chemicals exported from the UK to South America suitable for use in the processing of drugs; and what action his Department is taking. [95546]

The Prime Minister: Exports to South American and other countries of precursor chemicals which might be used in the illicit manufacture of drugs are controlled and monitored by the UK in accordance with the UN Convention against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances 1988 and the relevant EU Regulation implementing these controls in the European Union.

The chemicals which are included in such controls are listed therein and subject to regular review by the UN Commission on Narcotic Drugs.

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Prime Minister, pursuant to his oral answer of 19 October 1999, *Official Report*, column 261, what is the timetable for the action he proposes to take to counter the lack of traceability of drug money; and if he will make a statement on the range of measures he proposes to take. [95548]

The Prime Minister: The Government strongly support action to combat money laundering and so attack the crime on which it thrives.

At the European Council meeting at Tampere we agreed a range of special concrete actions against money laundering, listed in the Presidency Conclusions. They cover a wide range of initiatives to facilitate unproved asset tracing. The United Kingdom will be pressing for the conclusions to be converted into action by the Council and Commission as quickly as possible.

The United Kingdom has taken a leading role in the Financial Action Task Force (FATF), the leading international anti-money laundering body. In accordance with its recommendations, United Kingdom legislation already bans the use of anonymous bank accounts, as they may be used to conceal criminal proceeds. Law enforcement authorities in all member states must have the ability, as they do in the United Kingdom, to trace the proceeds of drug trafficking and other crimes, subject to judicial oversight but regardless of banking secrecy.

At the domestic level, the Government are examining how to strengthen existing legislation and arrangements for the investigation, restraint and seizure of criminal proceeds. I have approved a study by the Performance and Innovation Unit of the role that following the money trail and seizing criminal assets can play in the fight against crime, and of how to maximise the effectiveness of these tools. The study will report early next year.

Departmental Twinning

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Prime Minister how many requests there have been to his Department for placement of officials from Central, East European and CIS states as twins of his officials; how many such officials have been accepted as twins; and from which countries *(a)* those who were accepted and *(b)* those who were not accepted came. [93991]

The Prime Minister: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer given to him today by the Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester, East (Mr. Vaz).

SOCIAL SECURITY

New Deal (Lone Parents)

15. **Mr. Burns:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many lone parents in Chelmsford local authority area have been contacted by the new deal for lone parents programme; and how many have received a job. [93762]

Angela Eagle: We do not have separate figures for Chelmsford. The figures that are available cover the whole of Essex; 9,000 invitations to participate in the voluntary programme have been issued and 440 lone parents have so far found jobs.

Pensioners

16. **Mr. Hepburn:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what plans he has to help the poorest pensioners. [93764]

Mr. Rooker: The Minimum Income Guarantee introduced in April provides a significant increase in incomes to the poorest pensioners. They will also start to receive their £100 Winter Fuel Payments in week commencing 8 November; this will ensure that no pensioner will have to worry about turning up their heating this winter.

17. **Sir Teddy Taylor:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what estimate he has made of the percentage of the total population which is of pensionable

age; what was the percentage 10 years ago; and what forecast he has made of the percentage in 10 years' time. [93765]

Mr. Rooker: The percentage of the UK population over State Pension age is estimated at 18 per cent., broadly the same as ten years ago. Over the next ten years it is projected to rise to 19 per cent.

Source:

Office for National Statistics: Previous figures Government Actuaries Department: Current and future figures.

Industrial Injury Benefits

18. **Mr. Illsley:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what proposals he has for reforming industrial injury benefits. [93766]

Mr. Bayley: We continue to see a case for reforming the industrial injuries scheme so that it reflects better the needs of today's labour market and improves incentives for prevention and rehabilitation. Initial discussions with key stakeholders confirmed our belief that there is scope for reform. However, much work remains to be done to decide the best way forward. Against the background of the current major programme of reform to other parts of the Social Security system the work cannot be completed quickly.

Child Support Agency

19. **Mr. Gerald Howarth:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will make a statement about the timetable for the implementation of his proposed changes to the Child Support Agency. [93767]

Angela Eagle: The proposals for a new Child Support service set out in the White Paper represent a major change from the current arrangements. We will not repeat the mistakes of the previous Government by rushing the new scheme into effect before we are ready.

27. **Mr. Robathan:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will make a statement on his proposed changes to the Child Support Agency. [93776]

Angela Eagle: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Social Security set out our plans to reform the Child Support system in a White Paper published on 1 July. These will address the failures of the current scheme and put children's rights at the heart of the Child Support system.

Benefits Agency

20. **Mr. Mackinlay:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will make a statement on delays in payments by Benefits Agency offices. [93768]

Mr. Rooker: The Benefits Agency is meeting most of its targets for the payment of benefits. In the recent past, some delays in paying benefits have been caused by complications arising from the introduction of the National Insurance Recording System (NIRS2). The majority of problems have now been resolved. Regrettably claims for Widows Benefit are still affected and the contingency arrangements in place take longer than normal to process.

Fraud

21. **Dr. Starkey:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what plans he has to improve co-ordination between the Benefits Agency and local authorities in combating fraud. [93769]

Mr. Rooker: We are committed to reducing fraud and error in the benefits system. One key part of our strategy is to develop stronger links between the Benefits Agency (BA) and local authorities (LAs). Most recently, following testing of the electronic transfer of information between the BA and LA in Lewisham, we started to extend this facility to other LAs. Fourteen LAs are now piloting the system which we aim to roll out nationally from next April. In Lewisham, the evaluation indicated significant reductions in processing times and overpayments. We have also introduced a national liaison service level agreement (SLA) and a specific fraud SLA, both of which are mandatory on BA and strongly endorsed by the LA Associations.

£6 million has been allocated to BA Area Directors to fund joint working initiatives which identify an activity or programme that enhances the liaison between the BA and the LA and through that liaison will combat fraud and error in the benefit system.

25. **Mr. Forth:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security when he last reviewed his target for the reduction of benefit fraud for the year 1999–2000. [93774]

Mr. Rooker: As published in the Public Service Agreement, for the first time we have set a single outcome target to reduce fraud and error in the two major benefits by 30 per cent. by March 2007, with at least a 10 per cent. reduction by March 2002.

Mr. Lilley: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many calls have been received by the Benefit Fraud Hotline in each month since it was established. [93642]

Mr. Rooker: The information is as follows:

National Benefit Fraud Hotline calls answered from 5 August 1996

	Calls answered			
Calendar month	*1996*	*1997*	*1998*	*1999*
January	—	17,981	17,206	13,925
February	—	27,075	15,780	13,798
March	—	27,073	15,345	16,901
April	—	18,563	19,007	11,996
May	—	19,272	13,149	11,303
June	—	16,272	13,692	13,415
July	—	18,808	15,512	10,491
August	35,179	14,755	11,104	10,336
September	26,736	16,236	13,694	12,971
October	28,257	13,202	12,805	—
November	21,805	11,770	14,285	—
December	11,989	10,829	12,160	—

Note:

Approximately 2 per cent. of all calls ring off before the call is answered

Mr. Lilley: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will list the places in which and dates on which Searchlight on Fraud investigations have taken place since they were started. [93641]

Mr. Rooker: The Spotlight On Fraud campaign commenced on 1 April 1996. Certain areas of the country were subject to intensive counter fraud activity over a short period. The campaign consisted of three phases:

Phase 1: 1 April 1996 to 15 August 1996
- Nottingham
- Glasgow
- Westminster
- Leeds
- Birmingham
- Bristol
- Lancaster and Barrow
- Isle of Wight
- Plymouth
- Cardiff
- Great Yarmouth
- Brighton
- Medway Towns
- Edinburgh
- Haringey and Enfield
- Croydon
- Rhyl
- Darlington
- Redcar and East Cleveland

Phase 2: 4 November 1996 to 29 November 1996
- Wigan and Leigh
- Warrington
- Sheffield
- Newport
- Luton
- Leicester
- Lea Roding
- Inverness
- Hull
- Exeter
- Coventry
- Coatbridge
- Clydebank and Dumbarton
- Canterbury and Thanet

Phase 3: 3 February 1997 to 28 February 1997
- Wolverhampton
- Westminster
- West Kent
- Peterborough
- Nottingham
- Newcastle
- Kirklees
- Kirkaldy
- Darlington

Welfare to Work

22. **Mr. Stringer:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what measures his Department is taking to help people move from welfare into work. [93770]

Angela Eagle: In the last two years we have launched an ambitious series of welfare-to-work reforms. We have invested almost £4 billion in New Deals, representing an unprecedented assault on worklessness. We are on target to meet our manifesto commitment to help 250,000 young people move from welfare into work, with 135,000 young people into jobs by the end of July. Our reforms are putting work at the heart of the benefit system.

Stakeholder Pensions

23. **Mr. Wilkinson:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will make a statement on the timetable for the introduction of the stakeholder pension. [93772]

Mr. Rooker: We aim to enable the first stakeholder pension schemes to be set up from April 2001. We will be announcing decisions, following our consultations, around the end of the year, and our final proposals will be set out in draft regulations for further consultation. Stakeholder pension regulations should then be laid by around April 2000, thereby giving a clear year for industry to develop schemes for the market.

Mr. Rammell: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what progress he has made with developing his proposals for stakeholder pensions. [93783]

Mr. Rooker: Between 2 June and 16 September, we issued six consultation documents on Minimum Standards, Employer Access, Clearing Arrangements, Advice, Governance and the Tax Regime.

We have also held discussions with the Stakeholder Pensions Advisory Group and the Core Group.

We will be announcing decisions around the end of the year before issuing draft regulations for consultation.

SERPS

24. **Mr. Burstow:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) what plans he has to compensate people who have been misinformed about the inheritance rules for SERPS; [93773]

(2) what estimate he has made of *(a)* the net costs of, *(b)* the gross costs of and *(c)* how many people would benefit from delaying the changes to the amount of SERPS payable to widows and widowers from (1) 2000 until 2010 and (2) 2000 until 2005 in (i) 2000 and (ii) every subsequent year until 2020; and how the (x) gross and (y) net costs of such a delay are calculated. [95256]

Mr. Rooker: The information is not available in the format requested. Such information as is available is in the table.

Estimated gross costs of delaying the changes to SERPS inheritance provisions and average numbers of widows and widowers who could be affected at any one time in each year

	Delay until 2010	
	Gross costs (£ million)	*Potential numbers affected (thousand)*
2000–01	60	100
2001–02	160	300
2002–03	280	490
2003–04	390	670
2004–05	510	830
2005–06	630	990
2006–07	750	1,140
2007–08	870	1,270
2008–09	990	1,400
2009–10	1,110	1,520
2010–11	1,160	1,540
2011–12	1,120	1,450
2012–13	1,080	1,370
2013–14	1,040	1,280
2014–15	1,000	1,210

Estimated gross costs of delaying the changes to SERPS inheritance provisions and average numbers of widows and widowers who could be affected at any one time in each year

	Gross costs (£ million)	*Delay until 2010 Potential numbers affected (thousand)*
2015–16	960	1,130
2016–17	920	1,060
2017–18	880	990
2018–19	830	920
2019–20	790	860
2020–21	750	860

	Gross costs (£ million)	*Delay until 2005 Potential numbers affected (thousand)*
2000–01	60	100
2001–02	160	300
2002–03	280	490
2003–04	390	670
2004–05	510	830
2005–06	560	890
2006–07	550	840
2007–08	530	790
2008–09	510	750
2009–10	500	700
2010–11	480	660
2011–12	460	620
2012–13	450	580
2013–14	430	550
2014–15	410	510
2015–16	390	470
2016–17	370	440
2017–18	360	410
2018–19	340	380
2019–20	320	350
2020–21	300	330

Notes:

1. Gross costs and potential numbers affected are supplied by the Government Actuary's Department. An explanation of the method for calculating gross costs of Additional Pension is given in the Government Actuary's Department publication 'National Insurance Fund: Long Term Financial Estimates', Appendix D (paragraphs 14.39 to 14.45), available in the House of Commons Library.

2. Precise estimates of net costs are not available.

3. Estimates of numbers affected assume that all widows and widowers have some SERPS entitlement although in reality there will be some who do not. Cases where the widower is over State pension age but the deceased partner is under State pension age are included in the estimates. These will both tend to overestimate the numbers affected.

4. Gross costs are rounded to the nearest £10 million, and are in 1999–2000 price terms. Potential numbers affected are rounded to the nearest 10,000.

5. Estimates assume average earnings growth from 1999 onwards of 1.5 per cent. per year above prices. The State Second Pension and Welfare Reform Bill changes are not taken into account in these figures.

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) when he intends to announce his decision as to what action he will take to remedy the problem of the changes to the inheritance of SERPS by spouses; and what provision has been made in the *(a)* CSR and *(b)* Contingency Fund to meet any extra costs; [95180]

(2) what assessment he has made of *(a)* the administration costs and *(b)* the setting-up time of a scheme to compensate those misled about the halving of the amount of SERPS payable to widows and widowers; and if he will make a statement; [95178]

(3) what assessment he has made of the ability of those misled about the halving of the amount of SERPS payable to widows and widowers to prove they were misinformed; and if he will make a statement. [95181]

Mr. Rooker: We will make an announcement about SERPS inheritance provisions shortly.

Annual Uprating

26. **Mr. Simon Hughes:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what advice he takes before making his annual assessment on uprating benefit and pension levels. [93775]

Mr. Rooker: The annual review of benefits is subject to the same decision-making processes as many other policy considerations. We will make an announcement on the uprating in due course in the normal way.

Child Poverty

28. **Mr. Gordon Prentice:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what factors he uses to measure child poverty. [93779]

Angela Eagle: I refer my hon. Friend to the written answer the Prime Minister gave to the hon. Member for Northavon (Mr. Webb) on 19 October 1999, *Official Report*, column *486*.

Disabled People (Employment)

29. **Fiona Mactaggart:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will make a statement on the measures in his welfare reform programme which will assist disabled people to take up work. [93780]

Angela Eagle: Together with my hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Employment we have introduced New Deal for Disabled People to help disabled people move into or remain in work; piloting a voluntary personal adviser service in 12 areas throughout Great Britain, for claimants of incapacity benefits; and funding 24 innovative schemes to test different approaches.

The first four ONE pilots were successfully launched in June and a further 8 pilots will start in November. In these pilot areas, where appropriate, people of working age who claim benefits will be given a Personal Adviser who will be able to access information and the opportunities for employment, training and rehabilitation, and will help them plan a route back to independence.

In October 1998, we introduced a new 52-week linking rule for incapacity benefits and abolished the 16 hour limit for voluntary work. We have increased the therapeutic earnings limit from April 99 and are piloting further measures to help disabled people who wish to work. We are replacing the All Work Test with the Personal Capability Assessment which will focus on what people can do, not just their incapacities. From October 1999 the

Disabled Persons' Tax Credit will replace Disability Working Allowance which will ensure that disabled people are better off in work than out of work.

Widows Benefits

30. **Mr. St. Aubyn:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will make a statement on his proposals for the future of widows' benefits. [93781]

Angela Eagle: I refer the hon. Member to the written answer I gave to the hon. Member for North Wiltshire (Mr. Gray) on 5 July 1999, *Official Report*, column *353*.

Parental Costs

31. **Helen Jones:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what plans he has to assist parents with the costs of bringing up children. [93782]

Angela Eagle: We recognise the additional costs that families with children have to bear. As part of our strategy to increase opportunity for all, we are determined to improve family prosperity, reduce child poverty, and ensure that the tax and benefit system properly acknowledges the costs of bringing up children.

Measures already announced by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer in the last two Budgets, including the largest-ever uprating of Child Benefit, and the introduction of the Working Families Tax Credit, will ensure that families with children will gain an average of £750 per year the 20 per cent. of poorest households will gain the most, an average of £1,080 per year.

Total growth in spending on families with children will amount to an extra £5 billion a year in real terms, by the end of this Parliament.

Departmental Twinning

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many requests there have been to his Department for placement of officials from Central, East European and CIS states as twins of his officials; how many such officials have been accepted as twins; and from which countries *(a)* those who were accepted and *(b)* those who were not accepted came. [94006]

Angela Eagle: I refer my hon. Friend to the written answer from the Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester, East (Mr. Vaz) today.

Pensions

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what plans he has to ensure that all pensioners receive pension increases which are linked to increases in national prosperity. [93777]

Mr. Rooker: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Social Security is required by law to review the rate of Retirement Pension and other benefits each year. He will announce the outcome later this year in the usual way.

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will estimate, using his PENSIM model, the mean net incomes in 2025 of *(a)* single pensioners and *(b)* married pensioners on the basis of (i) unchanged policies, (ii) his proposed phased replacement of SERPS with the second state pension and (iii) the phasing out of SERPS coupled with the introduction of an age addition to the basic pension for those aged 80 years or over, set at three quarters of the gap between the basic pension and the minimum income guarantee, assuming in each case the continuation of earnings indexation of the minimum income guarantee; and if he will provide separate estimates for each quintile group of each distribution. [94695]

Mr. Rooker: The information is in the tables:

Net income of single pensioners by quintile in 2025

£ per week

Mean	*Quintile 1*	*Quintile 2*	*Quintile 3*	*Quintile 4*	*Quintile 5*
Unchanged policies					
168.00	85.20	119.70	139.00	172.70	323.50
After the State Second Pension					
169.70	86.50	121.10	140.30	174.70	325.70
After the suggested age addition to the Basic State Pension and phasing out of SERPS					
172.00	92.30	124.50	144.40	177.10	321.50

Net income of married pensioners by quintile in 2025

£ per week

Mean	*Quintile 1*	*Quintile 2*	*Quintile 3*	*Quintile 4*	*Quintile 5*
Unchanged policies					
346.70	169.50	221.00	275.30	356.90	710.50
After the State Second Pension					
351.40	172.40	226.00	280.30	362.10	716.00
After the suggested age addition to the Basic State Pension and phasing out of SERPS					
342.20	171.80	224.20	271.30	347.40	695.60

Notes:

1. In order to model option (iii), it is necessary to make further critical assumptions about the current regime for contracting out of SERPS. If this were to cease at the same time that SERPS stops accruing, there would be a significant effect on private pension provision although highly dependent on the behavioural response of individuals and employers. Alternatively, if contracted out rebates continued to be available, there would be a large incentive for those who had previously been in SERPS to take advantage of the rebates, at significant extra cost to the public finances. Again this would depend on behavioural responses, unless private second pensions were made compulsory. The estimates in the table are based on assumptions which avoid the need to model behavioural responses ie those who are already contracted out continue to receive their rebates, whereas those in SERPS have no replacement second pension once SERPS accruals cease. This is not a sustainable set of assumptions in policy terms, but does provide a basis for answering the question as set out.
2. The estimates have been arrived at using the DSS's PENSIM model. PENSIM is a dynamic microsimulation model which projects future pensioners' incomes on the basis of past labour market and pensions information. Because the model is dependent on the assumptions used and the cohort sampled to generate the work and pensions histories, it is primarily a tool to compare policy options rather than to project the future course of pensioners' incomes with accuracy. Results so far into the future, even of a comparative nature, must be treated as broad brush.
3. The quintiles have been derived by dividing each income distribution in to five equal sized groups in ascending order of income size. The first quintile contains the fifth of the distribution with lowest incomes while the fifth quintile contains the fifth with highest incomes.

4. The income figures given are on a benefit unit basis. Therefore, the income of couples is that of both members of the couple combined.
5. Figures are expressed in 1999 prices rounded to the nearest ten pence.
6. Earnings indexation of the minimum income guarantee is assumed. The earnings assumption in the PENSIM model is 1.5 per cent. per year above inflation.
7. The State Second Pension is assumed to be introduced in 2002.
8. The suggested age addition to the Basic State Pension refers to three quarters of the gap between the full basic state pension and the maximum minimum income guarantee of a single person aged 80. It is assumed to be introduced in the year 2000. Under this option, the year 2000 also marks the end of all new SERPS accruals. Existing SERPS entitlements continue to be paid.

Mr. Trend: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) what plans he has to seek an amendment to the law to require a stakeholder pension to be taken out in the form of an annuity by a specified age; and if he will make a statement; [94930]

(2) what plans he has to seek an amendment to the law to prevent any pension scheme from requiring a person to take out a pension in the form of an annuity by a specified age; and if he will make a statement. [94929]

Mr. Rooker: Only pension schemes which are not themselves able to pay a pension require their members to take pension benefits in the form of an annuity, so as to guarantee a pension income throughout retirement. We propose that this should also apply to stakeholder pensions. We will consider whether there is a case for changing the present age 75 limit for annuity purchase as part of the review of personal pension income withdrawal being undertaken by the Inland Revenue.

Incapacity Benefit

Mr. Randall: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what recent representations he has received on incapacity benefit. [93771]

Mr. Bayley: We have received a number of representations about our proposals to modernise the rules for the Incapacity Benefit. We believe the proposals are right in principle. We have made it clear that we will consider concerns when we finalise the details.

Race Awareness (Tribunals)

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will make a statement on race awareness training for chairmen of appeal tribunals. [93778]

Angela Eagle: The President of appeal tribunals is responsible for arranging the training of chairmen and members of appeal tribunals. The President intends to arrange for the chairmen and members to be trained in equal opportunities in the next financial year and that the training will include racial and disability awareness issues. The President will write to my hon. Friend setting out his plans for the training.

ONE Service Pilots

Mr. Healey: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will make a statement on the progress to date of the ONE service pilots. [93752]

Angela Eagle: The first four ONE pilots were launched as planned in June. They are making good progress in helping people plan ways to become independent, while dealing promptly and accurately with claims to benefit.

A further eight pilots will start on the 29 November. Four will test out the use of Call Centre technology in providing the ONE Service. The other four are led by the Private and Voluntary Sector—they will enable us to test what innovations that they can bring to client services.

Oral Statements

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will list *(a)* the reports published by his Department and its associated bodies, *(b)* the reports received from bodies set up by his Department, *(c)* the decisions his Department has taken and *(d)* events in the UK and elsewhere, since 27 July, which satisfied the criteria he uses for deciding whether to apply to make oral statements to the House when the House is sitting. [93976]

Mr. Bayley: I refer my hon. Friend to the written answer from my right hon. Friend the President of the Council on 19 October 1999, *Official Report*, columns *429–30*.

This Department has made three announcements since 27 July as follows:

As my hon. Friend, the then Minister of State announced, in response to a Parliamentary Question on 9 June 1999, *Official Report*, column *340*, a series of Consultation Documents would be published on pension reform, the last of which were published on 2 August and 16 September. Copies of the Reports were sent to the Chairman of the Social Security Select Committee and copies were placed in the Libraries of the House of Commons and House of Lords. These were announced publicly by way of a Press Release.

On 21 September we announced the publication of the first annual report on poverty and social exclusion entitled: "Opportunity for All". Copies were placed in the House of Commons and House of Lords Libraries. All MPs were sent a copy of the summary document under cover of a letter and copies were also made available to all key organisations. The Chairman of the Social Security Select Committee also received a copy.

On 26 August we received the CSA Independent Chief Examiner's Report. It was published in the normal way as soon as it was received. Copies of this report were placed in the House of Commons and House of Lords Libraries.

Andrew Mehdi

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) on what date the Benefits Agency received from the Independent Tribunal Service notice of the tribunal's decision of 5 August in the claim for disability living allowance by Mr. Andrew Mehdi (references D/04/048/1998/01876 and NH 01 71 23 B); and when he expects the Benefits Agency to implement the judgment of the tribunal; [94952]

(2) on what date the Independent Tribunals Service sent to the Benefits Agency notice of the judgment of the tribunal in the claim for disability living allowance by Mr. Andrew Mehdi (references NH 01 71 23 B and D/04/048/1998/01876). [94953]

Angela Eagle: The Independent Tribunal Service (ITS) first issued the judgment on 6 August which regrettably was not received. Despite investigation, ITS and the Benefits Agency have been unable to identify where the problem occurred.

A further copy was received at the Disability Benefits Unit (DBU) in Blackpool by fax on 19 October, following DBU's request to ITS dated 12 October. The decision was implemented and payment of all arrears and an order book for continuing payments were issued on 20 October.

Disability Benefits

Mr. Berry: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what will be the real-terms increase in spending on benefits for disabled people by May 2002; and how this figure is derived. [95438]

Mr. Bayley: The Social Security Departmental Report 1999 (Cm 4214) includes details of Social Security expenditure for the financial years 1993–94 to 2001–02. Table 10 of the report sets out benefit expenditure by Departmental Objectives in real terms (1998–99 prices). The individual benefits which comprise Objective 3 (Support for disabled people) are prescribed in the table.

Disabled Children

Mr. Levitt: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what plans his Department has to assist disabled children. [93746]

Mr. Bayley: We are committed to maintaining Disability Living Allowance, the main disability benefit for children, as a national, universal benefit. We are making specific improvements to help children with severe disabilities: a clause within the Welfare Reform and Pensions Bill, which is currently before Parliament, extends entitlement to the higher rate mobility component of Disability Living Allowance to 3 and 4 year olds. This will help an additional 8,000 children from April 2001.

From April 2001 the new Disability Income Guarantee will provide extra help within Income Support premiums for families with severely disabled children getting the highest rate of the care component of Disability Living Allowance.

Occupational Pension Funds

Mr. O'Hara: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what plans he has to amend the Pensions Act 1995 to require occupational pension funds to nominate a pensioner as a member trustee. [95660]

Mr. Rooker: We believe that member trustees add value to pension schemes, and want to increase their coverage.

The consultation document, "Strengthening the Pensions Framework", which was issued in December 1998, made a number of proposals on member-nominated trustees, including a proposal that large mature schemes should be required to reserve a place on the trustee board for a pensioner member. Responses showed widespread support for the principle of member trustees, but concern about some of the practical implications.

We have been working closely with the pensions industry and other representative bodies to develop revised proposals. A further consultation document was issued on 7 October 1999.

Our priority is to ensure that schemes have member-nominated trustees, and that members have a fair say in determining the arrangements for appointing them.

The revised proposals do not require schemes to have a pensioner trustee, but they do ensure that pensioners are given a fair say in the procedures.

Income Support

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will estimate the number of pensioners aged *(a)* 60 to 64, *(b)* 65 to 69, *(c)* 70 to 74, *(d)* 75 to 79 and *(e)* 80 years or above who are entitled to Income Support but do not take up their entitlement; and if he will provide separate estimates for (i) single male pensioners, (ii) single female pensioners and (iii) married pensioners. [94696]

Mr. Rooker: The information is in the table.

Estimated average numbers not taking up entitlement to Income Support—Great Britain, 1997–98

Category	*Total number of ENR's*
Pensioner Couples Aged 60–64	50,000
Pensioner Couples Aged 65–69	30,000
Pensioner Couples Aged 70–74[1]	30,000
Pensioner Couples Aged 75–79[1]	20,000
Pensioner Couples Aged 80 and Over[1]	20,000
All Pensioner Couples	150,000
Single Males Aged 60–64[1]	20,000
Single Males Aged 65–69[1]	20,000
Single Males Aged 70–74[1]	20,000
Single Males Aged 75–79[1]	20,000
Single Males Aged 80 and Over	40,000
All Single Male Pensioners	110,000
Single Females Aged 60–64[1]	20,000
Single Females Aged 65–69	40,000
Single Females Aged 70–74	60,000
Single Females Aged 75–79	100,000
Single Females Aged 80 and Over	230,000
All Single Female Pensioners	450,000
All Pensioners	720,000

[1] These figures are based on small sample sizes and are to be treated with particular caution.

Notes:

1. ENR's = Entitled non-recipients.
2. These estimates are based on the 1997–98 Family Resources Survey. Reliable precise estimates are not available. Estimates by age band comparable with the aggregate estimates published in September could be provided only at disproportionate costs. The table provides a breakdown, by age band, of raw estimates with no attempt to correct for data imperfections. The available evidence suggests pensioner couples estimates are biased upwards relative to the estimates for single pensioners. The nature and extent of biases in the raw estimates may also vary by age band.
3. The figures for the number of entitled non-recipients are rounded to the nearest ten thousand.
4. The age of a couple has been defined by the age of the older partner.
5. The figure for the total number of ENR's does not comply with the sum of the component amounts. This is due to rounding of the figures.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

European Council

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the procedural changes set out in Council Decision 1999/468/EC of 28 June, OJ L184 of 17 July. [94143]

Mr. Vaz: Council Decision 1999/468/EC reforms the procedures for monitoring the exercise of implementing the powers delegated to the Commission by the Council and the European Parliament (the 'comitology' system). The Government welcome the changes that the Decision makes.

It improves the comitology system in three ways. Firstly, it increases democratic control over the process by giving an enhanced scrutiny role to the European Parliament. Secondly, it simplifies the system by reducing the number of committee types from five to three.

Thirdly, it takes an important step towards making the comitology system more transparent. For example, the Commission will for the first time be required to publish a complete list of comitology committees.

Overall, the changes should improve the efficiency, accountability and transparency of the comitology process.

EC Staff Contracts

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will deposit in the Library the model contract of employment for European Communities staff working at the Commission. [94140]

Mr. Vaz: Only staff employed on a temporary basis have individual contracts. The terms and conditions of permanent staff are set out in Community Staff Regulations. A copy of the latest version of these Regulations will be placed in the Library as soon as we have received it from the Commission.

Rambouillet Agreements

Sir Richard Body: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will publish the proposals made by the Yugoslav Parliament in answer to the draft agreements made at Rambouillet; and what the differences were from the agreement reached on 3 June. [94127]

Mr. Vaz: The Rambouillet Agreements on Kosovo were presented to the FRY/Serbian delegation and the Kosovo Albanian delegation on 22 February, after two and a half weeks of intensive negotiation. Both sides agreed to attend a second round of talks to discuss implementation of the agreements. However, on the first day of the second round of talks, in Paris on 15 March, the FRY/Serbian delegation presented their own proposals for a Kosovo agreement. The Contact Group (the Governments of the UK, US, France, Germany, Italy and Russia) took the unanimous view that only technical adjustments to the draft agreements presented at Rambouillet could be considered. The proposals presented by Belgrade amounted to an extensive and unacceptable revision of the draft agreements presented at Rambouillet.

The proposals presented by the FRY/Serbian delegation and subsequently endorsed by the Serb Parliament were published recently in "The Crisis in Kosovo 1989–1999, International Documents and Analysis, Vol 1", as was the text of the Rambouillet Agreements signed by the Kosovo Albanian delegation on 18 March.

On 3 June, President Milosevic and the Serbian Parliament accepted an agreement, presented by the EU and Russian special envoys, which specified the principles for a resolution of the crisis in Kosovo, notably: the end of violence and repression; withdrawal of all FRY/Serbian forces; deployment of international civil and security presences in Kosovo; and return of refugees and displaced persons. The agreement also called for a political process, taking full account of the Rambouillet accords, to provide substantial self-government for Kosovo.

Cyprus

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of the implications for Cyprus of the recent rapprochement between Greece and Turkey after the earthquakes in their countries. [94415]

Mr. Vaz: We warmly welcome the recent improvement in relations between Greece and Turkey. We hope that it will contribute positively to international efforts, which the UK fully supports, to launch negotiations for a comprehensive Cyprus settlement under UN auspices this autumn.

Burma

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what consideration has been given to implementing sanctions against Burma under the provisions of Article 73g(2) of the EC Treaty of Rome; and if he will make a statement. [94605]

Mr. Battle: Article 60 (2) [ex Article 73g (2)] of the EC Treaty is not a power to implement sanctions but an exception to the rule that all restrictions on movement of capital and on payments between member states and member states and third countries (Article 56) should be prohibited: Article 60 (2) permits such measures in certain circumstances. There is limited power to implement unilateral sanctions under domestic legislation. There is an application for Judicial Review relating to the scope and meaning of Article 60 pending before the High Court. We are considering its position with regard to that application.

Honorary British Consuls

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs in which cities of *(a)* the EU and *(b)* applicant countries for EU membership his Department uses honorary British consuls. [94613]

Mr. Hain: Honorary British Consuls are situated in EU member states in:

France: Biarritz, Calais, Perpignan, Nates, Toulouse, Amiens, Boulogne-sur-Mer, Dunkirk, Nice, Montpellier, Cherbourg, St Malo-Dinard, Saumur.
Germany: Bremen, Nurenberg, Hanover, Kiel.
Belgium: Antwerp, Liege.
Italy: Genoa, Venice, Bari, Cagliari, Turin, Trieste, Catania, Messina, Brindisi, Palermo.
Spain: Vig, Santander, Menorca.
Finland: Jyvaskyla, Kotka, Kuopio, Aland Islands, Oulu, Pori, Tampere, Turku, Vaasa.
Austria: Bregenz, Salzburg, Graz.
Sweden: Gothenburg, Sundsvall, Malmo.
Portugal: Portimao.
Greece: Kos, Patras, Rhodes, Salonika, Syros, Zakynthos.

Honorary British Consuls are situated in EU applicant countries in:

Poland: Kotowice, Poznan, Gdansk, Szczecin, Wroclaw.
Hungary: Pecs.
Rumania: Constanta.
Bulgaria: Varna.
Turkey: Antalya, Bodrum, Iskenderum, Izmir, Marmaris, Mersin.

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many honorary British consuls there are world-wide; and if he will make a statement. [94611]

Mr. Hain: At present there are 248 Honorary British Consuls world-wide. They are prominent members of their local communities, who undertake their role in a voluntary capacity. They provide support and advice to the head of the British diplomatic mission in the host country, and act as a first port of call for British nationals in their district in need of consular assistance. Our Honorary Consuls constitute an important resource for the delivery of our consular services world-wide.

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will issue a minimum of two flags to each honorary British consul to facilitate their cleaning; and if he will ensure their regular replacement consistent with maintaining them in good condition. [94612]

Mr. Hain: Honorary British Consuls are issued with a set of Union flags sufficient for the Consuls' needs, including spares. Guidance is also provided on the flying of the flags, and on how to requisition replacements. But if my hon. Friend has a particular post or problem in mind, I would be happy to respond to his concern.

Belarus

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what action Her Majesty's Government are taking in respect of human rights violations in Belarus; and if he will make a statement. [94615]

Mr. Vaz: We raised our concerns about the human rights situation in Belarus most recently when First Deputy Foreign Minister Martynov met senior officials at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office on 8 October. The British Embassy in Minsk also has frequent contacts with human rights organisations and has supported projects designed to promote human rights in Belarus. The UK has also played a leading role in shaping EU policy towards Belarus, which stresses the need for improved human rights performance. The EU has called on the Belarusian authorities to investigate the recent disappearance of Viktor Gonchar, Deputy Chairman of the 13th Supreme Soviet, and all other cases in which politically active figures have disappeared. We also fully support the activities of the Advisory and Monitoring Group of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe, whose mandate includes promoting compliance with other OSCE commitments, including in the human rights field.

EU Treaty

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what steps have been taken by the President of the Commission of the European Union to appoint an advisory body on steps to be taken to prepare for a further union treaty; what consultations he has had with the President; and what United Kingdom appointment has been made to it. [94362]

Mr. Vaz: The Commission is not preparing next year's Inter-Governmental Conference, but it will present a formal IGC Opinion for member states to consider. Romano Prodi asked a Group under Jean-Luc Dehaene to feed ideas in to that Opinion. The Group published its Report on 18 October. Lord Simon sat on the Group, but he did so in a personal capacity, not as a representative of the United Kingdom. It is up to the Commission how it reacts to the recommendations in the Group's Report. I have had no contact with Mr. Prodi about this.

MOD Electronic Test Facility

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations his Department has received from the Irish Government with regard to the Ministry of Defence's Electronic Test Facility formerly sited at the British Nuclear Fuels Ltd site at Capenhurst, Cheshire, since 1 July; when these representations were received; and from which Irish Government Departments. [93857]

Mr. Robin Cook: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister on 19 October 1999, *Official Report*, column *484*.

Consular Records

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what plans he has for direct computer access by his Department's Consular Division in London to consular records on cases abroad; and if he will make a statement. [94803]

Mr. Hain: Modernisation of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office's communications technology continues to evolve. At present there is direct e-mail access to almost all consular posts overseas, and delivery to the remainder is planned. There are no existing plans for direct access by the Consular Division to the consular data bases of overseas posts. The concept is under consideration, but it carries with it substantial resource and technical strategy implications.

Foreign Policy Centre

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the role and activities of the Foreign Policy Centre

since its launch, with particular reference to its input into departmental policy; and what *(a)* financial and *(b)* other support his Department has provided. [95326]

Mr. Robin Cook: The Foreign Policy Centre is an independent organisation and has received no money from the Foreign Office. The Foreign Office welcomes ideas from outside organisations on all areas of its work. It is established practice for Foreign Office Officials and Ministers to have contact with policy institutes and NGOs, to consider their views when developing policy and to contribute to the debates initiated by them. Policy institutes and NGOs can also influence policy through their contributions to a wider public debate. The nature of these contacts means that it is not possible to assess the influence of one particular policy institute in isolation from other institutes and NGOs.

Africa

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the *(a)* agenda and *(b)* conclusions of the Franco-British meetings with African delegations held in New York on 22 September; to what extent (i) EMU, (ii) European politics and (iii) security policy was discussed; and what future meetings are planned. [95220]

Mr. Hain: The following press release was issued after the meeting in New York on 22 September:

"At the invitation of Britain and France, Foreign Ministers Robin Cook and Hubert Vedrine had a meeting in New York this morning with Amara Essy, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Cote d'Ivoire; Jean Ping, the Minister for External Affairs, Cooperation and Francophonie for Gabon; Alhaji Sule Lamido, the Minister for Foreign Affairs for Nigeria; and Adhi Bonaya Godana, the Minister for Foreign Affairs of Kenya.

This meeting represents a further significant step forward in the efforts of Britain and France to develop, with African partners, joint strategies for cooperations on the continent.

The meeting focused on the current crises affecting the African continent and on how all concerned could join together to help resolve them.

It was agreed that Africans and Europeans must work more closely together to address the challenges facing the continent. Participants underlined the importance of vigorous joint action to end conflict, tackle poverty, debt and AIDS, promote good governance, and boost trade and investment.

All welcomed the opportunity for discussion and agreed on the usefulness of further harmonising the African and European perspectives. The Ministers agreed that further discussions between UK, French and African Permanent Representatives in New York would enable the dialogue to be continued and deepened. They further agreed that their countries would work together whenever possible on issues of mutual interest before the Security Council."

French and British officials are working on the practicalities of another meeting.

Libya

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on Her Majesty's Government's policy towards maintenance of an EU arms embargo against Libya. [95250]

Mr. Hain: Libya has taken a number of important steps towards reintegration with the international community, not least of which was the handing over for trial of the two Libyans accused of involvement in the Lockerbie bombing. In recognition of these developments, the UN has suspended its sanctions against Libya. The EU, with UK support, has lifted most of its own sanctions, but decided, for now, to retain the arms embargo. EU member states will review this decision regularly.

Sierra Leone

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the Sierra Leone Contact Group meeting on 27 and 28 July. [95300]

Mr. Hain: The third Sierra Leone Contact Group meeting on 28 July continued Britain's leading role in encouraging international support for the people of Sierra Leone. Participants welcomed the signature of the Lomé Peace Agreement, and committed themselves to work towards lasting peace in Sierra Leone. Following a presentation by President Kabbah, the meeting agreed priorities for the future, and an action plan for the Government of Sierra Leone, the rebels and the international community. Welcome progress has since been made on a number of the priorities identified.

At the meeting, Britain announced further help for building lasting peace and democracy in Sierra Leone.

Copies of the Contact Group Concluding Statement are being placed in the House of Commons Library; it is also available on the FCO website (www.fco.gov.uk).

Tunisia

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he has received an invitation to send independent observers to Tunisia to scrutinise the presidential and legislative elections arranged for 24 October. [95096]

Mr. Hain: No but we would of course consider one.

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when he last discussed with the Tunisian Government the question of democracy and human rights in that country. [95095]

Mr. Hain: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs has not yet met his Tunisian counterpart or any senior member of the Tunisian Government. He hopes to do so in the near future. I last met the Tunisian Ambassador on 6 September. We had a wide-ranging discussion, including the human rights situation in Tunisia. I hope to visit Tunis before too long.

Tanzania

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent representations he has made to the Tanzanian Government about Hutu militia operating from its territory. [95226]

Mr. Hain: I discussed the security situation in the Burundi/Tanzania border area with the Tanzanian Foreign and Defence Ministers during my visit to Tanzania (14–15 October). The Government of Tanzania deny providing support of any kind to Hutu militia groups, and are making efforts to improve security in the border region in western Tanzania where the refugee camps are located.

Colombia

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will set out the proposals contained in the Plan Colombia. [95287]

Mr. Battle: Plan Colombia was presented at UNGA by President Pastrana. It is intended to highlight the Colombian Government's future strategy. The key proposals are:

i) an economic strategy, using fiscal and financial austerity measures to re-establish Colombia's position in international markets;

ii) a drugs strategy, aiming to reduce cultivation and distribution by half over six years. The strategy is to have full regard for human rights;

iii) strategy for democracy and social development, focusing on human rights, reduction of judicial impunity, forced displacement of communities, alternative crops to drug cultivation, the environment and training of local leaders;

iv) the peace strategy, with recognition of the role of civil society and the need for an effective presence of the army and police in all parts of Colombia;

v) the role of the international community, which could participate in the peace process as mediator and verifier. The international community should also condemn terrorist acts and human rights violations.

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment his Department has made of the Colombian peace process. [95286]

Mr. Battle: We support the Colombian Government's efforts to bring peace and stability to Colombia. We hope that the latest round of peace talks, which are due to start again on 24 October, will lead Colombia towards a lasting solution to its internal conflict.

Sudan

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent reports he has received from Southern Sudan regarding the activities of the Arab militia. [95239]

Mr. Hain: We continue to receive reports from UN agencies and other NGOs working in the field of military activity conducted by a variety of militia groups in southern Sudan.

During October, both the Government of Sudan and the SPLA made further ceasefire commitments. We shall continue to promote the cause of peace in Sudan.

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what progress has been made with peace talks to end the civil war in Sudan. [95238]

Mr. Hain: The Government have continued to devote considerable effort to the peace process in the Sudan and has been an active member of the IGAD Partners Forum (IPF). On 20 October, the IPF agreed on the terms of reference and budget for their proposal for a permanent peace Secretariat in Nairobi. This will have as its objective a sustained and accelerated negotiation and a Special Envoy has already been appointed. We will contribute financially to the running of the Secretariat and will remain in close contact with the Special Envoy and all the parties in order to support the peace process in any way we can. I met the special envoy two weeks ago in Nairobi to discuss progress.

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent reports he has received from Southern Sudan regarding progress with the oil pipeline due to be operational in July. [95240]

Mr. Hain: The oil pipeline was formally opened on 30 August by President Bashir. On 19 September, an explosion east of Atbara damaged the pipeline but I understand that it was quickly repaired.

Arms Exports

Ann Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs on how many occasions the UK has initiated consultations on an export licence which has been denied by another member state under the consultation arrangements specified in the EU Code of Conduct on Arms Exports; what were the outcomes of these consultations; on how many occasions other member states have initiated consultations on export licences which have been denied by the United Kingdom; and what were the outcomes of these consultations. [95644]

Mr. Hain: Operative Provision 4 of the EU Code of Conduct states:

"Member states will keep . . . consultations [under the Code] confidential".

We interpret this as including the outcomes of such consultations.

The first annual report on the operation of the Code of Conduct, which has been published in the Official Journal of the European Communities, records that between June 1998, when the Code was adopted, and September 1999, the UK was involved in seven bilateral discussions concerning denials issued either by the UK or by other member states. Several of these discussions focused on whether a proposed export was essentially identical to that covered by a denial notification, although in some cases there was also a substantive exchange of views on the proposed export. We would not therefore characterise all of these discussions as formal consultations under the Code of Conduct.

Mr. Oaten: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs which UK officials are participating in the implementation of the EU code of Conduct on Arms Exports; what progress was made at the review meeting on 21 September in Brussels; and if he will make a statement. [95690]

Mr. Hain: The EU Code of Conduct establishes criteria which are to be applied to export licence applications covering all goods on the UK Military List, and dual-use goods where there are grounds for believing that the end-user will be the armed forces or internal security forces. Licences to export arms and other goods whose export is controlled for strategic reasons are issued by the Trade and Industry Secretary acting through the Export Control Organisation of the Department of Trade and Industry, which circulates all relevant applications to other Departments with an interest, as determined by those Departments in line with their policy responsibilities, including the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the Ministry of Defence and the Department of International Development. All of the above Departments therefore have a role in implementing the Code of Conduct.

Lead responsibility for policy issues relating to the Code of Conduct rests with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, which consults other interested Departments as necessary, including those listed above.

The meeting of the CFSP Working Group on Conventional Arms Exports (COARM) on 21 September agreed the text of the first annual report on the operation of the Code of Conduct since its adoption on 8 June 1998. The report summarises member states' experiences of the Code, and gives a detailed account of practical steps taken to support the operation of the Code and priorities for future action. A meeting of the Council of Ministers on 11 October took note of the report and decided to publish it in the Official Journal of the European Communities.

Departmental Twinning

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many requests there have been to his Department for placement of officials from Central, East European and CIS states as twins of his officials; how many such officials have been accepted as twins; and from which countries *(a)* those who were accepted and *(b)* those who were not accepted came. [93995]

Mr. Vaz: We are aware of the following attachments from Central, East European and CIS States to UK Government Departments this year:

Czech Republic

One official from the Ministry of the Interior's Refugee Department on a two-week work placement at Heathrow Airport. Three officials from the Environmental Inspectorate on a study visit to Heathrow, looking at protection of endangered species. Two Government human rights officials on a two-week work placement at the Commission for Racial Equality.

Estonia

The Head of the European Union Department was attached to the European Union Department (External) (EUDE) in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) from 12–23 April.

Hungary

The Head of the EU Political Relations Department was attached to the Common Foreign and Security Policy Department (CFSPD) in the FCO for one week in September.

Latvia

The Head of the EU Policy Division was attached to EUD(E) in the FCO from 7–18 June. The Acting Head of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Policy Planning Group will undertake a short secondment to CFSPD in the FCO in November/December.

Lithuania

One official attached to CFSPD in the FCO from 15–26 February.

Poland

One environmental official currently on a five-month secondment to the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions (DETR).

Romania

One official attached to the FCO for three days in Spring 1999.

Russia

One official from the Ministry of the Economy attached to the DETR for four weeks in April/May. Two officials attached to the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) for 3–4 weeks (all organised by the Civil Service College as part of the EU TACIS programme).

Slovakia

One official attached to CFSPD in the FCO for 2–3 weeks in May.

Slovenia

Two officials attached to the FCO, one from 19–23 April and one from 6–17 September. One official on a one-month fact-finding mission to the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (MAFF) in early summer.

We are not aware of any requests for attachments that were not accepted.

South Eastern Europe Table

Mr. Oaten: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list the *(a)* UK and *(b)* other representatives on the South Eastern Europe Regional Table and Working Tables on (i) democratisation and human rights, (ii) economic reconstruction and (iii) security issues; what timetable and action plans have been devised for meetings of these groups; who will be the chairs of the individual tables; and if he will make a statement. [95691]

Mr. Vaz: The UK's representatives at the first Stability Pact Working Table meetings were as follows:

(i) Democratisation and Human Rights—Our delegation was led by the Head of the Foreign Office Information Department (to present the UK's proposal for a Media Charter) with support from Eastern Adriatic Department at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. There were also delegates from the Department for International Development and our delegation to the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) in Vienna.

(ii) Economic Reconstruction—Our delegation was led by a representative from Economic Policy Department at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. There were also representatives from the Foreign Office Eastern Adriatic Department and from the Department for International Development.

(iii) Security Issues—Representatives from the Foreign Office's Eastern Adriatic Department and, for the Justice and Home Affairs Sub-Table, from Human Rights Policy Department within the FCO.

Attendance at Working Table meetings is flexible and appropriate experts will be called upon as necessary.

Other representatives at the three Working Tables are from Foreign Ministries and other government experts from full Participants, Facilitators and Observers to the Stability Pact.

The Work Plan for the Pact was agreed at the first Regional Table meeting on 16 September. All three Working Tables met in the first half of October. They are all due to meet again end January/early February 2000.

The Chairs of the individual Tables are:

Democracy and Human Rights—Max van der Stoel (OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities)

Economic Reconstruction—Fabrizio Saccomanni (Director General for International Affairs, Central Bank of Italy)

Security Issues—Jan Eliasson (State Secretary, Foreign Ministry of Sweden)

The United Kingdom remains committed to the Stability Pact as a force for co-operation, change and peace in the region. We look forward to concrete progress following the Working Table meetings, but impetus must come from the countries of the region.

Kosovo

Mr. Winnick: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many have been arrested in Kosovo for crimes against Serbian civilians since NATO liberated Kosovo. [94933]

Mr. Vaz: Specific figures for those arrested for crimes against Serbian civilians since NATO liberated Kosovo are not currently available from UNMIK.

I can disclose that 200 individuals are currently in prison for committing various crimes. The ethnic breakdown of those individuals is: 1 Montenegrin, 1 Macedonian, 1 Bosniac, 4 Roma, 36 Serbs and 157 Albanians.

Mr. Winnick: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the recent murder of a UN official in Kosovo; and if any arrests have been made over the crime. [94934]

Mr. Vaz: We wholeheartedly condemn the recent murder of UN worker Valentin Krumov. There can be no excuse or justification for such acts of violence. The death of a UN employee just starting his work to contribute to the reconstruction of Kosovo is particularly tragic.

We join our international colleagues in calling for swift action to bring those responsible to justice. The forces of law and order in Kosovo under the direction of the United Nations Interim Administration in Kosovo (UNMIK) have launched an investigation which is on-going. I can therefore give no further details at this stage.

Mr. Winnick: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (1) what steps NATO has taken to make clear that Serbs have a settled future in Kosovo; and if steps will be taken to encourage Serbian civilians to stay there; [94936]

(2) what action is being taken by NATO in Kosovo to protect the lives of civilian Serbs. [94935]

Mr. Vaz: The NATO-led international force in Kosovo, KFOR, has from the beginning of its deployment tried to persuade Serb citizens in Kosovo to remain in the province. KFOR troops, as part of their routine duties, maintain close contact with Serb citizens in Kosovo in order to help deter any violence against them, and so encourage them to remain.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Education Spending

Mr. Cash: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list the levels of spending on education per head of population in *(a)* Staffordshire and *(b)* each other county of England (i) in the current year and (ii) in each of the last three years. [94014]

Ms Estelle Morris: A table has been placed in the Library giving information by each county in England from 1996 onwards.

Accurate information per head of population is not available for each of the years requested. Information has, therefore, been provided on the basis of expenditure per pupil.

Key Stages 2 and 3

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment (1) how many schools made representations to him in favour of revising the dates announced in June 1998 for the year 2000 statutory test dates for Key Stages 2 and 3; [94910]

(2) what date he decided to alter the dates announced in June 1998 for the year 2000 statutory tests for Key Stages 2 and 3; and on what date the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority issued Circular 040/99. [94911]

Jacqui Smith: Since the original test dates were published, a number of schools and some Local Education Authorities have made representations to the Department for Education and Employment and the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority in favour of revising the test dates for Key Stage 2 and 3 in 2000. David Hart, General Secretary of the National Association of Headteachers, supported the decision to move the test dates, recognising that the Government were responding positively to the genuine concerns of his members.

The decision to put back both the Key Stage 2 and 3 test dates by one week in the year 2000, was made on 14 July. Schools were notified by Circular 040/99 issued by the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority on 16 July which reached schools by 20 July.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment (1) how many schools have been granted a timetable variation in respect of the year 2000 statutory test dates for *(a)* Key Stage 2 and *(b)* Key Stage 3; which alternative weeks have been offered to those schools; and how many schools have been offered which alternative weeks; [94909]

(2) how many schools have applied for a timetable variation for the year 2000 statutory test dates for *(a)* Key Stage 2 and *(b)* Key Stage 3 which were announced in circular 040/99 in July; and how many of those applications have been agreed by the Qualifications Curriculum Authority. [94912]

Jacqui Smith: This is a matter for the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority. I have asked the Chief Executive to write to the hon. Member and to place a copy of his letter in the Library.

New Deal

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list the amount spent per head of the population in Lancashire on the New Deal since its introduction. [94188]

Ms Jowell *[holding answer 19 October 1999]:* Almost £6.75 million has been spent in the county of Lancashire, for the New Deal for Young People, aged 18–24, and the New Deal for those aged 25 plus, between April 1998 and 31 August 1999.

A total of 6,896 people entered into the New Deal for Young People and 2,232 people entered into the New Deal for those aged 25 plus to the end of July 1999 and on 31 July 1999.

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if people who leave the New Deal without a job are listed as long-term unemployed if they were listed as long-term unemployed before they entered the New Deal. [94189]

Ms Jowell *[holding answer 19 October 1999]:* New Deal exists to get long-term unemployed people off benefit and into work. New Deal for Young People has been successful in doing this for 135,000 young people. In those cases where a young person reaches the end of their New Deal option and has still not obtained a job, they will enter a follow-through period and start a new claim to Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) whilst engaging in intensive job search activity with the assistance of their personal adviser. In these specific cases, unemployment duration is calculated from the date they returned to JSA.

Participants in the New Deal for Long-Term Unemployed People aged 25 plus who remain on JSA throughout will remain classed as long-term unemployed on leaving New Deal. If a jobseeker has an interruption to their claim, such as a period in subsidised employment or on Work-Based Learning for Adults, then their unemployment duration is calculated from the date they returned to JSA.

National Training Organisations

Mr. Rowlands: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what estimate he has made of *(a)* the costs of setting up and *(b)* the annual running costs of the United Kingdom network of national training organisations; and what proportion of these costs will be carried within public funds. [94823]

Mr. Wicks: Since 1997 the Department has spent £151,854 on the independent panel assessing bids from organisations seeking to become national training organisations (NTOs). The Department does not hold complete information on the running costs of NTOs, most of which are met by employers, and is therefore unable to calculate the proportion of these costs carried within public funds.

Mathematics and Science Teachers

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment, pursuant to his reply of 27 July 1999, *Official Report*, column *180*, on mathematics and science teachers, when he plans to write to the hon. Member for Hertsmere. [94918]

Ms Estelle Morris: The package of measures announced in October 1998 will affect teachers in the year 1999–2000. Information relating to returning teachers in 1999–2000 will not be published until the latter part of 2001. Copies of the relevant publications will be laid in the House of Commons Library.

Class Sizes

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what assessment he has made of the educational impact of class sizes of 41 or more. [94924]

Ms Estelle Morris: Evidence from Ofsted and others has shown that it is at Key Stage 1 that class size is most important, and that is why we have pledged to reduce the size of infant classes. Limiting the size of classes to 40 would have very little impact, whereas our pledge will ensure that all children benefit from infant classes of 30 or below. We are well on course to meet our pledge by September 2001 at the latest. More generally, the average size of classes taught by one teacher in all schools in England went down between January 1998 and January 1999, from 24.9 to 24.8.

Youth Service

Dr. Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment when he expects to publish a Green Paper on the Youth Service. [95077]

Mr. Wicks: We have recently carried out a broad consultation exercise, announced in the Social Exclusion Unit's report "Bridging the Gap", about the establishment of a new service to provide support to young people. The key aim of this service will be to create a comprehensive support structure for all young people in the 13–19 age group. It will build mainly on what is currently undertaken by the Careers Service, parts of the Youth Service and a range of other specialist agencies. We will consider the role the Youth Service will play within the new structure in the light of the consultation responses.

English SATs

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what were the qualifying marks for Level 4 of the Key Stage 2 English SATs in the last three years. [95101]

Jacqui Smith: The qualifying marks for Level 4 of the Key Stage 2 English SATs in the last three years were 1999—48 marks, 1998—51 marks and 1997—52 marks.

The level thresholds are the number of marks needed to achieve a specific level in the National Curriculum tests at Key Stages 2 and 3. The level setting procedures are the final stage of the test development process. The level-setting exercise is in two stages and draws on statistical data, from pre-testing and from a sample of live tests, and expert judgments made by test developers, teachers and markers concerning the difficulty of the test and the quality of pupils answers.

The Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) is responsible for setting and maintaining the standards in the tests, and the level thresholds are designed to ensure that standards remain constant from year to year. For this reason the thresholds do not normally remain the same each year but change in response to the relative difficulty of the tests. They have changed in every year since the tests started in 1995.

In view of debate over the level thresholds this year, the Secretary of State for Education and Employment established an independent panel, with cross-party representation nominated by the shadow Secretary of State for Education and Employment and the Liberal Democrats' education spokesman.

The independent panel reported their findings in July. The panel was convinced that the concerns about the arrangements for setting, and maintaining the standards of the tests were without foundation. It was their view that the current method of setting standards for the National

Curriculum tests appears to be the most rigorous standard-setting procedure in use in any educational tests anywhere in the country and that our system of national tests is well in advance of many, if not all, of our international counterparts.

Student Drop-out Rates

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many students dropped out of their courses of higher education in each of the past five years; what proportion this represents of the student population; and what is the variation in the drop-out rate between institutions. [94946]

Mr. Wicks: The available information is full-time and sandwich first degree non-completion rates for the UK, and is published in the Departmental Annual Report. It is as follows:

UK[1] full-time and sandwich first degree non-completion rates

Percentage

	Non-completion[2]
1993–94	17–18
1994–95	17–18
1995–96	18–19

[1] The institutional coverage of the non-completion rates is restricted to the former UFC-funded universities in the UK and former polytechnics in England.

[2] "Non-completion" covers all those leaving degree courses because of exam failure, ill health, personal and other reasons. It includes those switching to a lower level course but it excludes students transferring between degree courses or subjects.

Ranges are given because the introduction of a new data source in 1994–95 made it difficult to measure non-completion, under existing definitions, accurately. For the same reason, it has not yet been possible to calculate accurate non-completion rates for later years than 1995–96. "Non-completion" covers those who leave full-time and sandwich first degree courses for various reasons, including exam failure, but students who failed their final examinations are not separately identified.The Department is currently working with the higher education funding bodies in the UK to calculate sector-level non-completion rates which will be extended to cover all UK higher education institutions, and which take into account the wider variety of patterns of attendance of students, including changing courses or institutions, repeating years or leaving higher education for a year or more before continuing their studies.

In addition, information on student progression for individual higher education institutions in the UK is due to appear in the Higher Education Funding Council for England's "Higher Education Performance Indicators" later in the year.

New Qualifications

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what response he has sent to proposals from the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority for a new qualification framework at degree level. [94944]

Mr. Wicks: The independent Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education published a consultative paper on Higher Education Qualifications Frameworks on 18 October, requesting responses by 20 December. The Department has received copies of the paper and will be considering whether to comment.

School Playing Fields

Mr. Spring: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what representations he has received about creating a national register of school playing fields. [95186]

Jacqui Smith: The Department has received representations from both the National Playing Fields Association (NPFA) and the Central Council of Physical Recreation (CCPR) about creating a national register of playing fields, including school playing fields. Sport England, with the support of the Department for Culture, Media, and Sport, the NPFA and the CCPR, have been working with local authorities on a suitable model for a register which can be used by local authorities to undertake assessments of all playing field need and provision in their area, including school playing fields.

Literacy Hour

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many members of the People's Panel responded to the recent research on the Literacy Hour; how many of those were parents with primary school-age children; and if he will publish the questions asked on the Literacy Hour. [95103]

Ms Estelle Morris: 1,003 responded to the question on the literacy hour, of which 160 had children aged 5–10 in the household.

Fuller results are published on the internet (www.servicefirst.gov.uk).

Student Mentors

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many students will be recruited as student mentors; what will be their terms and conditions of employment; if it will be subject to the consent of the higher education institutions in which they are enrolled; and if such appointments will be subject to competitive selection procedures, prior or in-course training and independent evaluation of performance. [94947]

Ms Estelle Morris: A pilot project of student mentoring is to be trialled in secondary schools in a number of Education Action Zones. About 600 students from six volunteer universities will be working as mentors, contracted on an annual basis to provide up to 120 hours of mentoring per year. They will be supervised and supported by their universities. There will be a rigorous selection process for mentors, including one-to-one interviews and accredited training. The project will be subject to independent evaluation.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Departmental Twinning

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department how many requests there have been to his Department for placement of officials

from Central, East European and CIS states as twins of his officials; how many such officials have been accepted as twins; and from which countries *(a)* those who were accepted and *(b)* those who were not accepted came. [93996]

Jane Kennedy: I refer my hon. Friend to the written answer given today by the Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester, East (Mr. Vaz).

Paddington Train Crash

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if the Lord Chancellor intends to exercise his powers under section 71 of the Access to Justice Act 1999 in relation to the Paddington train crash. [95107]

Jane Kennedy: Section 71 of the Access to Justice Act 1999 is not yet in force. The Lord Chancellor is considering when the section should be implemented and whether it will apply to the inquiry chaired by Lord Cullen into the Paddington train crash.

Equal Opportunities

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if an action plan for increasing the representation of women in public life has been *(a)* prepared by his Department and *(b)* published since November 1998. [94842]

Jane Kennedy: I refer the hon. Member to the written answer given today by my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Cabinet Office.

HEALTH

Insulin Injectors and Pens

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when pen needles for diabetics' insulin injectors will become available on the NHS; and if he will make a statement. [94425]

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what decision he has reached about his proposal to prevent pre-filled insulin injection pen systems being available on prescription for diabetics; [95105]

(2) what estimate he has made of the amount that would be saved by the NHS if pre-filled insulin injection pen systems were no longer available to diabetics on prescription; and if he will publish a cost-benefit analysis of the proposal. [95106]

Mr. Denham: We have consulted on proposals which would include allowing insulin pen needles to be prescribed by general practitioners on the National Health Service. We have received representations from most of the organisations consulted. We are considering them, and are seeking clarification on certain points before we make our final decisions.

PFIs (Lancashire)

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many private finance initiatives are currently in operation within the Health Service in Lancashire. [94185]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 19 October 1999]:* There are four schemes at various stages of preparation. They are at Bay Community National Health Service Trust; Blackburn, Hyndburn and Ribble Valley Health Care NHS Trust (two schemes); and Blackpool, Wyre and Fylde Community NHS Trust.

Single-sex Wards

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what progress has been made in achieving single-sex wards in psychiatric units to the extent that there are no male patients anywhere in women-only wards; [94355]

(2) if all new psychiatric in-patient units are being constructed on the basis of the segregation of the sexes. [94356]

Mr. Hutton: The National Health Service Executive has a clear objective to work towards the elimination of mixed sex accommodation in 95 per cent. of health authority areas by the year 2002. The NHS Executive has set three national objectives:

to ensure that appropriate organisational arrangements are in place to secure good standards of privacy and dignity;

to fully achieve the current Patient's Charter standard for segregated washing and toilet facilities across the NHS;

to provide safe facilities for patients in hospital who are mentally ill, which safeguards their privacy and dignity.

For the third objective, the latest progress report indicates that 56 per cent. of health authorities expect to achieve this by the end of 1999. 97 per cent. of health authorities expect to meet it by 2002.

We will shortly publish new guidance for mental health units to reinforce earlier guidance designed to ensure the privacy, safety and dignity of patients. This guidance will also help to ensure that new NHS buildings will be constructed on the basis of having segregated accommodation for male and female patients.

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will define single-sex wards in relation to *(a)* sleeping, *(b)* washing, *(c)* eating and *(d)* socialising facilities. [94357]

Mr. Denham: Single-sex accommodation in hospitals is defined by compliance with the Government's national objectives to secure good standards of privacy and dignity for patients, to ensure that washing and toilet facilities are segregated and to provide safe facilities for the mentally ill.

Skin Cancer Campaign

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what percentage of schools in each health authority agreed to participate in the Health Education Authority's skin cancer campaign, Sun Know How. [94059]

Yvette Cooper: The Health Education Authority (HEA) has produced sun safety guidelines for schools including a good practice guide on the use of sunscreens. Although the authority does not at present hold statistics on the percentage of schools in each health authority that participated in the Sun Know How campaign, representatives of around 80 per cent. of health and local authorities receive comprehensive support, including training, resources and policy advice.

In 1999, the HEA supported the first ever Sun Care for Schools campaign which aims to raise awareness of sun protection and make reduced price sunscreen available to schools. To date, 110 local education authorities in England support the campaign, with over 3,000 schools taking part, reaching over six million school children.

Emergency Contraception

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what guidance his Department has issued to general practitioners regarding prescribing of emergency contraception prospectively. [93877]

Yvette Cooper: There is no guidance to general practitioners dealing exclusively with the advance prescribing of hormonal emergency contraception. This is a matter for clinical judgment. The responsibility for deciding what treatment is best for the patient rests with the doctors concerned, in consultation with the patient and informed by the patient's history.

Health Development Agency

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when the proposed Health Development Agency will be established. [93872]

Yvette Cooper: We are currently considering options for establishing a new Health Development Agency and succeed the Health Education Authority. However, we anticipate that the Health Development Agency will be launched early in the New Year, subject to parliamentary approval.

Benzodiazepine

Mr. Woolas: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will establish respite care and detoxification units for people who are addicted to benzodiazepine drugs. [93727]

Yvette Cooper: Decisions about the commissioning of drug treatment services are made locally by health and local authorities on the basis of local need. Assessment of the need for specialist services, such as particular services for users of benzodiazepines, should inform these commissioning decisions.

Bovine Tuberculosis

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if the Government routinely record the occupation of people in whom infection with bovine tuberculosis is identified. [94536]

Yvette Cooper: Information on the occupation of individuals notified with tuberculosis in England and Wales is sought on the standard notification form. This information is used locally.

Reports of *M.bovis* infections are collated by the Public Health Laboratory Service Communicable Disease Surveillance Centre as part of a scheme called in the UK Mycobacterial Resistance Network (Mycobnet). On receipt of a report of *M.bovis* infection, a questionnaire is sent to the local consultant in communicable disease control inquiring, among other things, about whether the individual had an agricultural occupation (including working on a farm) or other animal contact.

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many cases of human tuberculosis and bovine tuberculosis were confirmed in humans in 1997 and 1998. [94535]

Yvette Cooper: A total of 5,859 cases of tuberculosis were notified in England and Wales in 1997 and 6,087 in 1998. 3,229 and 3,456 respectively were microbiologically confirmed. Of these confirmed cases, 29 cases in 1997 were due to M.bovis infection and 32 cases in 1998.

Social Workers

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will include in the code of conduct for the General Social Care Council a requirement to establish and publish plans for monitoring the extent of *(a)* violence and *(b)* stress experienced by social workers, and to recommend to Government what action is necessary to minimise such pressures on social workers. [94721]

Mr. Hutton: We are determined to reduce substantially the incidence of violence towards everyone working in social care. We have set up a task force to produce a National Action Plan by November 2000 with recommendations and timescales for action to reduce violence against social care staff and to promote the safety and welfare of social care workers. We will also ensure that in drawing up its code of practice for employers the General Social Care Council includes practical references to dealing with violence.

Oxfordshire Health Reorganisation

Mr. Baldry: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he expects to make an announcement on the proposals by Oxfordshire health authority for reorganisation of community health facilities in Oxfordshire and the Bicester community hospital. [94939]

Mr. Denham: We fully recognise the concerns of the local community on such an important issue.

We are carefully considering all options before reaching a final decision on the future arrangements for community hospitals in Oxfordshire and the future of Bicester Community Hospital.

Latex Allergy

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what steps he is taking to encourage greater awareness of allergy to latex among *(a)* health professionals and *(b)* the general public; and what research in this area he is supporting. [94949]

Mr. Denham: The Department is aware of the problems associated with latex allergy for patients and healthcare workers in the National Health Service. The NHS Executive has recently issued guidance to all NHS trusts and health authorities on reducing the risk of allergic reaction to latex. This follows recommendations made to the Health Service in 1996 (Medical Devices Agency DB9601) which was re-issued with further advice in 1998 (Medical Devices Agency SN9825). The Department is an active participant in the European Commission Working Group which is investigating issues surrounding the use of medical devices made of latex and is also funding a study into the prevention of occupational skin disease in the workplace.

Beta Interferon

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make it his policy to fund further clinical trails of beta interferon if NICE were to recommend them. [95157]

Mr. Denham: Each case will be considered on its merits, but the presumption will be that research which is reasonably required to assess the clinical and cost effectiveness of products for use in the NHS should be funded by the relevant company. Under certain circumstances, some funding from the public sector may be appropriate, for example where there is no clear sponsoring company for an intervention to be appraised by the National Institute for Clinical Excellence. The Department will make sure that, under such circumstances, any research falling to the public purse is taken forward by the appropriate body.

National Institute for Clinical Excellence

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the responses to the consultation on the paper, "Faster access to modern treatment", on *(a)* the composition of the NICE appraisal group and *(b)* the format of NICE guidance. [95182]

Mr. Denham: Some 75 respondents to the discussion paper "Faster access to modern treatment" commented on aspects of the composition of the appraisal group and 25 on the format of the guidance. We are unable to list individual respondents since the invitation to comment did not seek permission for the detailed nature of the responses to be made public.

Mr. Oaten: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the groups that represent the interests of the disabled that are on the advisory body of the National Institute for Clinical Excellence. [R] [95705]

Mr. Hutton: The Partners' Council of the National Institute for Clinical Excellence has representatives from the following eight organisations:

Association of Community Health Councils for England and Wales
Carers National Association
Long Term Medical Conditions Alliance
Patients Association
Wales Council for Voluntary Action
Association of Welsh Community Health Councils
The Relatives Association
National Consumer Council.

A further four members of the Partners' Council are patient representatives, chosen for their experience and expertise as either patients or carers. The Institute's board of directors has two non-executive members who have special interest in the needs of carers.

Child Migrants

Mr. Coaker: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what plans he has to review the eligibility criteria for former child migrants as to their entitlement to support for *(a)* air fares and *(b)* living allowance; [95155]

(2) what plans he has to allow former child migrants whose nearest living relatives are cousins to qualify for support to return to the United Kingdom. [95156]

Mr. Hutton: The eligibility criteria for access to the Support Fund are kept under regular review. Demand is currently running at a level which suggests that the Fund will be fully subscribed with the current criteria, which are designed to give priority to reuniting close family members.

Extending the scheme to others (including those wishing to meet cousins) would substantially enlarge its scope and would mean that there might be insufficient funding available to help this priority group. We do not therefore at present have any plans to amend the criteria.

Demand on the Fund will however continue to be closely monitored and should it appear that the Fund will not be fully subscribed, we will consider whether revised criteria might be appropriate.

Residential Accommodation (Elderly People)

Mr. Hunter: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on his proposals for reforming the funding of residential accommodation for the elderly. [93758]

Mr. Hutton: The Royal Commission on Long-Term Care was asked to examine the options for funding long-term care, including residential care for elderly people. We are carefully considering the Royal Commission's proposals, the divergences of view within the Royal Commission and the comments that have been made by various organisations and individuals. We will make an announcement in due course.

Foster Care Standards

Dr. Kumar: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what steps he will be taking to ensure that independent fostering agencies are inspected against the recently introduced National Standards in Foster Care in order to ensure the safety and protection of vulnerable children likely to be placed with such agencies. [95528]

Mr. Hutton: As we announced in the White Paper "Modernising Social Services", independent fostering agencies (IFAs) will be brought into the regulatory framework and will have to be registered and inspected by the new Commissions for Care Standards (CCSs). This will of course be subject to the introduction of appropriate legislation. The National Standards for Foster Care will be used as a basis for developing new regulatory standards for the CCSs. As an interim measure the Department is planning to introduce a voluntary accreditation scheme for IFAs.

Sponsorship

Mr. Oaten: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what guidance he has issued to those health professionals that are sponsored or paid by commercial organisations in relation to declaring an interest when recommending products. [R] [95702]

Mr. Denham: Guidance on standards of business conduct for National Health Service staff including when to declare an interest when recommending products is set out in Health Service Guidance (93)5. More recently, Executive Letter (96)12 was issued on 16 February 1996 again reminding National Health Service employers of the importance of avoiding potential conflicts of interest.

Copies of these documents are available in the Library. The National Health Service Executive is currently consulting on new guidelines.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

National Lottery

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what amount of money is currently held in the National Lottery distribution fund which has not been allocated to Lottery distributors. [95142]

Kate Hoey: None. All of the money held in the National Lottery Distribution Fund is allocated to Lottery distributors.

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (1) if he will list those parties which have applied for the new licence to operate the National Lottery; [95141]

(2) if he will make a statement on progress towards appointing a contractor to operate the new licence to run the National Lottery. [95139]

Kate Hoey: Responsibility for appointing the operator for the new National Lottery licence rests with the Lottery regulator, the National Lottery Commission. The Commission issued a draft Invitation to Apply for the new licence and a draft licence on 30 September 1999 and invited comments from potential bidders. The Commission aims to issue the final Invitation to Apply and a revised draft licence by the end of November 1999. Bidders will be asked to submit Letters of Intent by 7 January 2000. The deadline for applications is noon on 29 February 2000.

No applications have yet been received for the new licence.

British Library

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will make a statement on the appointment of a chief executive at the British Library. [95146]

Mr. Alan Howarth: The British Library Board intends to appoint a new Chief Executive next year and will shortly be issuing an advertisement for the post. My Department will be closely involved in the appointment.

Tourism

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what recent representations he has received regarding proposals to introduce a rating system for visitor attractions; and if he will make a statement. [95143]

Janet Anderson: I have received representations from the Historic Houses Association regarding its concerns about a scheme in the West Country and rumours of a national scheme.

The Government are concerned to maintain and improve standards of quality in visitor attractions but there are no plans to introduce a national rating system for visitor attractions.

Mr. Spring: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what estimate he has made of visits to UK tourist attractions in each year since 1991; and what his estimate is for 1999. [95205]

Janet Anderson: The number of visits to UK attractions since 1991 is estimated as follows:

millions

Year	*Number of visits*
1991	333
1992	357
1993	367
1994	387
1995	392
1996	402
1997	409
1998	408

Source:
Sightseeing in the UK, English Tourism Council

Data for 1999 are not yet available.

Statistics for different years are not always comparable, because the number of attractions whose figures have been included has varied over the years, reflecting survey developments and the growth in the number of attractions.

Mr. Spring: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what estimate he has made of the balance of payments surplus or deficit on tourism *(a)* in each year since 1995 and *(b)* for 1999. [95204]

Janet Anderson: Data from the International Passenger Survey show the following balance of payments for tourism in the period from 1995 to August 1999:

£ millions

	Exports	*Imports*	*Balance*
1995	11,763	15,386	–3,623
1996	12,290	16,223	–3,933
1997	12,244	16,931	–4,687
1998	12,671	19,489	–6,818
1999[1]	8,625	14,290	–5,665

[1] First 8 months

Mr. Spring: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what discussions he has had with the DETR regarding the impact on tourism of the dualling of the remainder of the A30 in Cornwall. [95194]

Janet Anderson: When I visited Cornwall in August, the dualling of the A30 between Bodmin and India Queens was raised with me on a number of occasions. I know that this road improvement is regarded as crucial to the development of tourism in the county, where we are investing heavily through Objective 1, Assisted Area grants and in a major Millennium project. I raised the matter with Lord Whitty at DETR on my return.

Lord Whitty informed me that the Highways Agency has recently awarded a new commission appointing consultants for the scheme which will enable development work to start straight away. It is hoped that a public

consultation will take place later this year and that a solution which will benefit tourism in Cornwall will follow.

Mr. Spring: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what discussions he has had about tourism courses in *(a)* higher education and *(b)* further education. [95202]

Janet Anderson: We have regular discussions with other Government Departments, tourism and hospitality bodies and relevant National Training Organisations, (in particular the Travel, Tourism Services and Events National Training Organisation and the Hospitality Training Foundation, the National Training Organisation for the hospitality industry) about the provision of tourism-related courses in both higher and further education.

National Arts Day

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will support plans to create a National Arts Day. [95131]

Mr. Alan Howarth: We are prepared to consider lending support to any practical and worthwhile project that would make a real contribution to our goal of bringing the benefits of the arts to the greatest number of people.

Overseas Visitors

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what assessment he has made of the reasons for recent trends in the number of overseas visitors to the United Kingdom. [95140]

Janet Anderson: Since 1996, the number of visits from EU residents has been fairly constant; there has been a notable decline in visits from Asia and the Pacific, while the number of visits from the USA has risen sharply.

A number of factors underlie this mixed picture, for example, the strengthening of sterling against currencies of other EU members, and weakening consumer confidence in a number of EU countries; the financial crises in Asia; and the strong growth of the US economy, combined with increased airline capacity and lower air fares.

Art Exports

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he plans to review the rules governing the export of works of art. [95127]

Mr. Alan Howarth: We have no plans to review the export system.

School Sport

Mr. Spring: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what discussions he has had with the DfEE about the state of sport and physical education participation in schools, with particular reference to Ofsted inspections. [95209]

Kate Hoey: DCMS Ministers meet and have regular contact with their colleagues at DfEE to discuss a range of education issues, including PE and sport in schools. This topic is of particular importance at present, as we prepare our sports strategy paper. I recently met Chris Woodhead of Ofsted to discuss school inspections.

Millennium Commission (Projects)

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will make a statement on progress towards completion of the major capital projects funded by the Millennium Commission. [95119]

Janet Anderson: This is a matter for the Millennium Commission. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State will reply to the hon. Member in his capacity as Chairman of the Commission, and place copies of his reply in the Libraries of the House.

Regional Regeneration

Mr. Spring: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what measures he has taken to ensure that Government regional offices involve *(a)* sport, *(b)* the Arts and *(c)* tourism in their plans for regeneration. [95197]

Janet Anderson: Our strategy document "Tomorrow's Tourism" and the Policy Action Team's report to the Social Exclusion Unit, "Arts & Sport", clearly illustrate how fundamental tourism, the arts and sport are to a successful regeneration programme.

Recently, my Department established a senior official in each of the Government Offices in the regions. They will champion the role, effectiveness and importance of these sectors for each region's regeneration strategy in one course of discussion on their Single Programme Documents, the framework by which EU Structural Funds are delivered, and the next Round (6) of the Single Regeneration Budget.

EU Agenda 2000

Mr. Spring: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what estimate he has made of how much EU Agenda 2000 funding has been spent on *(a)* the arts and *(b)* sport (i) in cash terms and (ii) as a total of the Agenda 2000 money spent in England. [95196]

Janet Anderson: The European Commission has yet to approve the Single Programme Documents, the framework by which EU Structural Funds are delivered, for each of the country's nine regions. Consequently, it is too early to estimate a breakdown of EU Agenda 2000 funding on the arts. In terms of EU Structural Funds, sport is an ineligible activity.

Analogue Radio Frequencies

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will make a statement on the timetable for the switch-off of analogue radio frequencies. [95125]

Janet Anderson: Digital radio broadcasting is at an early stage of development in the UK. It is premature to set a timetable for the switch-over of analogue services to digital at this time. However, I look forward to the launch of the first national commercial digital radio services in November and to the future growth of commercial and BBC digital radio services.

Radio Authority

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will make a statement on his future plans for the Radio Authority. [95152]

Janet Anderson: We intend to set up a new dedicated unit in my Department to consider the future regulation of broadcasting, building on the interim measures set out in "Regulating Communications: the Way Ahead", which was published by my Department and the DTI in June.

Local Radio Licences

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will list all applications for local radio licences which are currently under consideration by the Radio Authority, stating when each was lodged. [95151]

Janet Anderson: Independent radio licences are currently under consideration by the Radio Authority as follows:

Ten applications for new analogue licences:

three for Bridgend (received 22 June);
three for Newbury (received 27 July);
two for Burnley (received 7 September);
two for Hertford (received 5 October).

Seven applications for re-advertised licences:

two for Guernsey (received 12 October);
two for Jersey (received 12 October);
two for Alton/Haslemere (received 19 October);
one for Barnstaple under the 'special application' procedure (received 27 July).

Two applications for local digital radio multiplex licences:

one for Cardiff/Newport (received 14 September);
one for Wolverhampton (received 12 October).

British Museum

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what is the difference in cost between the stone in the specification originally detailed for the restoration of the south portico of the British Museum and that finally purchased; and if he will make a statement. [94446]

Mr. Alan Howarth *[holding answer 19 October 1999]:* I am advised by the British Museum that the stone is an oolitic limestone and therefore meets the original contract specification. I am also advised that the price of stone varies according to its size and the quantity needed, and that the price differential between Anstrude and Portland Stone is in the range of 10 to 20 per cent.

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport for what reasons it was necessary to purchase an alternative to the Portland stone specified for the restoration of the south portico of the British Museum; and if he will make a statement. [94614]

Mr. Alan Howarth: I am advised by the British Museum that in line with European procurement regulations, the contract called for an oolitic limestone (Portland Stone from the basebed or similar). The rebuilding of the south portico is an exceptional example of architectural reconstruction, demanding some 60 massive blocks for the columns and pilasters. The contractor advised the Museum that stone of the required quality and size could not be procured in sufficient quantity from Portland. Another oolitic limestone, Anstrude Roche Claire, was therefore selected.

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what assessment was made of the visual properties and resistance to weathering and atmospheric pollution of alternative stone to Portland stone; prior to varying the specifications of the restoration of the south portico of the British Museum; and if he will make a statement. [94444]

Mr. Alan Howarth *[holding answer 19 October 1999]:* I am advised by the British Museum that there has been no variation to the specification, and the stone is fully compliant with the contract. The visual properties of the stone were assessed and approved by the Museum, its professional team and project monitors. The technical characteristics have been assessed by an independent body, and the Museum commissioned its own report. The courtyard will be under a new roof, so none of the new stone, neither the 900 tonnes of Portland Stone that is being used on the project, nor the Anstrude Roche Claire, will be subject to the same weathering as the original.

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if the stone used in the restoration of the south portico of the British Museum has the same visual properties and resistance to weathering and atmospheric pollution as Portland stone; and if he will make a statement. [94443]

Mr. Alan Howarth *[holding answer 19 October 1999]:* I am advised by the British Museum that there are minor differences in the visual properties and resistance to weathering and atmospheric pollution of the French Limestone. However, English Heritage has accepted that the stone is adequate. The stone will be in a covered courtyard, and therefore protected against the weathering effects of wind, rain and atmospheric pollution.

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport when he was informed of the need to use alternative stone to that in the specification in the restoration of the south portico of the British Museum; and if he will make a statement. [94442]

Mr. Alan Howarth *[holding answer 19 October 1999]:* The stonework in question is being carried out on the South Portico of the Museum's inner courtyard. This portico was demolished in the 1870s and is being completely rebuilt. I am advised by the British Museum that the specification was for "oolitic limestone" (Portland Stone from the basebed or similar). The stone that is being used for the main body of the portico is Anstrude Roche Claire. This is an oolitic limestone of the Jurassic period, as is Portland Stone. It therefore complies fully with the specification and is not an alternative. The Museum has been working closely with the Heritage bodies throughout and notified them about the selection of Anstrude Roche Claire in June. English Heritage has accepted that the Anstrude Roche Claire is adequate. We inquired about the choice of stone in August.

Culture Consortiums

Mr. Spring: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport when he expects the Culture Consortiums to be fully functional. [95198]

Janet Anderson: We announced the appointment of the Chairs of the Regional Cultural Consortiums on 8 October 1999. They are:

Consortiums	*Appointees*
East of England	Graham Creelman
East Midlands	Venu Dhupa
North East	George Gill
North West	Felicity Goodey
South East	Sir David Watson
South West	Adrian Vinken
West Midlands	Baroness Christine Crawley
Yorkshire and Humberside	Chris Heinitz

The Chairs are now considering the appointment of members to the Consortiums. We expect that all the Consortiums will have held their first meetings before the end of the year. In London, under the GLA Bill currently before Parliament, instead of a Consortium, the Mayor will be responsible for appointing a Cultural Strategy Group for London to advise him or her.

Sports Cabinet

Mr. Spring: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport when the Sports Cabinet has met this year. [95192]

Kate Hoey: The Sports Cabinet met on 10 March and 6 October. Officials from this Department maintain regular contact with their colleagues in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland on those issues of most strategic priority for UK Sport.

Sports Institute Headquarters

Mr. Spring: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what discussions he had with representatives of Sheffield City Council about the decision to remove the headquarters site of the UK Sports Institute to London. [95207]

Kate Hoey: No specific discussions have been held with representatives of Sheffield City Council, though representatives of Phoenix Sports Limited (the company formed by members of the Sheffield Consortium) have met with Ministers from time to time to discuss general developments related to the proposals for the UK Sports Institute Network Centre Sheffield. Officers of the United Kingdom Sports Council (UK Sport) and the English Sports Council (Sport England) attended the Board Meeting of Phoenix Sports Limited on 7 October 1999. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has since agreed to meet representatives of Sheffield at a suitable time soon.

Mr. Spring: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what criteria were used to determine that the headquarters of the UK Sports Institute should be in London; and *(a)* by whom and *(b)* when this decision was made. [95206]

Kate Hoey: It was originally envisaged that the UK Sports Institute headquarters would consist of around 200 staff providing a range of sports medicine and physiological services. In the light of discussions with the world of sport, and other developments both nationally and internationally, this view has been revised. With the new focus on a decentralisation of services to the network centres to better meet the requirements of athletes and coaches—and the need for a much smaller team at the centre—the UK Sports Council (UK Sport) considered it sensible to review how the central service functions could now best be delivered.

A full options analysis has been undertaken by PMP Consultancy on behalf of UK Sport. The criteria and relative weighting used to evaluate the qualitative aspects of the various options have been developed from the work undertaken by Dr. Roger Jackson, an internationally recognised expert in his field from the University of Calgary commissioned by UK Sport earlier this year to review and verify the role and functions of the UK Sports Institute headquarters/central services, and from the factors that will enable the Institute to do its job effectively. Seventeen different criteria were used covering (i) the impact on partnerships with key stakeholders; (ii) accessibility; (iii) resources; (iv) links with network centres; and (v) strategic role. The preferred option provided the greatest value for money in terms of qualitative benefit per £1 million of expenditure.

A summary of the options analysis was included in a paper about the UK Sports Institute prepared by my Department for consideration by the Sports Cabinet on 6 October. It was announced in a press statement on 7 October 1999 that the Sports Cabinet had agreed UK Sports' proposal that a headquarters is no longer required and what is now needed is co-ordination, support and administration from a body with a dedicated UK wide sports performance focus and responsibility. The preferred option meets these objects.

Volunteers

Mr. Spring: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what discussions he has had with the DfEE and the DSS about the effects of the benefits system on volunteers in *(a)* the Arts and *(b)* sport. [95193]

Kate Hoey: My Department recently published a report by Policy Action Team 10 (PAT 10), on how to maximise the impact on poor neighbourhoods of Government spending and policies on arts, sport and leisure. Other Government Departments including DfEE were represented on PAT 10. The report included a recommendation that

> 'the DfEE and DSS should work together to ensure that the benefits system does not penalise those who volunteer to help community-building activities or who want to take up training or work opportunities offered by small community organisations, and that it operates to meet the flexibility for developing artistic and sporting talent'.

My Department consulted with both DfEE and DSS regarding this recommendation prior to publication of the report and will be entering into further discussions with them in order to take the recommendation forward.

Horse Racing

Mr. Spring: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what discussions he has had with the Home Office about the future departmental responsibility for the sport of horse racing. [95188]

Kate Hoey: Neither my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State nor I have had any direct discussions with Home Office colleagues about the future departmental

responsibility for the sport of horse racing. However, given the responsibilities of the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food in the horse industry and my own Department's interests in both racing and equestrianism, I intend to discuss with ministerial colleagues whether the current arrangements are satisfactory.

Broadcasting Standards Commission

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what plans he has to review the functions of the Broadcasting Standards Commission. [95153]

Janet Anderson: We have no plans at present to review the functions of the Broadcasting Standards Commission. As "Regulating Communications: The Way Ahead" made clear, the Government believe the current system of broadcasting regulation, of which the BSC forms part, is broadly sustainable for the time being. However, I envisage that developments in broadcasting and communications will require a fundamental reassessment of broadcasting regulation, with the possibility of major new legislation early in the next Parliament.

Sports Strategy

Mr. Spring: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport when he will be publishing his Department's sports strategy. [95187]

Kate Hoey: The Government's Action Plan for sport will now be published early next year.

Voluntary Sports Clubs

Mr. Spring: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what discussions he has had with *(a)* the Treasury and *(b)* the Home Office about charitable status for voluntary sports clubs. [95190]

Kate Hoey: My right hon. Friend and I are in regular contact with Ministerial colleagues in the Treasury and Home Office on a wide range of issues of mutual interest. Most recently we have been in contact with the Home Office and Charity Commission in relation to issues arising from the Commission's review of the Recreational Charities Act 1958 and the planned consultation dealing specifically with charitable status and community based sports organisations. My officials, together with those of Sport England, recently met representatives of the Charity Commission to discuss a range of issues relating to the charitable status for voluntary sports clubs.

Mr. Spring: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what representations he has received and from whom about charitable status for voluntary sports clubs; and if he will list them. [95189]

Kate Hoey: I have received representations in favour of granting charitable status to voluntary sports organisations from: Sport England, The Central Council of Physical Recreation, The National Playing Fields Association, and Lord Phillips and Lord Cowdray. Parliamentary Questions on this subject have recently been tabled for answer by my Department by my hon. Friend the Member for Loughborough (Mr. Reed) and the hon. Member for Cheltenham (Mr. Jones).

Policy Action Unit 10

Mr. Spring: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what resources his Department has devoted in terms of *(a)* money and *(b)* personnel to the monitoring of Policy Action Unit 10's recommendations on the arts and sport. [95195]

Kate Hoey: Staff throughout DCMS have been asked to incorporate promoting social inclusion into their divisional and personal objectives, including the advocacy, monitoring and follow-through of Policy Action Team 10's recommendations on arts and sport. £90,000 has been set aside this year for a programme of research into improved ways of monitoring and evaluating the success of cultural, sporting and leisure approaches to social inclusion.

Objective 1 Funding

Mr. Spring: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what discussions he has had with *(a)* the West Country Tourism Board, *(b)* the Cornwall Tourism Board and *(c)* the DETR about possible projects to be undertaken with EU Objective 1 funding. [95201]

Janet Anderson: The Single Programme Document (SPD) for Objective 1 funding in the South West was presented to Government Departments for approval this week, prior to being submitted to the European Commission for approval.

I have had no discussions with the West Country Tourist Board, the Cornwall Tourism Board or the DETR about possible projects. However, I have asked my officials to assist in the preparation of the SPD, and discussions have taken place with the West Country Tourist Board, the Cornwall Tourism Board and DETR.

Business Partnerships

Mr. Spring: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what discussions he has had with the DTI about promoting partnerships between businesses and *(a)* the arts and *(b)* sport. [95200]

Kate Hoey: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has had a number of discussions with colleagues in the DTI about promoting partnerships between business and arts and sports organisations. The vital contribution made to arts and sport by business is recognised across Government. In the arts, for example, my hon. Friend the Minister for Competition and Consumer Affairs participates in hosting receptions to recognise the contribution made by business sponsors through the Government's Pairing Scheme, managed by Arts and Business.

DTI Ministers have also responded positively to the report of the Policy Action Team on Arts and Sport which recommended that DTI should encourage the business links network to forge partnerships between businesses and art/sport organisations.

Manchester United

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what communications were sent by Ministers in his Department to Manchester

United concerning the club's participation in the FA Cup *(a)* before 29 July and *(b)* since 29 July; and if he will make a statement. [94710]

Kate Hoey *[holding answer 19 October 1999]:* The then Minister for Sport's letter of 10 June to Roland Smith was the only such communication.

I very much hope that a solution can be found and that Manchester United do compete in this season's FA Cup. Manchester United's exemption from the competition is ultimately something which only the FA could offer and only the Manchester United Board could decide to accept. Clearly any solution has to be acceptable to both these parties.

Playing Fields

Mr. Spring: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what discussions he has had with the DETR and DfEE regarding the sale of school playing fields in the last year; and if he will make a statement. [95210]

Kate Hoey: My right hon. Friend and I are in regular contact with Ministerial colleagues in the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions and the Department for Education and Employment on a wide range of issues of mutual interest including the important issue of protecting school playing fields. My right hon. Friend launched National School Grounds Week in June this year jointly with DETR and DfEE colleagues, at which the Government also announced details of the new procedural guidance on disposal of school playing fields. This builds on last year's DETR Direction requiring local authorities to refer the planning applications for the development of local authority owned playing fields and those currently used, or used in the past five years by schools, to which Sport England object.

Quest

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will report on the activities undertaken so far by the agency Quest. [95138]

Janet Anderson: The Quality, Efficiency and Standards Team (Quest) has been set up to identify, evaluate and promote good practice across the sectors for which my Department is responsible.

It works independently of the Department and reports directly to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State. The chief executive and advisory panel took up their appointments in July this year. The advisory panel has met to identify Quest's initial projects and draw up a work plan, details of which will be published shortly.

School Sports

Mr. Spring: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how many school sports co-ordinators have been appointed to date. [95208]

Kate Hoey: None. We are working towards the appointment of the first Active Schools Sports Co-ordinators by September 2000.

Written Answers to Questions

Tuesday 26 October 1999

DEFENCE

Armed Forces Personnel

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will review the policy of allowing armed forces personnel below the age of 18 years to serve in war zones, in peacekeeping or other combat roles; and if he will make a statement. [94344]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 19 October 1999]:* The armed forces recruit only volunteers, and those who join under the age of 18 do so only with the written consent of parents and guardians. No personnel are deployed until they are well into their 17th year and only after they have undergone thorough professional training. Our recruitment and deployment policies are in line with international standards set by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the recent International Labour Convention 182 which prohibits the forced or compulsory recruitment of children for use in armed conflict.

Training (Armed Forces)

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list average training days, by Army trade, for *(a)* 1997 and *(b)* 1998. [95411]

Mr. Spellar: The information asked for is not available in the form requested and could be provided only at disproportionate cost. However, the length of time typically taken for a soldier to progress from enlistment to completion of Specialist Training, i.e. to be sent to the Field Army as a trained soldier, is shown in the table, broken down by Arm or Corps. These times do not change significantly from year to year and are based on current information.

Days

Arm or Corps	*Time in basic training*	*Time in specialist training*	*Total*
Royal Armoured Corps	90	117	207
Infantry	90	138	228
Army Air Corps	90	175	265
Royal Artillery	90	111	201
Royal Engineers	90	505	595
Royal Signals	90	398	488
Royal Logistics Corps	90	282	372
Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers	90	559	649
Adjutant Generals Corps	90	62	152

Falkland Islands

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many Falkland Islanders have enlisted in HM armed forces in each year since 1981. [95312]

Mr. Spellar: Data readily available indicate that:

Naval Service: since 1996, no Falkland Islanders have enlisted as ratings;

Army: since 1986, two Falkland Islanders have enlisted, joining in 1994–95 on Short Service Engagements;

RAF: since 1981, no Falkland Islander has enlisted.

In the case of the Naval Service and the Army, information prior to the dates indicated could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many Falkland Islanders are currently serving in each service of HM armed forces. [95313]

Mr. Spellar: Data readily available indicate that there are no Falkland Islanders currently serving in the Naval Service, Army or RAF.

Mr. Connarty: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on force levels in the Falkland Islands. [96090]

Mr. Hoon: The Government remain firmly committed to the defence of the Falkland Islands and the right of the Islanders to determine their own future. There are no plans to make changes to the front line strength of our forces stationed there. We have concluded however that minor adjustments can be made to some elements of the Falklands garrison without diminishing our ability to ensure the security of the Islands. These adjustments will reduce the number of service men and service women stationed there by around 100. The first of these adjustments, the withdrawal of a contingent of Royal Engineers, took place in early September. The remaining changes will be implemented over the coming months. These changes are a further demonstration of this Government's efforts to ease the burden on the armed forces where at all possible.

Northern Ireland

Mr. William Ross: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what plans the General Officer Commanding in Northern Ireland has to close Army bases or establishments in the Province within the next three months. [95341]

Mr. Spellar: The General Officer Commanding in Northern Ireland keeps the operational requirement for Army bases in the Province constantly under review. No decision has been taken to close any base within the next three months.

Manpower Commitments

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list total manpower commitments for the Armed Forces in each year since 1995; and what has been the total manpower available in each year. [95324]

Mr. Spellar: We do not hold information on total manpower commitments in the form that the hon. Member requests. These will vary at any point in a year depending

on the circumstances. The total trained strength of the Armed Forces, including Gurkhas, on 1 April of each year since 1995 was as follows:

	Number
1 April 1995	226,328
1 April 1996	212,164
1 April 1997	197,390
1 April 1998	193,914
1 April 1999	190,506

Our commitment to achieve full manning in all three Services is a key component of the Strategic Defence Review (SDR). Recruiting is buoyant; for example, the Army have just had their best recruiting year this decade, and each Service is taking vigorous steps to tackle the problem of retention.

Under 18-year-olds

Mr. Alan Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many under-18-year-old UK service personnel are serving in *(a)* Northern Ireland and *(b)* Kosovo. [95684]

Mr. Spellar: As at 1 September 1999, the latest date for which figures are available, the numbers of UK service personnel under 18 years of age serving in Northern Ireland and Kosovo are:

Northern Ireland: 26

Kosovo: 49.

Iraq

Mr. Alan Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what has been the cost of United Kingdom military actions against Iraq in the current financial year; and what proportion of those costs have been borne by *(a)* UK public funds and *(b)* other sources. [95547]

Mr. Hoon: Information on the expenditure to date this year on ongoing military operations in the Gulf is not held centrally and could be collated only with disproportionate effort. However, excluding the value of assistance provided through host nation support, expenditure on such operations last year amounted to some £35 million, and is forecast to be some £28 million this year.

Disposal Sales Agency

Mr. Browne: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement setting out the key targets which have been set for the Disposal Sales Agency for financial year 1999–2000. [96020]

Mr. Spellar: Since its launch in October 1994 the Agency has brought in over £400 million in gross sales receipts and has achieved significant efficiency savings through contractorisation of the disposals business. The Key Targets which have been set for the Chief Executive of the Disposal Sales Agency for this financial year are aimed at a continued focus on receipts, much of which has been achieved through British companies participation, and to ensure continual improvement in efficiency and working practices.

The Chief Executive of the Agency has been set the following key targets for the financial year 1999–2000:

To achieve disposal sales income of £66 million from sales of surplus Government owned equipment and stores.

To reduce the unit cost of generating £1 million of sales to £62,500 from a baseline of £90,500 achieved in 1994–95.

To undertake customer satisfaction surveys designed to identify key issues and priorities, measure perceptions and expectations, and to communicate results and benefits of actions taken to Agency's customer base.

Bosnia

Ms Dari Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what assessment he has made of the current security situation in Bosnia and the potential implications for the numbers of UK troops deployed there. [96088]

Mr. Hoon: The UK remains fully committed to supporting NATO operations in Bosnia. In conjunction with Allies, we have just completed a careful assessment of the current security situation in Bosnia. The situation has improved sufficiently in the four years since the deployment of the Implementation Force (IFOR) for NATO to move safely to a restructured force, of some 20,000 members. The implication for UK forces is that 900 personnel will now return to the UK, without replacement, before Christmas. The UK contribution to the Stabilisation Force (SFOR) will then stand at some 3,300.

Defence Evaluation and Research Agency

Ms Squire: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will announce a decision on the way ahead for the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency public private partnership proposals. [96089]

Mr. Hoon: Following the announcement on 6 July that further discussions with stakeholders were continuing, we have held consultations with interested parties, including UK industry, our international partners, DERA staff and trade unions. In response to the feedback we have received, and a number of views expressed, we have decided to widen the scope of these discussions to address the issues raised in the consultation process. We will now undertake further work on these issues. This process will continue into the New Year.

We continue to work positively for a PPP result which will strengthen DERA's ability to continue to provide world class scientific research and enable it to be a flexible and responsive organisation which can attract investment and develop new business, while at the same time preserving our essential defence interests and maintaining our valuable collaborative relationships.

Serbia

Sir Sydney Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence, pursuant to his answer of 19 July 1999, *Official Report*, column *427*, if he will make a statement on the progress of the Joint Task Force set up by the UN Environment Programme and the UN Commission on Human Settlements on the environmental effects of the conflict in Kosovo. [95810]

Mr. Hoon: The joint UN Environment Programme/UN Commission on Human Settlements Balkans Task Force issued its report "The Kosovo Conflict: Consequences for the Environment" on 5 October 1999. A copy of the report will be placed in the Library of the House.

Armed Forces (Running Costs)

Mrs. Ewing: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the number and running costs of *(a)* Royal Navy shore stations, *(b)* Army core headquarters and *(c)* RAF bases in (i) the South East of England, (ii) England, (iii) Scotland, (iv) Wales and (v) Northern Ireland. [95277]

Mr. Spellar: I will write to the hon. Member and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

Secondments

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many personnel are *(a)* on secondment from UK armed forces serving with foreign armed services and *(b)* from abroad serving with UK armed forces, specifying their ranks and to which service they belong; and if he will make a statement. [95931]

Mr. Spellar: I will write to the hon. Member and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

Departmental Twinning

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many requests there have been to his Department for placement of officials from Central, East European and CIS states as twins of his officials; how many such officials have been accepted as twins; and from which countries *(a)* those who were accepted and *(b)* those who were not accepted came. [94001]

Mr. Spellar: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer which the Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester, East (Mr. Vaz) gave on 25 October 1999, *Official Report*, columns *739–40*.

Efficiency Savings

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will provide a breakdown of the £594m of new efficiency improvements achieved in 1998–99, indicating where the savings were made; and if he will make a statement. [95551]

Mr. Spellar: I refer the hon. Member to the letter sent on 27 July by the then Secretary of State, Lord Robertson, to the hon. Member for Salisbury (Mr. Key), a copy of which was placed in the Library of the House. That letter provides a breakdown of the £594 million of new efficiency improvements in 1998–99, £89 million more than the target of £505 million.

Both service and civilian personnel made this achievement across all parts of my Department by seeking out genuine efficiencies. The extra efficiency gains have been retained by the defence budget and have contributed to funding other defence priorities. This further demonstrates the MOD's commitment to improving our capability and performance.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Biosafety Protocol

Joan Ruddock: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what preparations her Department is making for input into the EU position for the next meeting of the Biosafety Protocol; and if she will make a statement. [94826]

Clare Short: My Department has been closely involved in the UK contribution to the EU position for the next meeting of the Biosafety Protocol to ensure that it takes account of developing country concerns.

Rwanda

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what progress has been made on debt relief for Rwanda; and if she will make a statement on the Rwanda Trust Fund. [95237]

Clare Short: Rwanda's external debt burden is heavy. At the end of 1998, Rwanda's debt stock was around US$1.2 billion, equivalent to 59 per cent. of GDP.

Multilateral creditors account for over 80 per cent. of Rwanda's external debt stock. A Multilateral Debt Trust Fund was established in 1998 to service Rwanda's debts to the International Development Association, the African Development Bank and the International Fund for Agricultural Development over the period 1999–2001, using funds pooled by bilateral donors. The UK contributed £10.6 million to this Fund in 1999, as part of the disbursement of the £30 million of flexible assistance committed in the Development Partnership Understanding signed by the two Governments in April 1999. The Fund is expected to be adequately financed through to the end of 2000. The UK will keep under review whether a further UK contribution to the Multilateral Debt Fund might be appropriate.

We strongly support the agreement at the 1999 Annual Meetings of the IMF and World Bank to revise the framework for debt relief for heavily indebted poor countries (HIPC), and to link it to poverty reduction much more strongly. For Rwanda, the revisions mean additional debt relief, provided that it continues to pursue sound policies, and a start to this relief three years earlier than under the original HIPC framework. Rwanda's Decision Point, when it will start to receive its HIPC debt relief, is likely to be in the next year or so. The UK will press for the maximum reduction in multilateral debt servicing in the early years, consistent with Rwanda being able to spend the savings effectively on programmes to reduce poverty.

In July 1998, agreement was reached between Paris Club official bilateral creditors (Austria, Canada, France, Japan, the Netherlands and the United States) and Rwanda on a debt rescheduling on Naples terms. All the relevant bilateral agreements with Paris Club creditors have now been signed.

AIDS Research

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement on the use of the money earmarked by her Department for Aids vaccine research. [95285]

Clare Short: We are providing £14.2 million over 5 years to support the International AIDS Vaccine Initiative (IAVI) in developing an AIDS vaccine which is safe, effective and affordable for the developing world. This supplements our work with the Medical Research Council and the European Commission. IAVI are harnessing public and private human and financial resources to accelerate testing of a number of promising candidate AIDS vaccines suitable to market to developing countries within 10–15 years.

Sudan

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what recent reports she has received regarding food supplies in Bahr el Ghazal, Southern Sudan. [95236]

Clare Short: Latest reports show that food supplies in Bahr el Ghazal are relatively good this year and certainly much better than in 1998. The bulk of supplies consumed in the region are from local production but a top-up of food aid continues at a rate of between 3,000 and 4,000 metric tonnes per month. Although food aid deliveries are below planning figures, the low observed rates of malnutrition confirm improvements over the last year.

The UN Annual Needs Assessment for Sudan, which is being carried out by FAO and WFP, is presently under way. We await its results with interest.

PRIME MINISTER

Oleg Gordievsky

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Prime Minister what papers were passed during the past 10 years on the authority of *(a)* the Foreign Secretary, or *(b)* other Ministers, to Professor Christopher Andrew relating to Oleg Gordievsky, (i) in connection with his defection and (ii) in relation to other matters; and if he will make a statement. [94705]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 19 October 1999]:* No such papers have been passed during this Government. I am not accountable for what happened under previous Governments.

Luxembourg Compromise

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Prime Minister on how many occasions member states of the European Union *(a)* have invoked and *(b)* have threatened to invoke the Luxembourg Compromise. [95306]

The Prime Minister: There is no central record of the number of times member states have invoked or threatened to invoke the Luxembourg Compromise. We are not aware of any formal invocation since this Government took office.

Michael John Smith

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Prime Minister (1) when Michael John Smith (prison number PR 3345) will receive a substantive reply to his letter of 10 January 1997 to the Secretary of the Security Commission; and what was the reason for the delay; [96168]

(2) why undertakings contained in the letter of 7 January 1998 from the Secretary of the Civil Service Commission to Michael John Smith (prison number 3345) were not fulfilled. [96167]

The Prime Minister: Mr. Smith last wrote on 3 August 1999 requesting a substantive reply to his letter of 10 January 1997. An acknowledgement was sent on 13 August by the current Secretary of the Security Commission also apologising for any earlier delays. A substantive response, approved by the Chairman of the Security Commission, was sent on 13 October 1999. This pointed out that the questions raised in Mr. Smith's letter of 10 January 1997 relating to the Security Commission Inquiry had already been dealt with in correspondence from the then Secretary of the Security Commission dated 20 December 1996 and in the Report of the Security Commission on Mr. Smith's case published in July 1995.

Robert Hamill

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Prime Minister what representations he has received requesting that a judicial inquiry be held into the circumstances surrounding the murder of Robert Hamill; and if he will make a statement. [95356]

The Prime Minister: The Government have received a number of requests for an inquiry into the circumstances surrounding the death of Robert Hamill. Whilst an inquiry has not been ruled out the Government take the view that this ought not to be considered while there is the possibility of disciplinary proceedings by the Chief Constable of the Royal Ulster Constabulary against police officers following the (Northern Ireland) Director of Public Prosecution's direction of no prosecution on 30 September 1999.

Intergovernmental Conference

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Prime Minister if fisheries policy will be negotiated at the forthcoming intergovernmental conference. [95786]

The Prime Minister: No. The Common Fisheries Policy will be reviewed in 2002.

Drugs

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Prime Minister which is the lead Department in considering the effects of the drug pyridostigmine bromide in relation to the report of the RAND Corporation for the San Diego Veterans' Affairs Medical Centre. [95658]

The Prime Minister: The Ministry of Defence is taking the lead in considering the report of the review, by the RAND Corporation, of the scientific literature on pyridostigmine bromide as it pertains to Gulf War illnesses.

Former Paymaster General

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Prime Minister if he will list the officials in his Department who have held discussions with *(a)* the hon. Member for Coventry, North-West (Mr. Robinson) or *(b)* his representatives concerning the content of his memoirs. [95874]

The Prime Minister: None.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Departmental Publications

Mr. Maclean: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list his Department's spending on official publications since May 1997. [93679]

Dr. Howells: The spending on official publications since May 1997, which includes the costs incurred by the Department in publishing, preparation and production, was £13,206,319. This excludes the cost of publications produced for internal use. Where the Department makes use of a private sector publisher the publishing, printing and design costs are generally met by the publisher as part of their acceptance of the risks of publication.

In addition, my Department spent £221,154 on purchase of copies for official use from The Stationery Office between April 1997 and March 1999. Due to changes in ordering and payment systems this information is no longer held centrally and could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Helium-Neon Lasers

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how much income his Department has received from Patent GB222 6443 Helium-Neon Lasers; when the patent came into force; and when it is due to expire. [94465]

Dr. Howells *[holding answer 19 October 1999]:* My Department has received income of £29,800 from patent "GB222 6443 Helium-Neon Lasers". It was filed on 5 May 1988, was granted on 8 January 1992 and is due to expire in 2008.

Y2K Product Liability

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on policy towards year 2000 product liability. [95409]

Dr. Howells: Computer equipment which is sold as year 2000 compliant and accessory equipment designed to fix systems so that they will be year 2000 compliant are subject to the Sale of Goods Act 1979. This requires goods to be of satisfactory quality and fit for their intended purpose. People suffering harm from defective products may have a right to compensation under Part I of the Consumer Protection Act 1987 which implemented the EC Product Liability Directive (85/374/EEC) into UK law.

Social Chapter

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list those proposals within the social chapter remit which *(a)* have been placed before the Council since United Kingdom accession to that Chapter and *(b)* are currently being drafted; and what has been United Kingdom policy on each. [95296]

Mr. Alan Johnson: The Social Chapter proposals placed before the Council since the United Kingdom's accession to that Chapter are:

a Commission proposal for a Council Directive concerning a Framework Agreement on Part-time Work (1997/81/EC) was forwarded to the Council on 28 July 1997. The Directive supports the Government's commitment to improving the functioning of the UK labour market by increasing its flexibility while providing a framework of minimum standards for workers.

a Directive concerning a Framework Agreement on Fixed-term Work (1999/70/EC) was forwarded to the Council on 30 April 1999. We support the aim of ensuring that fixed term contracts are not abused, while retaining flexibility. In implementing the directive, we will ensure that people's freedom to enter into contracts which suit their circumstances is not limited; and finally,

a Commission proposal for a Council directive establishing a general framework for informing and consulting employees in the European Community (13099/98, COM (98)612) was forwarded by the Commission to the Council on 17 November 1998. The Government are not persuaded of the need for a directive on information and consultation in undertakings operating only at national level, which is difficult to reconcile with subsidiarity and would cut across existing practices in member states to no benefit.

I am not aware of any further Social Chapter proposals being drafted by the Commission.

Ilisu Dam

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when he expects the Export Credits Guarantee Department to make a final decision on whether to extend UK export credit support for British firms involved in the construction of the Ilisu Dam in Turkey. [95160]

Mr. Caborn: ECGD is some way from taking a final decision on the project. The issues are currently being considered with other interested Government Departments. There will also be further discussion with the export credit agencies supporting other contractors involved in the project.

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will publish the environmental and social impact assessments of the Ilisu Dam arrived at by the Government before a final decision is taken on whether or not to extend export credit support for the British firms involved. [95161]

Mr. Caborn: It is intended to publish the independent reports commissioned by the Export Credits Guarantee Department on the environment and social impacts of Ilisu before a final decision is taken on whether or not to extend export credit support.

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what meetings have taken place between his Department and Balfour Beatty on the matter of the Ilisu Dam. [95162]

Mr. Caborn: Since receiving Balfour Beatty's application for support on Ilisu, ECGD has held four meetings with Balfour Beatty. There have also been six meetings on the project at which both ECGD and Balfour Beatty were among the participants, three with other UK Government Departments and three with the other export credit agencies.

Icecream Industry

Ms Kingham: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when his Department will publish its response to the Competition Commission's report into the icecream industry. [95079]

Dr. Howells: The Competition Commission report on impulse icecream will be published as quickly as is practicable. I cannot comment on the likely publication date of the report, which remains confidential until publication. Copies of the report will be laid before Parliament at the same time as it is published.

World Trade Organisation

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what outcomes the Government aims to achieve at the forthcoming trade round in Seattle. [95289]

Mr. Caborn: The Government hope that a comprehensive Round of negotiations will be launched at Seattle with a negotiating agenda which reflects the interests of all members of the World Trade Organisation in a substantial new package of trade liberalisation and will be guided by the aim of sustainable development.

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what recent representations he has received concerning reform of the World Trade Organisation. [95290]

Mr. Caborn: The Government have received a range of representations many of which support the UK's and EU's call for the launch of a comprehensive Round of trade negotiations at Seattle. Some have expressed the desire to see the pace of liberalisation stopped and a review undertaken of existing World Trade Organisation Agreements. In such cases, the Government have explained that we need a new Round to keep up the pace of liberalisation to promote growth in the world economy, jobs for our people and resist protectionist pressures which threaten us all. At the same time, the Government accept that more can be done to strengthen the World Trade Organisation through increased transparency and dialogue. This communication effort is very much the responsibility of national governments and the UK is committed to playing its full part.

Working Time Regulations

Mr. Gordon Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what guidance he has given to *(a)* the Health and Safety Executive and local authorities and *(b)* Industrial Tribunals, on enforcing the new Working Time Regulations. [95698]

Mr. Alan Johnson *[holding answer 25 October 1999]:* The Department of Trade and Industry published guidance on the Working Time Regulations, which covered enforcement, in September 1998. Copies were sent to the Health and Safety Executive and the Employment Tribunal Service (formerly the Industrial Tribunal Service). Guidance is also available on the Department website.

Mr. Gordon Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what provision has been made to increase the resources available to *(a)* the Health and Safety Executive and *(b)* industrial tribunals, to enforce the new Working Time Regulations. [95699]

Mr. Alan Johnson *[holding answer 25 October 1999]:* The Department of Trade and Industry transfers funds to the Health and Safety Executive for enforcing the working time limits. This funding is reviewed in the light of experience.

Resources are allocated to the Employment Tribunal Service taking account of the Service's forecasts of overall caseload and operational requirements. Recent forecasts take into account the implementation of the Working Time Regulations.

Mr. Gordon Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what recent representations he has received on the enforcement mechanisms for the new Working Time Regulations. [95697]

Mr. Alan Johnson *[holding answer 25 October 1999]:* The Department of Trade and Industry is in regular contact with interested parties about many aspects of the Working Time Regulations, including enforcement.

Petrol Prices

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will take steps to ensure that the pricing policies of petrol wholesalers do not disadvantage independent retailers. [95746]

Dr. Howells *[holding answer 25 October 1999]:* Under UK competition legislation responsibility for monitoring markets, including the petrol market, and investigating allegations of anti-competitive practices lies with the Director General of Fair Trading. He has powers to act if necessary. Anyone with evidence of, or concerns about, anti-competitive pricing policies or other behaviour should contact the Director General.

Structural Funds

Mr. Amess: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what representations he has received about criteria for allocating structural funds to the regions. [94212]

Mr. Caborn: We received over 440 representations in response to the public consultation on determining areas for Structural Funds Objective 2 eligibility.

Sir Teddy Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on the procedures used to determine the selection of areas recommended for Objective 2 status. [94234]

Mr. Byers: On 8 October the Government submitted the UK proposals for new Objective 2 areas for 2000–06 to the European Commission.

The procedure the Government used is set out in the document URN99/1021 "The Government's proposals for new Objective 2 areas". Copies have been sent to all Members.

In drawing up its proposals the Government took account of responses to the earlier consultation exercise, and in particular of the proposals from the Scottish Executive and the National Assembly for Wales.

Electrical Installations

Mr. Chidgey: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what plans he has to require electricity supply companies to upgrade consumer installations to comply with Building Standard BS 7671. [95264]

Ms Hewitt: None. The decision and responsibility for any necessary upgrading of consumers' existing electrical installations is a matter for those consumers alone.

Timor Gap

Ms Roseanna Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what recent meetings *(a)* he, *(b)* his Ministers and *(c)* his officials held where UK investment in oil or gas developments in the Timor Gap was discussed; when these meetings were set up; with whom these meetings were held; what the precise purpose of the meetings was; and what involvement there was of Indonesian Government (i) Ministers, (ii) officials and (iii) businesses; and if he will make a statement. [95267]

Mr. Caborn: All the dealings of my Department regarding oil and gas developments in the Timor Gap have been with the Australian side. To date there has been no involvement of Indonesian Government Ministers, officials or other organisations in relation to such developments.

My officials visited Darwin in July 1999 and met the Northern Territory Minister, Hon. Daryl Manzie. Meetings were also held with the Office of Resource Development, Phillips Oil Company Australia, Woodside Energy Ltd., the Australian representative of the Australia-Indonesia Joint Authority for the Timor Gap Zone of Co-operation and with the University and local engineering and supply companies.

These meetings were set up by the British Consulate-General in Perth, WA, to allow an assessment to be made of the likelihood of oil and gas developments going ahead in the Timor Gap and the opportunities these might present for the suppliers of UK goods and services.

EU Trademark Directive

Mr. Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what representations he has made to the EU regarding changes to the EU Trademark Directive, with respect to allowing branded goods from outside the EU to be imported; and if he will make a statement. [95710]

Dr. Howells: Since the European Court of Justice, in its judgment in the Silhouette case last year, determined that European trade mark law allows trade mark owners to prevent the import of their goods into the EU, we have made it clear to our European partners and to the Commission that full discussion, including possible change to European law, must take place. This discussion should be informed by studies into the economic effects of this judgment, in particular on prices, competition and consumers.

The European Commission has responded with a study undertaken by the consulting firm NERA which demonstrated that there would be a beneficial, if small impact on the European economy resulting from change to the law, and that such benefits would be focussed in certain sectors, especially clothing, footwear, perfumes and other luxury goods. Work undertaken by my Department concerning the United Kingdom economy, and by the Swedish government, supports these findings.

We have ensured that trade mark rights and the results of these studies have been discussed at meetings of the Internal Market Council. The Council will consider the issue again at its meeting in November. In the meantime we are encouraging other member States to undertake investigations to ensure that discussion at the Council progresses and is well informed.

Minimum Wage

Mr. Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what requirement there is for care workers to be paid at national minimum wage rates for time spent travelling between assignments; what representations he has received from and discussions he has had with care companies on this matter; and if he will make a statement. [95731]

Mr. Alan Johnson: The National Minimum Wage Regulation 15 provides that workers travelling on the business of their employer during their normal working hours must be paid the national minimum wage for that time, except where the travel is between the worker's home and place of work. I have received a number of representations on this issue from organisations involved in the provision of care work.

We have asked the Low Pay Commission to monitor and evaluate the impact of the national minimum wage on pay, employment and competitiveness. I would expect that care work providers will have taken the opportunity to raise this matter with the Commission.

SOLICITOR-GENERAL

Crown Prosecution Service

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Solicitor-General what training *(a)* in race awareness and *(b)* on employers' responsibilities under the Race Relations Act 1975 has been undertaken by (i) the DPP, (ii) CPS chief Crown prosecutors, (iii) CPS assistant chief Crown prosecutors and (iv) CPS branch Crown prosecutors; what plans he has to review training in *(a)* and *(b)*; and if he will make a statement. [95773]

The Solicitor-General: A programme of training in race awareness was introduced in the Crown Prosecution Service for all staff managers in September 1997. In the London Area, which has a high percentage of staff from minority racial and cultural backgrounds, this training was extended to all staff. The course covers the provisions of the Race Relations Act 1976 and the Sex Discrimination Act 1975. The Director of Public Prosecutions and the Chief Executive have received this training since joining the CPS. The Chief Crown Prosecutors who were appointed to their posts this year will either have received this training earlier or should have done so by the end of

the year. This training is now provided on an on-going basis so that all new managers receive it shortly after appointment.

The structure, delivery and content of all training provided within the CPS is currently being reviewed by the Equality Committee that was formed within the Department in August this year.

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Solicitor-General what the present position is in relation to the Commission for Racial Equality's possible investigation into the Crown Prosecution Service; and if he will make a statement. [95774]

The Solicitor-General: On 27 July 1999 the Commission for Racial Equality wrote to the Crown Prosecution Service indicating that it was minded to undertake a formal investigation under section 48 of the Race Relations Act 1976. The Crown Prosecution Service have made written representations to the Commission in response to their letter and discussed these with a number of Commissioners on 5 October. The Crown Prosecution Service is currently waiting to hear from the Commission with their conclusions.

Equal Opportunities

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Solicitor-General if an action plan for increasing the representation of women in public life has been *(a)* prepared by his Department and *(b)* published since November 1998. [94843]

The Solicitor-General: The hon. Member is referred to the answer given by my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Cabinet Office on 25 October 1999, *Official Report*, column 682.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Museums, Libraries and Archives Council

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will make a statement on the cost of establishing the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council. [95136]

Mr. Alan Howarth *[holding answer 25 October 1999]:* £350,000 has been allocated to cover the costs associated with the establishment of the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council (MLAC) in this year and next.

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how many applications were received for the position of Chief Executive of the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council; how many candidates were interviewed; and what salary the position carries. [95150]

Mr. Alan Howarth *[holding answer 25 October 1999]:* Thirty seven applications were received for the position of Chief Executive of the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council.

Six Candidates were interviewed for the post. The position carries a salary of £67,500.

Tourism

Mr. Spring: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how many incoming tourists to the UK there were annually since 1995, and what estimate he has made of the numbers for 1999. [95203]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 25 October 1999]:* Since 1995 the number of incoming tourists to the UK has been as follows:

Thousand

Year	*Visits to UK*
1995	23,537
1996	25,163
1997	25,515
1998	25,745

There were 17.46 million visits to the UK in the first 8 months of 1999, an increase on 17.42 million visits in the equivalent period for 1998.

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will make a statement on the effectiveness to date of the Government's tourism strategy. [95117]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 25 October 1999]:* "Tomorrow's Tourism" is a challenging strategy for the next decade with many long-term goals. Together with the industry, we have already made good progress, for example:

- the creation of the English Tourism Council (ETC) to provide strategic leadership for the industry in England;
- the launch of the new standardised accommodation rating system;
- the addition of on-line accommodation booking facilities to BTA's award-winning "Visit Britain" website; the launch of 16 of the British Tourist Authority's planned 36 new websites overseas; and the launch of the "Britain—Now is the Time" campaign to market the UK as a visitor destination for the Millennium;
- the successful hospitality careers festival held earlier this year;
- the inclusion of many seaside resorts on the new Assisted Areas map.

A fuller progress report will be made at the first Tourism Summit early next year.

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what representations he has made to Her Majesty's Treasury regarding the impact on the tourism industry of airport passenger duty. [95118]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 25 October 1999]:* My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and I have discussed many matters of concern to the tourism industry, including air passenger duty (APD), with a wide range of ministerial colleagues including my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer. In addition, my officials have made contact with their colleagues in HM Customs and Excise when representations about APD have been made by industry representatives or members of the public.

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will make a statement on the future arrangements for England-wide marketing within the tourism sector. [95132]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 25 October 1999]:* The British Tourist Authority continues to market England abroad as part of its overall remit. It does so in partnership with the Regional Tourist Boards and the English Tourism Council with which it has an Overseas Marketing Agreement. Domestically, the English Tourism Council retains a strategic policy overview of marketing and has a major role in carrying out market research and providing advice on techniques and best practice.

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what assessment he has made of the impact on the number of visitors to Britain of doubling airport passenger duty. [95124]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 25 October 1999]:* The new rates of APD were introduced on 1 November 1997. In the first twelve months (November 1997 to October 1998) in which the new rates were in operation there were an estimated 25.8 million visits to the UK, an increase of 3 per cent. on the previous twelve months.

Green Spaces

Mr. Spring: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (1) what amount in *(a)* percentage and *(b)* money terms of the New Opportunities Fund budget is currently spent on the purchase of brown-field sites for developing playing fields; [95199]

(2) what is the breakdown in *(a)* cash and *(b)* percentage terms of the moneys set aside by the new Opportunities Fund for the Green Spaces initiative. [95185]

Kate Hoey *[holding answer 25 October 1999]:* The New Opportunities Fund is currently consulting on the Green Spaces and Sustainable Communities initiative, and has so far made no grants under it. The policy directions that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has issued to NOF require it to commit at least 75 per cent. of the £125 million available for the initiative to green spaces, and NOF will decide in the light of its consultation exercise whether or not further to allocate this sum between particular types of project.

Equal Opportunities

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if an action plan for increasing the representation of women in public life has been *(a)* prepared by his Department and *(b)* published since November 1998. [94854]

Janet Anderson: The Cabinet Office is responsible for co-ordinating the Government's initiative on equal opportunities and public appointments, so I therefore refer the hon. Member to the reply given by my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Cabinet Office on 25 October 1999, *Official Report*, column 682.

This Government are committed to the equal representation of women and men in public appointments. A plan of action has been drawn up, which includes individual departmental plans for increasing the participation of women in public life. Details of individual Departments' plans are given in "Quangos: Opening up Public Appointments, 1999–2002", published by the Cabinet Office on 25 May 1999. Copies are in the Libraries of the House and on the Internet. The plans contain specific goals and objectives for increasing the representation of women on the boards of public bodies, and are updated annually in the light of progress made.

Dance and Drama

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Education and Employment regarding the funding of dance and drama courses. [95114]

Mr. Alan Howarth *[holding answer 25 October 1999]:* My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and I have had a number of discussions with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Employment and my noble Friend the Minister of State regarding the development of policy for funding dance and drama students.

Ealing Studios

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what representations he has received in relation to the future of Ealing Studios; and if he will make a statement. [95128]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 25 October 1999]:* In addition to the representation from the hon. Member, my Department has received four representations about Ealing Studios, three of which were from interested parties.

The National Film and Television School, as the owner of the land at Ealing, is responsible for the future of the site. As one of my Department's funded bodies, the School will keep my officials fully informed of its plans.

Wembley Stadium

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport when he last met representatives of the London Borough of Brent to discuss the development of the national stadium at Wembley; and what discussions have taken place regarding section 106 proposals. [95144]

Kate Hoey *[holding answer 25 October 1999]:* My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State met representatives of the London Borough of Brent on 15 and 22 July to discuss general progress with the national stadium project. He has had no discussions with the London Borough of Brent about section 106 requirements related to the national stadium project, which are entirely matters for the planning authority and the applicant, Wembley National Stadium Limited, to resolve following submission of the formal planning application.

I will be meeting representatives of the London Borough of Brent early next month.

Millennium Experience

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what plans he has to increase public participation in Millennium Experience celebrations at a regional level; and if he will make a statement. [94069]

Janet Anderson: The Millennium Experience is already achieving considerable success in encouraging public participation at a local and regional level through its National Programme of events and activities and through its involvement with the Millennium Festival. To date 10 National Programme strands have been launched and another will be launched in December. Through this programme and the Millennium Festival, NMEC estimates it will have reached 40 million people before the end of the year 2000. Equally importantly, it believes it will have delivered a programme which will not only have encouraged people to celebrate this momentous point in time but will have left a legacy, the value of which will continue to be felt long after the Dome has ceased to welcome the public.

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what events are planned in Shropshire as part of the Millennium Experience *(a)* National Programme and *(b)* Manpower National Skills Festival; and if he will make a statement. [94068]

Janet Anderson: The Millennium Experience National Programme is made up of a series of events and activities which aim to inspire everyone across the UK to take part and make a difference to us and to future generations. Shropshire and the West Midlands are keenly participating in many of these initiatives including over 40 major companies and public sector organisations signing up to Children's Promise; hundreds of schools busily composing a song for the Millennium as part of Voices of Promise; schools and the community in Shropshire performing in the Dome on 1 November 2000 for the Our Town Story show; and 74 Shropshire schools taking part in the creation of the greatest modern day domesday book on the internet. The area is also participating in the Manpower National Skills Festival, which encourages the promotion and celebration of vocational skills. The programme features regional contests and demonstrations culminating in the first-ever national skills championships at the NEC in Birmingham in July 2000.

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

Integrated Public Transport

10. **Mr. David Heath:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the integration of public transport in rural areas. [94220]

Mr. Meacher: Most of the proposals in our integrated transport strategy apply to rural areas just as much as other areas of the country. Local Transport Plans in particular will provide a much sounder base for local authorities to develop effective rural transport strategies. Additionally, in view of the urgent need to improve transport in rural areas, we have made available £170 million over three years to improve rural public transport.

Housing Tenancy Arrangements

15. **Ms Oona King:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on his plans for the future of housing tenancy arrangements. [94225]

Mr. Mullin: I have no immediate plans to make any changes to housing tenancy arrangements. I am aware, however, of the discussion paper published by the Chartered Institute of Housing on a single form of tenure for social housing.

Roads Programme

16. **Mr. Greenway:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the priority he will give to bypassing towns and villages on major trunk routes in his roads programme. [94227]

Ms Beverley Hughes: " A New Deal for Trunk Roads in England" sets out the priorities for investment in the trunk road network. Half the schemes in our targeted programme of improvements will provide bypasses of local communities.

House Building

17. **Mr. Day:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to ensure that his target for house building on brown-field sites is met. [94228]

Ms Beverley Hughes: We have set in hand a number of policy initiatives to help authorities substantially increase their reuse of previously developed land. Chief amongst these is our radical revision of the last Government's outmoded planning guidance on housing (PPG3), which has caused so much greenfield development over the last decade.

21. **Mr. John M. Taylor:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on his target for the proportion of new housing to be built on brown-field sites. [94232]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The Government's national target is that 60 per cent. of new housing should be built on previously developed land or provided by way of conversion of existing buildings.

24. **Mr. Evans:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many houses will be built on greenfield sites in Lancashire in 1999–2000. [94236]

Mr. Raynsford: My Department does not estimate the number of new homes to be built. Estimates for Net Additional Dwelling Provision for 1991—2011, by county, are in Regional Planning Guidance for the North West (RPG13), but it does not make separate estimates for 'brownfield' or 'greenfield' sites.

25. **Mr. Lilley:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has further to restrict house building in the green belt. [94237]

Ms Armstrong: Planning Policy Guidance note 2—"Green Belts"—already recommends that local authorities' development plans should include a strict presumption against inappropriate development in the Green Belt. This includes most types of house building.

Regional Strategies

18. **Mr. Cousins:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the draft Regional Strategies presented by the Regional Development Agencies. [94229]

Ms Armstrong: Regional Development Agencies have today formally handed over their Regional Strategies to Ministers for consideration. We aim to respond to the strategies before the end of the year.

Ms Atherton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when the regional development agencies' regional strategies will be published; and if he will make a statement. [96169]

Ms Armstrong: The Regional Development Agencies' regional strategies were handed over to Ministers today. Copies of those which have been printed to date have been placed in the Library of the House. The remainder will be placed in the Library as soon as they are published.

Rough Sleepers

19. **Mr. Pound:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many young people sleeping rough in England have been settled in accommodation in the most recent year for which figures are available. [94230]

Mr. Mullin: Comprehensive information on resettlement is not available. The Rough Sleepers Initiative has provided about 3,500 units of accommodation over the past 9 years, a large number of which have been let to young people.

Eastern Regional Development Agency

20. **Mrs. Anne Campbell:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what progress has been made in the work of the regional development agency in the eastern region. [94231]

Ms Armstrong: The East of England Development Agency has achieved much since their official launch on 1 April this year and are now fully established with a committed and enthusiastic Board.

The Agency have handed over the final version of their regional economic development strategy today and are currently working hard to finalise their first corporate plan.

They have already announced over £20 million of Single Regeneration Budget funding, £4.3 million for the Skills Development Fund, almost £3 million for the Rural Development Programme and are managing Land and Property Regeneration schemes with a value of £25 million.

English Partnerships

22. **Mr. McWalter:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what arrangements he has made to ensure the accountability of English Partnerships to local communities. [94233]

Ms Armstrong: In carrying out its activities in the former new town areas, English Partnerships has to have due regard for the convenience and welfare of people who live, work or carry on their business there. When drawing up its plans, it consults with local councils and other interested parties.

Housing Green Paper

23. **Mr. Kirkwood:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he now expects to publish the Housing Green Paper; and if he will make a statement. [94235]

Mr. Raynsford: We intend to publish a Housing Policy Green Paper in due course. The Green Paper will build on our achievements in housing to ensure that everyone is offered the opportunity of a decent home and so promote social cohesion, well-being and self-dependence.

Thameslink Services

27. **Mr. Dismore:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the frequency and quality of Thameslink services to central London from Mill Hill Broadway and Hendon. [94239]

Mr. Hill: The frequency of service Thameslink are providing from Mill Hill Broadway and Hendon to Central London is greater than required by their Passenger Service Requirement. The Franchising Director is aware that services during peak periods are overcrowded beyond allowable thresholds and he has required Thameslink accordingly to produce a Feasibility Study detailing ways in which capacity can be increased to reduce this overcrowding. In addition to the Feasibility Study, Thameslink are currently negotiating with other train operators to lease additional trains.

London Underground

28. **Mr. Syms:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what progress he has made on the public private partnership for the London Underground. [94240]

Mr. Hill: Excellent progress has been made on the PPP. London Underground has been restructured, in shadow form, into one operating company and three infrastructure companies. Four consortia have been invited to tender for each of the two deep tube infrastructure companies. Discussions with Railtrack concerning the integration of the subsurface railway and the national rail network are continuing to make progress.

The Greater London Authority Bill, which contains the new powers governing the public private partnership, is in its final stages in the House of Lords.

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what estimate he has made of the principal capital sums which need to be expended on the London Underground in respect of

(a) each line, *(b)* multi-line improvements and *(c)* other aspects, indicating the principal purposes of each and the (i) sums and (ii) proportion of each item or the total amount arising from the shortfall in past maintenance. [94792]

Mr. Hill: Information is not available in the form requested. London Underground have made the following line-by-line estimates of how much it will cost to implement the performance regime being developed for the first 15 years of the proposed Public Private Partnership. They estimate that £1.2 billion of the total projected expenditure of £7.36 billion can be attributed to past funding constraints on the Underground network.

£ million (1999–2000 prices)

Line	*Indicative projection of 15 year investment expenditure*
Bakerloo	390
Central, Waterloo and City	780
Victoria	900
Northern[1]	950
Jubilee[2]	280
Piccadilly	1,190
Metropolitan, Circle, Hammersmith and City	1,700
District	970
East London[3]	200
Total	7,360

[1] Northern Line train investment costs are contracted for under a separate PFI scheme and are excluded from these figures.
[2] Excludes operating and maintenance costs for the Jubilee Line Extension project.
[3] Excludes costs from potential project for extending East London Line.

Waste Minimisation Act

29. **Angela Smith:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will undertake a review of the Waste Minimisation Act 1998. [94241]

Mr. Hutton: As the Waste Minimisation Act came into force only in November 1998, it is too early to undertake a review of it. During the passage of this Act, the Government promised to provide guidance to Local Authorities on the powers it conferred on councils and on the issue of consultation. My Department will be issuing such guidance shortly.

Urban Task Force

30. **Mr. Chaytor:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what progress has been made in the north west with regard to implementing the recommendations contained in the report of the Urban Task Force, "The Urban Renaissance". [94242]

Ms Armstrong: The Government is considering the recommendations of the Urban Task Force's report in its preparation of the new Urban and Rural White Papers which are due to be published next summer. The Government has launched a pilot urban regeneration company, Liverpool Vision, and has invited Manchester City Council to submit a proposal for a second pilot in East Manchester.

Norfolk Broads

31. **Dr. Gibson:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to review the impact of aquatic pollution on the Norfolk Broads. [94243]

Mr. Mullin: The Environment Agency, as the environmental regulator, is responsible for keeping this matter under review. On their advice, parts of the Broads have been designated Sensitive Areas (eutrophic) under the Urban Waste Water Treatment Directive. This is subject to 4 yearly review due to report next in 2001. Designation requires phosphorus removal from sewage treatment works into the affected waters to combat eutrophication. The Agency is keeping this and other pollution sources under review through monitoring and research. Proposals for further action will be included in the Broadland Rivers Local Environmental Action Plan, which is in the final stages of preparation following public consultation.

Alternative Fuels

32. **Mr. Rendel:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what research his Department has commissioned into alternative fuels. [94244]

Mr. Hill: The most recent research, commissioned jointly by my Department, DTI and MAFF, compared the emissions performance of a wide range of alternatively fuelled vehicles. The results were published by HMSO early last year as "Alternative Road Transport Fuels—UK field trials, Volumes 1 and 2".

Climate Change

33. **Mr. Jim Murphy:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what discussions he has had with Ministers of other EU countries about climate change and the impact upon rare animal species. [94245]

Mr. Meacher: I regularly speak to my EU partners about the potential impacts of climate change and how to mitigate it. The EU fifth framework research programme includes a key action on global change, climate and biodiversity, and my Department and English Nature have commissioned research to address this issue.

Yorkshire and Humberside Regional Chamber

34. **Mr. Bill O'Brien:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will report on progress in the establishment of the Regional Chamber in Yorkshire and Humberside. [94246]

Ms Armstrong: The Regional Chamber for Yorkshire and Humberside was designated, under the Regional Development Agencies Act 1998, on 27 July 1999.

Rural Public Transport

Mr. Borrow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what representations he has received on the provision of rural public transport. [94238]

Mr. Hill: We have received representations on the provision of public transport from a range of individuals living in rural areas, as well as from a number of interested organisations.

Housing Benefit Subsidy

Mr. Austin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what estimate he has made of the reduction in expenditure by his Department on housing benefit subsidy in respect of rent rebates paid to local authorities in each of the years 1989–90 to 1998–99 as a result of large scale voluntary transfers of tenants to registered social landlords; and what are his estimates for 1999–2000 and for each of the years from 2000–01 to 2029–30. [94346]

Mr. Mullin: The only estimates which have been made are the projections made for three years ahead at the time of each transfer. These are set out in the following table. Our records do not extend back to cover transfers made before 1991–92. No figures are available for 1999–2000 and future years because we do not yet know what transfers may occur.

Projected rent rebate subsidy savings at time of transfer

£ million

Year of transfer	*1992–93*	*1993–94*	*1994–95*	*1995–96*	*1996–97*	*1997–98*	*1998–99*	*1999–2000*	*2000–01*	*2001–02*
1991–92	3.3	3.2	3.1	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
1992–93	—	14.5	18.5	19.7	—	—	—	—	—	—
1993–94	—	—	14.4	13.3	9.2	—	—	—	—	—
1994–95	—	—	—	16.5	14.0	13.5	—	—	—	—
1995–96	—	—	—	—	26.7	26.6	26.3	—	—	—
1996–97	—	—	—	—	—	8.1	8.3	8.3	—	—
1997–98	—	—	—	—	—	—	28.6	28.4	28.6	—
1998–99	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	30.2	28.9	26.8

Renovation Grants

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what proposals he has to increase renovation grants for *(a)* improving the quality of housing in the private sector and *(b)* helping owner-occupiers on low incomes; and if he will make a statement. [94796]

Mr. Mullin: Local authorities are responsible for paying renovation grants to help owner-occupiers on low incomes improve their homes and are funded from within the local authorities' housing capital programme, partly from subsidy allocated by central Government and partly from authorities' own resources. Decisions on the size of their renovation grant programme are taken by authorities in the light of their housing strategy and the housing needs of the different forms of tenure. From April next year, there will no longer be a separate ring-fenced allocation to support renovation grant expenditure. The resources will, instead, be included in a new single capital allocation for housing. This will give local authorities more freedom to decide the balance between investment in their own housing stock and in private sector renewal. Next year, local authorities will be allocated an additional £30 million [redacted] capital investment in housing, which is part of the additional £5 billion being made available over the life of this Parliament.

Minicabs

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will extend section 37 of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 to cover minicabs, with particular reference to the problems of sight-impaired people with guide dogs. [94865]

Mr. Hill: Such a change would require primary legislation and at this stage we have no plans to introduce any amendment in respect of private hire vehicles (PHVs).

Having said that, there is a power available to licensing authorities outside London under Section 51(2) of the Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1976 enabling them to attach such conditions to the grant of a PHV driver's licence as they consider reasonably necessary. Bearing in mind that this power is subject to an appeals procedure, it would be up to individual councils in their capacity as licensing authorities to consider whether it could, or should, be applied in respect of guide dogs.

With regard to the situation in London, I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I gave on 25 October, *Official Report*, column *669*.

Railway Policing

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what proposals he has to enhance railway security and policing, with special reference to assaults on railway staff. [95171]

Mr. Hill: The Government expects all public transport operators to adopt the crime prevention strategies in our guidance "Personal Security on Public Transport—Guidelines for Operators". This includes measures such as CCTV, improved lighting and the availability of trained staff.

My Department has launched the Secure Stations scheme, with the British Transport Police (BTP) and Crime Concern, to encourage railway companies to work with the BTP to improve security and reduce the fear of crime. Stations can apply to become accredited as "Secure Stations" by meeting agreed standards on crime prevention measures. 21 stations have so far been independently awarded "Secure Station" status.

Assaults on railway staff are a growing problem and the Health and Safety Commission's Railway Industry Advisory Committee (RIAC) organised a conference in July to discuss what could be done to address this matter. The conference was attended by representatives of the Health and Safety Executive, Railtrack, the BTP and the train operating companies. It was agreed that RIAC should develop guidance setting out good practice to

assist railway managers with developing action plans to combat the problem. RIAC are now developing these proposals.

Parish and Town Councils

Mr. Collins: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has for the future of parish and town councils. [95329]

Ms Beverley Hughes: As stated in our White Paper "Modern Local Government—In Touch with the People" (Cm 4014)

"Parish councils will continue to play a key role in many of our towns and villages".

In our forthcoming Rural White Paper we intend to address further how we see parish councils playing their part in rural local governance.

Paddington Rail Services

Mr. Denzil Davies: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what was the total number of scheduled passenger train services entering and leaving Paddington railway station in (i) 1995, (ii) 1996, (iii) 1997 and (iv) 1998. [94874]

Mr. Hill: This information is not held by the Government.

Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty

Mr. Edwards: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to give further protection to designated areas of outstanding natural beauty. [95224]

Mr. Mullin: My right hon. Friend the Minister for the Environment expects to make an announcement shortly about measures to conserve and enhance designated Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty.

Millennium Compliance

Mr. Nigel Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the preparations made by housing associations in respect of the millennium computer bug. [95215]

Mr. Mullin: The Housing Corporation is responsible for assessing preparations taken by Registered Social Landlords (RSLs) to deal with the millennium computer bug.

In its progress report to the Action 2000 National Infrastructure Forum on 21 October 1999, the Housing Corporation confirmed that no evidence had been found, in respect of those RSLs owning about 80 per cent. of total RSL stock to suggest that millennium bug concerns had been inadequately addressed.

The Housing Corporation anticipates that all remaining RSLs will be prepared for the millennium change by mid November.

Thermal Insulation

Mr. Levitt: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what changes were made to BS 5422 on thermal insulation of pipes after the Rio Earth Summit; and what assessment he has made of its compliance with Part L of the Building Regulations 1991. [94886]

Ms Beverley Hughes: Changes to British Standards are a matter for the British Standards Institute and its technical committees. I am aware however that BS 5422 is currently being revised to incorporate among other things a new method of assessing appropriate insulation thicknesses that takes account of environmental issues.

BS 5422 is referenced in the Approved Document which supports Part L of the Building Regulations. This too is currently under review. During the course of the review we shall be examining whether standards of insulation applied to vessels, pipes and ducts should be increased, and also whether the reference to the revised BS 5422 is still appropriate.

Ragwort

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what steps he is taking to combat the spread of ragwort *(a)* along roadside verges and *(b)* in liaison with local authorities and utilities in respect of land owned by them. [95318]

Mr. Hill: For roadside verges, eradication of noxious weeds on road verges in England is the responsibility of highway authorities. These authorities take measures to eradicate ragwort when made aware that a problem exists. The Highways Agency's current policy on noxious weeds for the trunk road and motorway network in England is to seek out infestation and take appropriate control measures. Maintenance of roadside verges on local authority roads is the responsibility of the local highway authorities, who are free to set their own standards. However, DETR are working with local authorities to produce a new code of practice for maintaining their roads, and will recommend that they adopt the same procedures for ragwort elimination as on national roads.

For land owned by local authorities and utilities, the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food has policy responsibility for control of injurious weeds, of which ragwort is one, under the Weeds Act 1959. Under its provisions, the Ministry may investigate complaints from any occupiers of agricultural land who consider that their land is threatened by ragwort spreading from land nearby. Where a specific complaint is received about ragwort spreading from land occupied by utilities or local authorities, the local Ministry regional service centre may approach the utility or authority concerned to request that control measures be taken. Where such measures are not put in hand, the Weeds Act gives the Minister powers to implement statutory procedures to ensure that weed control is carried out.

Shorthold Tenancy Agreements

Mr. Sanders: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what representations he has received from *(a)* landlords and *(b)* tenants regarding shorthold tenancy agreements; and if he will make a statement. [94885]

Mr. Mullin: Since April 1999, nine letters have been received from landlords and 26 from tenants regarding various aspects of assured shorthold tenancy agreements.

The main topics raised are repossession and tenants' rights (by landlords) and affordability, condition, housing benefit and security of tenure (by tenants).

We believe that to encourage growth in long term, good quality accommodation for private letting, we must secure the confidence of landlords in a stable policy framework while at the same time ensuring that the interests of tenants are protected. We therefore have no plans to change the legislative framework of assured and assured shorthold tenancies established under the Housing Act 1988.

Noise (Heathrow)

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the level of night-time noise around Heathrow Airport in connection with attempts to meet the night-time noise exposure levels under the EU Fifth Environmental Action Programme by 2000. [95248]

Mr. Mullin: The Fifth Environmental Action Programme does not require such an assessment to be made.

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) what assessment he has made of the long-term implications for noise from air traffic around Heathrow Airport and under its flight paths of the adoption of an EU noise abatement programme which has as its objective ensuring that no person should be exposed to levels of noise which endanger health and quality of life; [95247]

(2) what assessment he has made of the long-term implications of the adoption of the EU noise abatement programme with regard to the operations and competitiveness of *(a)* Heathrow and *(b)* other UK airports. [95246]

Mr. Mullin: The European Commission has stated its intention to make a proposal for a Directive on environmental noise. However, this is not expected until late next year and the UK Government will treat the proposals on their merits as they emerge.

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) what level of noise from air traffic he has assessed to be excessive around Heathrow Airport and under its flight paths between 2300 and 0700 hours in the past year; [95460]

(2) how many people are exposed to excessive noise from air traffic around Heathrow and under its flight paths between 2300 and 0700; and what were the number for each year since 1993; [95461]

(3) what steps have been taken to measure the levels of noise experienced at night between 1 and 2 metres above ground level in residential areas *(a)* around Heathrow Airport and *(b)* under flight paths to Heathrow. [95468]

Mr. Mullin: For many years, one of the objectives of the night restrictions has been to protect local communities around Heathrow, Gatwick and Stansted airports from excessive aircraft noise levels at night. It has been the view of successive Governments that policy on night noise should be firmly based on research into the relationship between aircraft noise and interference with sleep and that, in order to preserve the balance between different interests, this should continue to be the basis for decisions. The "Night Restrictions at Heathrow, Gatwick and Stansted: Second Stage Consultation", published on 17 November 1998, included a summary of research. Copies were placed in the Library.

My Department has for many years published daytime (7.00 am—11.00 pm) aircraft noise contours for the area around Heathrow. They show a substantial improvement in the daytime noise climate over the past two decades.

The Department does not publish night-time noise contours. A 1998 study found that there is not enough research evidence to underpin scientifically robust night contours relating noise to annoyance. Its publication was announced on 27 February 1998, *Official Report*, columns *403–04*. However, a comparison of the seasonal totals of the 'quota count' (QC) ratings of aircraft counted against the noise quotas, indicates that there has been an improvement in the night noise climate around Heathrow, between 11.30 pm and 6.00 am, since the introduction of the present night restrictions regime in 1993. Information on this was also given in the "Night Restrictions at Heathrow, Gatwick and Stansted: Second Stage Consultation".

Night Flights

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has for changing the night flight restrictions at Heathrow, Gatwick and Stansted airports. [95233]

Mr. Mullin: The Government announced new night flight restrictions at Heathrow, Gatwick and Stansted airports on 10 June 1999, *Official Report*, columns *378–80*, which will last for five years, from 31 October 1999 until the end of the 2004 summer season. This followed a two-stage consultation between February 1998 and February 1999. The 10 June announcement included notification of a review of the QC system before the 2002 summer season. It also recognised that it may be necessary to review the Stansted night restrictions before 2004 if the current strong growth in traffic there were to continue. We expect to announce shortly the decision on Part 2 of the second-stage consultation on options for changes to the preferential use of Heathrow's runways at night.

Birds of Prey

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will require owners of birds of prey to have a licence of competence before allowing them to fly freely. [95320]

Mr. Mullin: Adequate statutory controls are already in place to regulate possession, welfare and trade in these sensitive species. I believe we can continue to rely on the long tradition of British falconry and its voluntary associations to maintain and disseminate satisfactory standards for those who fly birds of prey.

Turkish Earthquake

Mr. Baldry: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the assistance being given to the UK construction industry to help in Turkey following the earthquake. [R] [95464]

Mr. Raynsford: I led a construction sector trade mission to Turkey on 20–24 September. One of the themes of this visit was to explore ways in which UK companies might participate in the planning and redevelopment of the areas worst affected by the tragic earthquake on 17 August.

I and the businessmen who travelled with me were appalled by the extent of destruction, particularly in the city of Adapazari. Adapazari has a population of 350,000 and is part of the industrial heartland of Turkey with some 350 factories. The World Bank investigation team estimated that the rebuilding of this city would require more time and more careful planning than the others which it had visited, because of the extent of the damage and the poor ground conditions that exist in the area.

Following the visit, the Government has in principle agreed to provide financial support, on a 50:50 basis, for an initiative by a group of nine UK companies which would provide much-needed consultancy advice on the reconstruction of Adapazari. This offer of assistance was delivered to the Deputy Prime Minister of Turkey on Monday 18 October.

Countryside Access

Mr. Fearn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to provide for greater rights of public access to *(a)* coastal land, *(b)* privately-owned woodland and *(c)* riverbanks. [95434]

Mr. Mullin: In March this year, the Government announced plans to introduce a new statutory right of access on foot to specified categories of open countryside—mountain, moor, heath, down and registered common land. As part of its announcement, the Government also asked the Countryside Agency, together with the Countryside Council for Wales and the Forestry Commission, to report on the case for extending public access to other types of open countryside, such as coast, woodland and riverside. We look forward to receiving their formal report and advice very shortly (I am aware that the Countryside Agency has already set out its recommendations on its website). We will wish to consider their views carefully before deciding how best to proceed.

Driving Standards Agency

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what proportion of practical driving tests were passed each year from 1983; and in which year the Driving Standards Agency became fully self-funding. [95540]

Ms Armstrong: Driving test pass rate data are not available for the years prior to 1989. Details for the financial years 1989–90 to 1998–99 are given in the following table.

Year	*Car*	*Motorcycle*	*Lorry*	*Bus*
1989–90	52.2	71.0	50.0	55.0
1990–91	52.4	52.0	51.0	55.0
1991–92	50.8	68.3	50.0	56.0
1992–93	49.75	69.70	50.0	53.0
1993–94	47.9	70.15	49.0	52.0
1994–95	46.9	70.5	47.5	70.5
1995–96	45.7	70.1	47.0	49.3
1996–97	44.7	67.5	48.1	48.7
1997–98	46.7	68.6	52.8	47.7
1998–99	45.9	67.9	51.8	47.8

The Driving Standards Agency became a Trading Fund in April 1997. Prior to that, it operated as an on-Vote non-statutory trading body, and was required to recover its full costs through fees and charges.

Parish Councils

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he plans to make an Order to effect the establishment of parish councils for *(a)* Hereford City and *(b)* Belmont; and if he will make a statement. [95676]

Ms Beverley Hughes: We intend to consult the Herefordshire Council and other interested parties shortly on a draft Order. Subject to that consultation the intention is to make the Order before the end of 1999 with the view to first elections for the new parishes being held in May 2000.

Pubs (Business Rates)

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will issue guidance on the application of the powers to reduce business rates to 50 per cent. on public houses. [95634]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The village shop rate relief scheme gives billing authorities a discretionary power to grant up to 100 per cent. rates relief to any business in a listed rural settlement, provided the rateable value of the property occupied is less than £10,000 and, in the view of the authority, is used for purposes which are of benefit to the local community. The legislation does not rule out any business or premises from receiving relief, and public houses might therefore qualify.

Guidance on the village shop rate relief scheme and eligibility for discretionary relief was issued to all billing authorities on 12 December 1997.

Leasehold Tenure

Mr. Waterson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he expects to announce plans to reform leasehold tenure; and if he will make a statement. [95915]

Mr. Mullin: We have almost completed our analysis of the responses received to our consultation paper on residential leasehold reform, and will announce our conclusions shortly.

Building Regulations

Mr. Chidgey: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he expects the Electrical Wiring Regulations set out in Building Standard BS 7671 to be incorporated into the building regulations. [95263]

Ms Beverley Hughes: My Department has been working with the Building Regulations Advisory Committee and others to develop proposals for

amendments to the Building Regulations that would introduce requirements for electrical safety in dwellings. The draft proposals indicate that following the recommendations in the British Standard BS 7671 would be a way of achieving compliance. The Building Act 1984 requires consultation with interested bodies before substantive amendments are made to the Building Regulations. I intend to announce consultation on these proposals once I am satisfied that they meet our better regulation criteria. Whether and when amendments are made will depend upon the outcome of this consultation. Electrical safety requirements for buildings other than dwellings are already made in the Electricity at Work Regulations 1989.

Millennium Dome

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what contingency plans are in place for visitors to travel to the Millennium Dome in the event that the Jubilee Line extension is not fully operable by 1 January 2000. [95807]

Mr. Hill: The Government expects that the whole of the Jubilee Line extension will be up and running from end-to-end in time for the opening of the Millennium Experience and hope that all stations will be open by the end of this year. A 15 train per hour Monday to Friday service is already operating to North Greenwich station through the Stratford to Waterloo section of the line. This is expected to be increased to 24 trains per hour seven days a week when through running from Stanmore to Stratford is successfully achieved in due course. Visitors to the Dome will therefore be able to travel on the Jubilee Line, even if access to the line is not possible from all of the stations at the end of the year.

It had, however, been decided in June 1998 that it would be irresponsible not to have contingency arrangements in place to manage problems on any of the main transport links to the Millennium Dome during the Millennium Year. London Underground Ltd. have therefore, in association with London's other transport operators, developed plans to cover a wide range of possible scenarios and a robust command and control strategy to direct those plans should they need to be invoked.

In the event of disruption, contingency provision will be made available through a combination of spare capacity on the other available public transport links to the Dome and a small number of additional buses and boats that have been contracted to be made available at short notice. A summary of the contingency plan arrangements has been placed in the Library of the House.

Dogs (Identification)

Mr. Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what legislation exists to require dogs to be identified; and if he will make a statement. [95665]

Mr. Hill: The Control of Dogs Order 1992 made under the Animal Health Act 1981 requires every dog (with some exceptions) while in a highway or in a place of public resort to wear a collar with the name and address of the owner inscribed on the collar or on a place or badge attached to it. My Department has set up a Dog Identification Working Group to reflect a consensus view on all the available options for dog identification. They will be producing a report in due course. No decisions will be taken until we have fully considered the report.

Recycling

Mr. Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the EU measures relating to recycling which apply in the UK; and if he will make a statement on the UK's performance in respect of such measures. [95562]

Mr. Mullin: Currently only the EC Directive on Packaging and Packaging Waste (94/62/EC) imposes recovery and recycling targets for the UK. The Directive requires Member States to recover 50 per cent. of all packaging materials by 2001, of which half must be recycled.

The Producer Responsibility Obligations (Packaging Waste) Regulations 1997 implement part of the Directive in the UK. In 1998, according to returns to the Environment Agency and the Scottish Environment Protection Agency—the bodies responsible for monitoring compliance with the Regulations—UK business exceeded their recovery obligation of 2,393,327 tonnes, with a total of 3,322,715 tonnes, with 2,874,316 tonnes having been recycled.

Plants (EU Transportation)

Mr. Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what *(a)* guidelines and *(b)* legislation applies to the application of fees for transporting certain types of plants across EU borders; what the (i) cost and (ii) purpose of licences for such transportation is; what plans he has to make representations to the EU on this matter; and if he will make a statement. [95728]

Mr. Mullin: EU Wildlife Trade Regulations 338–97 and 939–97, implementing the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), contain provisions for the control of trade and movement of listed species of endangered animals and plants. The controls apply to imports and exports across the external frontier. Member states may set fees for issuing the relevant import and export permits. Under the Control of Trade in Endangered Species (Fees) Regulations 1997 the current fee for import and export permits for plants issued by the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions is £7 per genus. There is a reduction to £5 per genus for non commercial consignments and for consignments of 5 or more genera.

Within the European Union there are controls on the sale (including movement for sale) and purchase of the most endangered category of plants listed in Annex A of Council Regulation 338–97. Such activities may be subject to the issue of a certificate from my Department although no fee is charged. Detailed guidance is available on demand to all applicants for CITES permits or certificates.

Domestic Electrical Installations

Mr. Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he

has to require domestic electrical installations to conform to a national minimum standard; and if he will make a statement. [95572]

Ms Beverley Hughes: My Department has been working with the Building Regulations Advisory Committee and others to develop proposals for amendments to the Building Regulations that would introduce requirements for electrical safety in dwellings. The draft proposals include the publication of approved guidance indicating that following the recommendations in British Standard BS 7671, "Requirements for Electrical Installations" would be a way of achieving compliance. I will announce consultation on these proposals once I am satisfied that they meet our better regulation criteria. Whether to amend the Building Regulations will depend upon the results of this consultation.

Draft Waste Strategy

Mr. Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to amend the draft waste strategy; what representations he has received on this matter; and if he will make a statement. [95563]

Mr. Mullin: The Government published for consultation its draft waste strategy for England and Wales, "A Way With Waste", on 30 June 1999. We have received over 500 substantive submissions from a wide range of interested parties, and around 20,000 postcards urging higher recycling targets from members of the public. These views will be taken into consideration as we develop the final strategy.

The final version of our sustainable waste management strategy—which we will publish early next year—will be a long-term strategy for handling the waste generated by businesses, service providers and households. The Government is committed to introducing and promoting sustainable waste management across the UK. This means using materials resources efficiently, to cut down on the amount of waste we produce. And where waste is produced, dealing with it in a way that actively contributes to the economic, social and environmental goals of sustainable development.

Mobile Telephone Masts

Mr. Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to review the planning requirements as regards the siting of mobile telephone masts. [95679]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The provisions of Part 24 of Schedule 2 to the Town and Country Planning (General Permitted Development) Order 1995 (GPDO) which govern the installation of mobile telephone masts were amended earlier this year by SI 1999 No. 1661. Guidance on these changes is contained in DETR Circular 04/99 which complements Planning Policy Guidance note 8 (revised) (PPG8) on telecommunications. In December 1998 the Department issued for consultation a draft circular prepared jointly with the Department of Health on land use planning and electromagnetic fields. We are currently considering the responses received.

Consumer Protection (Spending)

Mr. Cash: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the levels of spending on consumer protection per head of population in *(a)* Staffordshire and *(b)* each other county of England (i) in the current year and (ii) in each of the last three years. [94016]

Dr. Howells: I have been asked to reply.

The figures requested are contained in the following table. Expenditure per head has been calculated by dividing the total expenditure on consumer protection for each county (excluding those abolished during local government reorganisation), as collected by the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, by the total population of the county. The population data used are the latest available, namely for mid 1997.

Total expenditure figures for the financial years 1996–97 and 1997–98 are actual out-turns; those for 1998–99 are provisional out-turns; and the 1999–2000 figures are budget estimates.

Figures reflect the changes in local authority boundaries that came into effect in 1998–99.

Consumer protection net expenditure per head of population for the Shire counties for the years 1996–97 to 1999–2000

£

	1996–97	1997–98	1998–99	1999–2000
Bedfordshire[1]	2.55	—	—	—
Bedfordshire	0	2.61	2.57	2.7
Berkshire	2.4	2.4	—	—
Buckinghamshire[1]	2.66	—	—	—
Buckinghamshire	0	2.14	2.13	2.38
Cambridgeshire[1]	2.2	2.13	—	—
Cambridgeshire	0	0	2.22	2.09
Cheshire[1]	2.11	2.16	—	—
Cheshire	0	0	2.09	2.39
Cornwall	2.38	2.6	2.41	2.88
Cumbria	2.8	2.74	2.75	2.74
Derbyshire[1]	1.96	—	—	—
Derbyshire	0	2.38	3.03	3.21
Devon[1]	2.26	2.19	—	—
Devon	0	0	2.2	2.25
Dorset[1]	2.42	—	—	—
Dorset	0	2.43	2.84	2.82
Durham[1]	2.66	—	—	—
Durham	0	2.71	2.85	2.99
East Sussex[1]	1.97	—	—	—
East Sussex	0	1.88	1.92	1.9
Essex[1]	2.03	2.02	—	—
Essex	0	0	2.05	2.1
Gloucestershire	2.21	2.36	2.62	2.68
Hampshire[1]	2	—	—	—
Hampshire	0	2.12	2.27	2.35
Hereford and Worcester	2.61	2.56	—	—
Worcestershire	0	0	2.64	2.7
Hertfordshire	1.88	1.89	1.71	1.74
Kent[1]	2.37	2.4	—	—
Kent	0	0	2.44	2.48
Lancashire[1]	2.26	2.37	—	—
Lancashire	0	0	2.65	2.73
Leicestershire[1]	2.11	—	—	—
Leicestershire	0	2.11	2.7	2.81
Lincolnshire	2.43	2.48	2.36	2.39
Norfolk	1.98	2.05	2.19	2.23
North Yorkshire	2.45	2.18	2.47	2.61
Northamptonshire	2.25	2.21	2.32	2.32
Northumberland	2.66	2.83	3.02	3.37
Nottinghamshire[1]	2.72	2.85	—	—
Nottinghamshire	0	0	2.81	2.78
Oxfordshire	2.29	2.3	2.31	2.32
Shropshire[1]	2.95	3.49	—	—

Consumer protection net expenditure per head of population for the Shire counties for the years 1996–97 to 1999–2000

£

	1996–97	1997–98	1998–99	1999–2000
Shropshire	0	0	3.86	3.85
Somerset	2.9	2.91	3.27	3.38
Staffordshire[1]	2.39	—	—	—
Staffordshire	0	2.68	2.65	2.69
Suffolk	2.36	2.29	2.42	2.53
Surrey	2.36	2.41	2.49	2.63
Warwickshire	3.24	3.3	2.93	3.2
West Sussex	2.69	2.63	2.77	2.82
Wiltshire[1]	2.14	—	—	—
Wiltshire	0	2.31	2.66	2.91

[1] These figures relate to spending by the authority prior to boundary changes as a result of Local Government reorganisation.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

European Commissioners

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list the amount paid to each European commissioner who resigned earlier this year *(a)* arising from their resignation and *(b)* over the period to the appointment of the new Commission. [94807]

Mr. Vaz: Commissioners' terms and conditions of service are set down in the 1967 Council Regulation 422/67, a copy of which has been placed in the Library of the House.

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement about the current state of investigations into former EU commissioners in respect of possible fraud or misconduct. [94808]

Mr. Vaz: The Council has commenced proceedings in the European Court of Justice against Mr. Bangemann, a former Commissioner, under Article 213 (2) of the Treaty. This matter is sub judice.

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment his Department has made of each of the proposed reforms to the EU Commission put forward by the Commissioner for Administrative Reform. [94809]

Mr. Vaz: We fully support the process of reform in the new Commission. We welcome the progress already made; and in particular, the adoption of a new Code of Conduct covering Commissioners' behaviour, a re-organisation of Directorates General and a reorganisation of senior jobs (which are now filled according to merit rather than on the basis of a quota system). We welcome the Commission's intention to publish a White Paper on reform early next year.

Paul Van Buitenen

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations Her Majesty's Government have made to the European Commission about the position of EU employee Paul van Buitenen; and if he will make a statement. [94810]

Mr. Vaz: We have not made any representations on this matter. We welcome the Commission's intention to bring forward proposals for such guidelines and procedures as part of its package of reform.

Corpus Juris

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list the official positions in the European Communities currently held by contributors to the Corpus Juris document. [95229]

Mr. Charles Clarke: I have been asked to reply.

The research study "Corpus Juris: introducing penal provisions for the purposes of the financial interests of the European Union" was published in April 1997. It was written by a group of experts from the Association of European Lawyers for the Protection of the Financial Interests of the Community (ALPFIEC). Although the experts worked under the aegis of the Directorate General for Financial Control (DGXX) of the European Commission, they were independent of the Commission and held academic appointments which are listed in the publication. Information on any official positions currently held by the authors of the study is not available.

Working Time Directive

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what measures have been taken to reorganise his Department's workload in accordance with the Working Time Directive; and if he will make a statement. [95399]

Mr. Battle: The Department constantly reviews its workload to take account of changing demands and priorities. Guidance issued to staff and managers requires line managers to re-prioritise the work on their staff to ensure that working hours comply fully with the Working Time Directive and Regulations.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many of his Department's staff are exempt from the Working Time Directive. [95401]

Mr. Battle: All staff are subject to the provisions of the Working Time Directive and Regulations.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what has been the cost to his Department to date of implementing the working time regulations; what additional paperwork has been required; and what checks are undertaken internally. [95403]

Mr. Battle: No additional financial costs have been incurred so far. Staff who have opted to waive their rights to a maximum 48 hour week are required to keep records of the hours they work. Guidance for staff and managers on the application of the Working Time Directive and Regulations have been circulated to staff. Line Managers are required to ensure that the working hours of their staff comply fully with the Working Time Directive and Regulations.

Chinese President (State Visit)

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations

his Department made to the Metropolitan Police about the public order implications of the state visit of the President of China. [95647]

Mr. Battle: As is normal practice in preparing for State Visits, there were routine Whitehall meetings to go through the programme so that the Metropolitan Police could make their operational decisions.

Refugees

Mr. Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the UK's participation within NATO in respect of the provision of intelligence information regarding refugees. [95569]

Mr. Vaz: It is longstanding Government practice not to comment on intelligence matters.

Mr. Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what financial responsibility the UK has accepted in respect of refugees from the former Yugoslavia. [95570]

Mrs. Roche: I have been asked to reply.

Currently, refugees who arrive in the United Kingdom and claim asylum are entitled to welfare benefits if they claim asylum at the port of entry, or help under the National Assistance Act 1948 or the Children Act 1989 if they make their claim after they have entered the country.

International Criminal Tribunal (Former Yugoslavia)

Mr. Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what financial provision he has made in connection with requests from the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia; and if he will make a statement. [95566]

Mr. Hain: Our total UN assessed contribution to the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) to date is £7.1 million since the Tribunal was established in 1993. In addition, we have made voluntary contributions totalling just over £2.6 million towards, for example, the construction of ICTY's second court-room; its Exhumations Programme; the translation of Prosecution documents; and more recently a UK Scenes of Crime Team which is helping ICTY's investigation of atrocities in Kosovo.

China

Mr. Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations he has made to the Chinese Government about the persecution of people who practise Falun Gong; and if he will make a statement. [95561]

Mr. Battle: We have made a series of representations expressing our disappointment to the Chinese Government at the banning of the Falun Gong on 22 July and supported an EU Presidency demarche in Peking on 29 July to the Chinese Government. We reiterated our concerns about the Chinese government's treatment of Falun Gong adherents during the latest round of our high level Bilateral Human Rights Dialogue between 13–15 September. Both the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary raised the issue of human rights, including freedom of expression and freedom of religious belief, with the Chinese during the State Visit.

Burma

Mr. Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations he has made to the Government of Burma regarding the alleged massacres at Kwei and Hpway Plaw villages, and the killings at Ta Hpo Hkee and the Tavoy District; and if he will make a statement. [95669]

Mr. Battle: We had heard reports of these appalling events, but have been unable to substantiate the details. We remain deeply concerned about human rights violations against the Karen and other ethnic minorities in Burma and raise our concerns regularly with the military regime. We will continue to do so.

Egypt

Mr. Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what advice his Department is currently giving to those planning to travel to Egypt; and if he will make a statement. [95574]

Mr. Hain: The FCO travel advice for Egypt, as valid on 22 October 1999 is as follows:

Begins

"British nationals travelling to Egypt should keep in touch with developments in the Middle East. Any increase in regional tension might affect travel advice.

Over 200,000 British nationals visit Egypt each year. Most enjoy a trouble-free stay. Visitors should dress modestly, and respect local customs and sensitivities.

Beginning in 1992 extremists conducted a campaign of violence against the Egyptian Government, mainly in the Governorates of Minya and Assiut (half way between Cairo and Luxor) but with sporadic attacks in other areas. Most incidents were directed at the police, or were sectarian in nature. However, some were directed against tourists. In March 1999 the principal extremist group reportedly announced a ceasefire, which has held so far. But the risk of a renewed campaign, including attacks on foreigners, remains. In addition, Egypt is one of a number of countries where we believe there is a threat to British interests from global terrorism.

The Egyptian authorities have expressed their determination to prevent attacks on foreign visitors and have taken a number of steps to increase security, especially at tourist sites. British nationals should be vigilant and respect any advice from the local security authorities.

There remains a small risk from unexploded mines in some desert areas, and some limited coastal areas. Visitors should follow local advice, especially if travelling off road.

Local driving conditions and poor vehicle maintenance make road travel outside the main cities hazardous, especially at night. In the event of an accident emergency medical facilities are limited.

Millennium Bug

The Egyptian Government are continuing their efforts to minimise the effects of any Millennium Bug problems in Egypt. Based on the information available at present, we believe that as elsewhere, there is a risk of limited disruption in some sectors. Particular sectors include health and the mobile telephone network. British nationals resident in or visiting Egypt should take the potential for temporary disruption into account when making their plans for the New Year period. These should include checking insurance cover and having enough cash to cover contingencies."

Ends

FCO travel advice represents an objective assessment of the risks to British nationals. It is designed to help them choose whether to travel and how to reduce their exposure to danger. It is reviewed regularly.

International Criminal Court

Mr. Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what plans he has to ratify the Rome Statute for an International Criminal Court; and if he will make a statement. [95567]

Mr. Hain: The Government will bring forward legislation to enable ratification of the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court as soon as the parliamentary timetable permits. We are strongly committed to the Court and intend to be among the first sixty states to ratify.

Libya

Mr. Wyatt: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when he intends to appoint a commercial officer to the British Embassy in Tripoli; and if he will make a statement. [95887]

Mr. Hain: We have selected and appointed two UK based commercial officers to our Embassy in Tripoli. Following pre-posting preparation, the Head of Commercial Section should be in Tripoli in early December with his deputy following early next year.

British Trade International now offer a trade promotion service, within the constraints of the present lack of specialist commercial staff in Tripoli.

Full commercial support in Tripoli will be available when the commercial section is operational but staff in Tripoli will meanwhile continue to help where they can.

Special Operations Executive

Mr. Hope: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when he plans to release more records of the wartime Special Operations Executive. [96166]

Mr. Battle: The records of the Special Operations Executive (SOE) have been released on a rolling basis since 1993. The seventh batch, comprising SOE Section Histories and its Headquarters War Diaries, will be opened at the Public Record Office today. Further records, including Headquarters policy files, will be released in due course.

Congo

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations he has made to the Government of the Republic of Congo about torture of child witch doctors in Kinshasa. [95231]

Mr. Hain: We have asked our Embassy in Kinshasa to investigate these reports. We maintain a regular dialogue with the Minister for Human Rights in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, covering all facets of human rights and child rights issues. We condemn all acts of violence against civilians and any acts that cause unnecessary suffering. We continue to urge the Government of the Democratic Republic of the Congo to apply rigorously international humanitarian law and human rights law, including the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Tunisia

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when he last met the Tunisian Ambassador; and if he will make a statement on UK-Tunisian relations. [95097]

Mr. Hain: The Secretary of State has not yet met the Tunisian Ambassador, Mr. Jhinaoui. I last met him on 6 September.

Bilateral ties go back a long way and remain mutually productive. Tunisia is an important trading partner and Britain is one of the largest international investors there. Tunisia is also a constructive and moderate influence on many of the Middle East's regional problems. Human rights form an important part of our bilateral agenda. We have welcomed the recent release from gaol in Tunisia of two people championed by international human rights NGOs. We hope to build on this at both bilateral and EU level for a resolution to other outstanding cases.

Gender Impact Assessment

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs for what reason his Department has not carried out any gender impact assessments since June 1997. [95228]

Mr. Battle: My Department has introduced three pieces of legislation since June 1997 which were needed to implement internationally negotiated treaties in the United Kingdom. Gender impact assessments were not considered necessary for the legislation concerned.

My Department works closely with the Women's Unit, and will continue to consider the need for gender impact assessments for all new legislation.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Lifelong Learning

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what contacts he has made with *(a)* trade associations and *(b)* trades unions on the formulation of strategies for lifelong learning and continuing professional development. [95723]

Mr. Wicks: The Department works closely with a variety of organisations in formulating its strategies for lifelong learning and continuing professional development. These include Trade Associations and Trade Unions.

Toddington and Didbrook

Mr. Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment when he expects to make public his decision on the amalgamation of Toddington and Didbrook primary schools in Gloucester. [95712]

Ms Estelle Morris: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State informed Gloucestershire local education authority on Thursday 21 October that he had rejected the

proposals. The letter containing the Secretary of State's decision asked the local education authority to inform objectors.

Departmental Twinning

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many requests there have been to his Department for placement of officials from Central, East European and CIS states as twins of his officials; how many such officials have been accepted as twins; from which countries *(a)* those who were accepted and *(b)* those who were not accepted came; and which of these twinnings related to the (i) education and (ii) employment aspects of his Department. [93998]

Mr. Wills *[holding answer 25 October 1999]:* I refer my hon. Friend to the reply given by the Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester, East (Mr. Vaz) on 25 October 1999, *Official Report*, columns *739–40*.

New Deal (Disabled People)

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment when he plans to announce the national roll-out of the New Deal for Disabled People. [95726]

Ms Jowell: Together with colleagues at the Department for Social Security, we are currently considering what has been learnt from the pilot phase for a national extension of this New Deal. We hope to make an announcement on this in the near future.

Supported Employment

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what use he is making of research his Department has recently *(a)* commissioned and *(b)* evaluated into the demand for places for supported employment. [95727]

Ms Jowell: Responsibility for the subject of the question has been delegated to the Employment Service agency under its Chief Executive. I have asked him to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from Richard Foster to Mr. Tim Boswell, dated 25 October 1999:

As the Employment Service is an Executive Agency, the Secretary of State has asked Leigh Lewis to reply direct to your question about research into the demand for place for our Supported Employment Programme. This is something which falls within the responsibilities delegated to Mr. Lewis as Chief Executive of the Agency. I am replying in his absence.

The research was conducted by Sheila Honey and Matthew Williams at the Institute for Employment Studies and published in July 1998 under the title: Supply and Demand for Supported Employment. A copy is available in the House of Commons Library.

The Programme provides job support to over 22,000 disabled people with a range of employers and in supported factories and businesses. It is open to disabled people who face more complex barriers to getting or keeping a job because of their disability, but who can work effectively with support. The Programme is delivered in partnership with over 230 local authority and voluntary organisations and Remploy Ltd. Around 12,000 supported employees work in a variety of jobs with mainstream employers with the remainder working in around 190 supported factories and businesses, including some 6,3000 in Remploy factories.

The research provided estimates, using a variety of data sources, of the extent to which the supply of places on our Programme matched the potential demand on a geographical basis. Depending on the definition, the research indicated a potential additional demand of between 40,000 and 180,000 places. The lower figures was based on people who were unemployed and actively seeking work and the upper figure included those who were currently inactive in the labour market (such as students, those looking after families or homes, or people temporarily unable to work due to illness). It is unlikely, however, that all of those estimated as eligible for our Supported Employment Programme will actually demand a place—many are likely to find work in open employment or training.

The research also indicated that the degree to which the potential supply of places on the Programme matched the potential demand varied by Employment Service Region. Wales had the closest match between supply and demand, followed by the South West and the Northern Region. The greatest mismatch between supply and demand occurred in London, followed by the West Midlands and the North West.

East year some 3,000 people enter the Programme; and we are using the findings of the research to inform contract discussions with a view to addressing geographical imbalances over time. One key factor we take into account in these discussions is that any rapid redistribution of existing places could force people off the Programme (and potentially out of work). Many contractors also have a specific geographical rather than a national remit, for example local authorities, and cannot support people elsewhere.

Government funding for our Supported Employment Programme for 1999–2000 is £155.1 million. A further £5 million for this financial year and the two following financial years to March 2002 has been allocated as part of a new £30 million fund for disability services, announced in 1998 by the Secretary of State for Education and Employment. We are using this additional resource to increase the grant per place to local authority and voluntary body contractors, to support developments at Remploy, and to support proposals for a series of projects to develop and test ways of improving the effectiveness of the Programme and, in particular, its success in helping people to progress into open employment. Helping those disabled people who can cope with unsupported open employment to make the transition will release places for new people to enter the Programme.

I hope this is helpful.

Oral Statements

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list *(a)* the reports published by his Department and its associated bodies, *(b)* the reports received from bodies set up by his Department, *(c)* the decisions his Department has taken and *(d)* events in the UK and elsewhere, since 27 July, which satisfied the criteria he uses for deciding whether to apply to make oral statements to the House when the House is sitting. [93970]

Mr. Wills: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply given by my right hon. Friend the President of the Council on 19 October 1999, *Official Report*, column *429*.

Remploy

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what recent discussions he has had with Remploy in connection with divergence from their corporate plan. [94726]

Ms Hodge *[holding answer 19 October 1999]:* There have been no discussions with Remploy regarding changes to their Corporate Plan. Ministers have approved

the strategy in the Board's Corporate Plan for 1999–2002, and remain committed to Remploy's current Corporate Plan.

Age Diversity in Employment

Ms Kelly: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what was the outcome of his Department's consultation with heads of employment tribunals about the legal status of the Code of Practice on Age Diversity in Employment. [95951]

Ms Jowell: The consultation confirmed that as the Code is non-statutory it cannot be used as the basis of a legal decision. It may, in time, though, help inform the thinking of Employment Tribunals on what constitutes "reasonable behaviour". That will, however, be a matter for the Tribunals themselves.

Higher Education

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many higher education places remain unfilled at the start of the academic year. [95725]

Mr. Wicks: Student number targets are set by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) each year covering home and EU students (whether fundable by HEFCE or not) who are on full-time or sandwich courses, or on courses of initial teacher training (ITT). For 1998 these targets were broadly met in aggregate at the sector level. Equivalent figures are not yet available for 1999.

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many students he estimates are entering higher education in the current year; and if he will make a statement on trends relative to the last three years. [95724]

Mr. Wicks: The latest figures from the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) show that, as at 13 October, the number of UK domiciled applicants accepted for entry to full-time and sandwich undergraduate courses was 247,318, which represents an increase of 2 per cent. compared to 1998. Figures from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA), which cover both full-time and part-time students, show that undergraduate recruitment has held up over the last three years.

Employment Service

Mr. Hilary Benn: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what estimate he has made of the additional number of staff required in the Employment Service if unemployed claimants had to register every day; and what would be the cost in a full year of employing such staff. [95656]

Ms Jowell: Responsibility for the subject of the question has been delegated to the Employment Service agency under its Chief Executive. I have asked him to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from Richard Foster to Mr. Hilary Benn, dated 25 October 1999:

As the Employment Service is an Executive Agency, the Secretary of State has asked Leigh Lewis to reply to your question concerning the additional staff numbers and costs that would be required should daily registration be required from unemployed claimants. This is something that falls within the responsibilities delegated to Mr. Lewis as Chief Executive of the Agency. I am replying in his absence.

Using the current live headline unemployment level of 1.2m along with staffing assumptions for current registration activities, the total additional staff numbers required to manage the daily registration would be approximately 25,000 at a cost of £400m in a full year.

I hope this is helpful.

TECs

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what discussions he has had with the Chairman of the TECs regarding their contribution to a legal fighting fund to challenge the Governments' proposals on the use of their reserves and assets when they are wound up. [95413]

Mr. Wicks: We are aware that the TEC National Council (TNC) has been taking legal advice on behalf of TECs. Officials and the Department's legal advisers have met the TNC on a without prejudice basis to discuss the legal aspects and implications around the termination of the Licence. We have also made it absolutely clear to TEC Chairmen and Boards that we expect TECs to work with us to ensure a smooth transition to the new arrangements and that resources are used effectively and efficiently for the benefit of learners, businesses and local communities.

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list the reserves and assets of each TEC indicating those moneys which came from *(a)* public and *(b)* private sources. [95414]

Mr. Wicks: The following table sets out the reserves of each TEC in England based upon information drawn from the companies' audited statutory accounts for 1998–99. The table splits the reserves into those which TECs believe attributable to funds derived from payments made by the Secretaries of State and those attributable to funds from other sources. Reserves include all assets less any liabilities of TECs. We are currently discussing with TECs the basis on which non attributable reserves have been calculated.

Split of TEC reserves 1998–99

£

TECs	*Attributable to SoS*	*Attributable to other*	*Total reserves*
Hampshire	6,156,000	—	6,156,000
Wight	1,040,094	—	1,040,094
Kent	4,364,691	1,079	4,363,612
Milton Keynes	1,372,558	303,262	1,675,820
Heart of England	1,902,407	361,068	2,263,475
Surrey	2,022,318	740,914	2,763,232
Sussex	4,578,000	199,000	4,777,000
Thames Valley	6,808,754	265,010	7,073,764
South East Total	28,244,822	1,868,175	30,112,997
AZTEC	3,299,489	—	3,299,489
FOCUS	3,830,000	1,316,000	5,146,000
LeTEC	5,215,737	795,472	6,011,209
North London	1,786,468	804,977	2,591,445

Split of TEC reserves 1998–99

£

TECs	*Attributable to SoS*	*Attributable to other*	*Total reserves*
North West London	2,691,411	137,608	2,829,019
SOLOTEC[1]	3,971,000	886,000	4,857,000
West London	3,085,429	207,000	3,292,429
London Total	23,879,534	4,147,057	28,026,591
WESTEC[1]	4,213,000	10,000	4,223,000
Prosper	6,298,000	—	6,298,000
Dorset	3,141,418	—	3,141,418
Gloucester	1,806,252	1,092,191	2,898,443
Somerset	2,877,938	76,965	2,954,903
Wiltshire	2,650,552	—	2,650,552
South West Total	20,987,160	1,179,156	22,166,316
Birmingham	6,440,000	2,548,000	8,988,000
Cov/War	1,545,060	2,029,898	3,574,958
Dudley	2,159,637	84,000	2,243,637
HAWTEC	1,334,449	1,478,014	2,812,463
Sandwell	1,872,568	276,500	2,149,068
Shropshire	2,910,359	1,161,773	4,072,132
Staffordshire	4,773,000	224,000	4,997,000
Walsall	1,075,097	200,000	1,275,097
Wolverhampton	1,611,000	124,000	1,735,000
West Midlands Total	23,721,170	8,126,185	31,847,355
Greater Nottingham	3,573,000	788,000	4,361,000
Leicester	2,509,113	638,834	3,147,947
Lincoln	1,083,140	2,281,073	3,364,213
Northamptonshire	4,736,401	—	4,736,401
North Derby	1,157,063	420,001	1,577,064
North Nottingham	2,228,163	—	2,228,163
South Derby	3,322,000	861,000	4,183,000
East Midlands Total	18,608,880	4,988,908	23,597,788
Bedford	790,696	527,536	1,318,232
Cambs TEC	1,285,874	—	1,285,874
Essex	8,090,000	355,000	8,445,000
Greater Peterborough	1,993,335	47,000	2,040,335
Hertfordshire	5,695,000	421,000	6,116,000
Nor/Wav	3,524,000	181,000	3,705,000
Suffolk	3,890,815	—	3,890,815
Eastern Total	25,269,720	1,531,536	26,801,256
Barnsley/Doncaster	6,653,000	102,000	6,755,000
Bradford	2,148,861	—	2,148,861
Cardles/Kirkles	1,395,743	—	1,395,743
Humber	6,069,427	—	6,069,427
Leeds	4,513,167	—	4,513,167
North Yorkshire	6,207,000	—	6,207,000
Rotherham	2,457,875	322,386	2,780,261
Sheffield	2,874,000	168,000	3,042,000
Wakefield	889,830	106,542	996,372
Yorkshire and Humberside Total	33,208,903	698,928	33,907,831
Bolton/Bury[1]	2,802,363	580,132	3,382,495
Manchester	6,891,000	2,540,132	9,431,132
Wigan	1,103,385	489,988	1,593,373
Oldham	1,364,670	214,927	1,579,597
Rochdale	1,713,582	378,740	2,092,322
South and East Cheshire	3,418,445	1,371,785	4,790,230
Stockport	2,592,458	—	2,592,458
Cumbria	1,582,954	780,752	2,309,706
ELTEC	2,349,000	673,000	3,022,000
LAWTEC	6,292,364	—	6,292,364

Split of TEC reserves 1998–99

£

TECs	*Attributable to SoS*	*Attributable to other*	*Total reserves*
North and Mid Cheshire	2,727,169	—	2,727,169
CEWTEC	2,257,557	162,686	2,420,243
Mersey	5,973,222	592,745	6,565,967
St. Helens	1,299,384	82,291	1,381,675
North West Total	42,313,553	7,867,178	50,180,731
County Durham	4,956,661	—	4,956,661
Northumberland	4,423,000	1,644,000	6,067,000
Tees Valley	8,427,000	—	8,427,000
Tyneside	3,940,000	330,000	4,270,000
Sunderland	6,101,434	66,445	6,167,879
North East Total	27,848,095	2,040,445	29,888,540
Grand Total	244,081,837	32,447,568	276,529,405

[1] Audited accounts are unavailable for 1998–99 and therefore we have used consolidated 1998–99 draft statutory accounts.

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what steps his Department is taking to monitor the use of reserves and assets of TECs in the period leading to their being wound up. [95415]

Mr. Wicks: All TECs were sent a formal notification on 13 July 1999 that their Licences would terminate on 25 March 2001. Since then, in accordance with the terms of the Licence, TECs have been required to inform Government Offices of any proposed new commitments or expenditure and must comply with all reasonable requests either to provide information or to limit expenditure. In addition, Government Offices receive regular information from TECs on their financial position and continue to monitor their financial and audit systems.

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will ensure that funds commercially generated by TECs from money originally from public sources returns to the public sector. [95416]

Mr. Wicks: Under the terms of the Licence, any funds derived from payments made by the Secretaries of State for Education and Employment, for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, and for Trade and Industry will return to the relevant Secretaries of State on termination of the Licence. The Secretaries of State will determine their use to ensure that Government priorities and commitments are met.

New Deal

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many 18 to 24 year-olds have started the New Deal scheme in Shrewsbury and Atcham, broken down by *(a)* employer, *(b)* full time education, *(c)* voluntary sector, *(d)* environment task force and *(e)* other; and if he will make a statement. [94247]

Ms Jowell: In the period to the end of July 1999, 278 young people had joined New Deal in Shrewsbury and Atcham parliamentary constituency.

The following table shows the destinations of all those who had left the Gateway by the end of July 1999.

	Number
Total number of leavers from Gateway	227
Immediate destination on leaving:	
Unsubsidised employment	46
To a New Deal Option	123
of which:	
Employment	14
Full-time education/training	34
Voluntary Sector	36
Environment Task Force	39
Other destinations:	
Other benefits	11
Other known destination	12
Not known	35

HOME DEPARTMENT

Asylum Seekers

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what telephone access to the Immigration Service is currently available to *(a)* asylum seekers and *(b)* local Benefit Agency sections on asylum seeker matters; what plans he has to improve the current level of telephone access; and if he will make a statement. [93984]

Mrs. Roche: Asylum seekers, in common with other members of the public, can telephone the Immigration and Nationality Enquiry Bureau to seek information on general immigration matters or to chase progress on applications. Major improvements have recently been made in telephone call handling with around 4,000 calls (75 per cent. of calls) now being answered each day. Further measures are planned with the aim of increasing this to 5,000 calls a day.

Arrangements have been made with the Benefits Agency that local offices should use a dedicated fax line to make inquiries about an asylum seeker's immigration status. Urgent inquiries will be dealt within three days. Inquiries from the Fraud Unit or in connection with terminally ill claimants can still be made by telephone.

Scout and Guiding Movement

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) what estimate he has made of the amount of income that will be generated from fees paid by the Guide Association Movement in the UK arising from use of the proposed Criminal Records Bureau in the first three years of its operation; [93728]

(2) what estimate he has made of *(a)* the annual revenue raised from the Scout and Guiding Movement as a result of the charges for carrying out security checks on new volunteers, *(b)* the cost of administering each charge associated with security checks on people who work with children and *(c)* the number of individuals subject to such a charge per annum. [94703]

Mr. Charles Clarke: When the Criminal Records Bureau comes into operation, it will be expected to recover its costs through charges for the certificates it will issue, on application, to individual employees. The overall cost to the Scout and Guiding Movement will depend upon their decisions as to the circumstances in which its volunteers should apply for a certificate and whether to reimburse the cost. Until the Bureau's operating costs have been determined it will not be possible to fix the charges for certificates but our best early estimate is £10 for the most expensive certificate, the Enhanced Criminal Record Certificate. We have made clear our intention to keep the cost as low as possible.

Wildlife

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what initiatives his Department has launched to protect wildlife *(a)* in the UK and *(b)* on Merseyside. [94653]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: Government policy responsibility for wildlife conservation rests mainly with the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions (DETR). There are no initiatives on this in which the Home Office has the lead role.

The principal national initiative, overseen by the DETR, but to which the Home Office suscribes, is the Partnership for Action against Wildlife Crime (PAW), launched in 1995 and fully supported by this Government. It provides a forum for Government Departments, voluntary organisations and wildlife user groups to make a strategic contribution to the fight against wildlife crime. PAW supports a network of over 250 Police Wildlife Liaison Officers (PWLOs) in police forces across the United Kingdom, including the Merseyside Police. PAW also hosts an annual conference of PWLOs.

Enforcement responsibility for wildlife crime rests with the police and, in the case of illegal imports and exports, with Her Majesty's Customs and Excise. Local initiatives to combat wildlife crime are matters for chief police officers in the light of their overall policing priorities. Merseyside Police are active in this area, and have most recently been targeting unlawful collection of birds' eggs, with the result that prosecutions are pending. A number of persons in Merseyside have also been cautioned for wildlife offences this year.

To assist local enforcement efforts across the country, PAW has made a number of recommendations, including that the courts be given the option, at present unavailable to them, of imposing custodial sentences for wildlife offences. The Government will be implementing this as soon as a suitable legislative opportunity arises.

Eurodac

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what progress he has made with the implementation of the Eurodac Implementing Rules (8140/99); and if he will make a statement. [94131]

Mrs. Roche: The draft Eurodac implementing rules were drawn up in respect of the draft Eurodac Convention and associated draft Protocol, which were not adopted by the Council prior to the entry into force of the Treaty of Amsterdam. A draft Eurodac Regulation is currently under discussion as a First Pillar measure. My right hon.

Friend the Home Secretary announced on 7 October that the United Kingdom was opting in to the draft Regulation. Implementing rules for the draft Regulation may need to be supplemented in the future in the light of technical developments.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what discussions he has had about the possible transfer to the Commission of competence for implementing the provisions of the Eurodac Regulation; and if he will make a statement. [94130]

Mrs. Roche: The Commission has proposed that competence for implementing provisions of the Eurodac Regulation should be transferred to the Commission by the Council in accordance with the terms of the first sentence of Article 202 of the Treaty Establishing the European Community. The Council will need to decide whether there are grounds in this instance for reserving that competence to itself in accordance with the third sentence of Article 202.

The Regulatory Procedure which the Commission has proposed for the implementing rules for the draft Eurodac Regulation would give the Member States considerable control over the Commission's exercise of delegated powers.

Prison Education Courses

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will set out the amounts of money available in each prison for education courses in each of the past 10 years at current prices and the percentage increase for each year. [94570]

Mr. Boateng: Information is not available in the form requested. The table sets out actual expenditure on certain separately identifiable areas of education spend covering payments to education service providers and purchase of education materials. These cover the financial years 1995–96 to 1998–99 and are at 1998–99 prices; information for earlier years is not readily available, neither is information on education costs at private sector prisons.

Establishment	*1995–96 spend at 1998–99 prices* £	*1996–97 spend at 1998–99 prices* £	*1996–97 as % of 1995–96* %	*1997–98 spend at 1998–99 prices* £	*1997–98 as % of 1996–97* %	*1998–99 spend* £	*1998–99 as % of 1997–98* %
Acklington	320,988	255,692	80	226,867	89	229,400	101
Albany	247,745	110,279	45	158,413	144	172,037	109
Aldington	167,464	130,183	78	135,247	104	131,333	97
Ashwell	372,115	336,886	91	341,547	101	359,680	105
Askham Grange	155,818	139,374	89	131,372	94	142,894	109
Aylesbury	388,924	321,477	83	424,991	132	522,455	123
Bedford	225,219	228,859	102	205,957	90	204,989	100
Belmarsh	390,367	367,166	94	426,554	116	440,854	103
Birmingham	299,945	213,254	71	203,980	96	199,999	98
Blantyre House	146,090	172,466	118	184,963	107	159,433	86
Blundeston	329,451	227,839	69	248,196	109	244,169	98
Brinsford	305,533	189,433	62	173,544	92	242,237	140
Bristol	219,098	154,292	70	167,307	108	153,388	92
Brixton	432,034	395,589	92	450,427	114	312,580	69
Brockhill	270,784	211,734	78	164,372	78	174,391	106
Bullingdon	929,823	545,194	59	497,006	91	512,312	103
Bullwood Hall	206,707	223,984	108	210,604	94	233,355	111
Camp Hill	351,260	368,614	105	367,815	100	352,129	96
Canterbury	212,128	178,896	84	154,277	86	134,907	87
Cardiff	215,605	192,010	89	187,714	98	212,610	113
Castington	256,500	211,643	83	247,594	117	256,167	103
Channings Wood	483,715	416,982	86	370,859	89	361,226	97
Chelmsford	205,243	182,372	89	170,633	94	185,244	109
Coldingley	221,893	180,317	81	164,441	91	191,468	116
Cookham Wood	155,655	140,222	90	136,257	97	131,159	96
Dartmoor	490,432	426,430	87	376,086	88	426,377	113
Deerbolt	393,771	346,360	88	334,390	97	422,119	126
Dorchester	267,942	221,926	83	100,197	45	130,048	130
Dover	189,120	141,074	75	154,973	110	157,403	102
Downview	230,174	233,426	101	225,186	96	206,700	92
Drake Hall	203,930	167,620	82	163,714	98	156,929	96
Durham	354,246	346,553	98	362,400	105	355,476	98
East Sutton Park	132,863	102,594	77	96,178	94	85,966	89
Eastwood Park	—	168,820	—	179,756	106	226,694	126
Elmley	475,773	305,430	64	261,960	86	391,782	150
Erlestoke	335,619	283,987	85	306,365	108	309,072	101
Everthorpe	337,331	431,628	128	448,623	104	443,146	99
Exeter	211,231	138,522	66	132,976	96	154,440	116
Featherstone	260,355	187,970	72	179,526	96	181,350	101
Feltham	398,644	420,368	105	479,126	114	592,115	124
Ford	269,577	286,046	106	282,219	99	260,074	92
Foston Hall	—	—	—	139,476	—	230,688	165
Frankland	313,636	253,805	81	279,530	110	350,257	125
Full Sutton	671,801	602,092	90	486,519	81	467,432	96
Garth	395,810	369,719	93	397,672	108	423,618	107
Gartree	280,660	241,692	86	221,795	92	208,846	94
Glen Parva	529,564	439,707	83	450,296	102	553,878	123
Gloucester	208,789	205,317	98	214,285	104	252,051	118

Establishment	1995–96 spend at 1998–99 prices £	1996–97 spend at 1998–99 prices £	1996–97 as % of 1995–96 %	1997–98 spend at 1998–99 prices £	1997–98 as % of 1996–97 %	1998–99 spend £	1998–99 as % of 1997–98 %
Grendon	416,997	362,016	87	356,722	99	393,318	110
Guys Marsh	248,305	306,353	123	265,237	87	359,457	136
Haslar	221,863	220,134	99	123,624	56	136,942	111
Hatfield	208,588	184,771	89	230,847	125	224,478	97
Haverigg	229,051	217,593	95	307,805	141	275,718	90
Hewell Grange	187,496	155,722	83	155,771	100	153,081	98
High Down	566,157	426,147	75	339,929	80	407,265	120
Highpoint	522,202	357,017	68	518,874	145	578,123	111
Hindley	399,586	714,789	179	745,775	104	624,206	84
Hollesley Bay Colony	518,083	431,767	83	364,023	84	359,530	99
Holloway	364,472	379,385	104	388,327	102	433,770	112
Holme House	425,669	486,164	114	586,511	121	382,409	65
Hull	372,511	384,935	103	348,541	91	375,372	108
Huntercombe	370,931	319,583	86	325,599	102	402,591	124
Kingston	131,829	112,263	85	91,701	82	106,748	116
Kirkham	260,166	221,003	85	237,869	108	242,505	102
Kirklevington Grange	94,276	40,942	43	56,656	138	36,554	65
Lancaster Castle	191,599	190,058	99	169,115	89	171,845	102
Lancaster Farms	355,794	428,832	121	469,904	110	564,437	120
Latchmere House	48,859	20,378	42	19,687	97	18,524	94
Leeds	362,199	410,932	113	433,803	106	551,235	127
Leicester	207,601	206,254	99	201,130	98	201,636	100
Lewes	333,143	325,761	98	280,200	86	276,099	99
Leyhill	256,715	260,851	102	251,993	97	241,674	96
Lincoln	378,992	353,502	93	228,668	65	220,840	97
Lindholme	456,410	434,242	95	431,289	99	445,630	103
Littlehey	589,391	456,617	77	432,097	95	395,780	92
Liverpool	304,672	310,245	102	340,917	110	365,870	107
Long Lartin	249,304	213,313	86	237,430	111	200,300	84
Low Newton	378,245	348,073	92	353,312	102	360,377	102
Maidstone	252,495	230,986	91	208,931	90	195,777	94
Manchester	577,197	508,335	88	480,993	95	557,039	116
Moorland	724,341	657,735	91	707,773	108	829,616	117
Morton Hall	240,870	211,571	88	193,058	91	191,851	99
Mount (The)	529,479	467,467	88	372,248	80	377,489	101
New Hall	316,980	359,568	113	309,448	86	376,651	122
North Sea Camp	136,350	134,421	99	130,866	97	126,023	96
Northallerton	250,127	242,067	97	242,156	100	279,352	115
Norwich	581,512	487,871	84	404,560	83	417,911	103
Nottingham	238,436	231,123	97	264,019	114	250,387	95
Onley	341,343	331,618	97	467,001	141	570,060	122
Parkhurst	177,353	203,573	115	228,680	112	253,595	111
Pentonville	318,807	249,295	78	271,258	109	318,295	117
Portland	458,136	476,653	104	455,097	95	500,700	110
Preston	216,330	202,751	94	245,151	121	265,367	108
Pucklechurch	145,948	277	—	—	—	—	—
Ranby	239,595	373,831	156	380,482	102	410,498	108
Reading	196,703	163,667	83	146,103	89	136,296	93
Risley	691,312	575,368	83	585,171	102	593,435	101
Rochester	361,227	274,862	76	152,095	55	190,179	125
Send	163,481	135,870	83	144,275	106	126,692	88
Shepton Mallet	261,070	229,425	88	210,478	92	184,749	88
Shrewsbury	167,624	135,534	81	117,589	87	121,260	103
Stafford	392,396	297,225	76	288,926	97	261,845	91
Standford Hill	230,451	208,939	91	200,701	96	204,993	102
Stocken	363,746	330,037	91	363,977	110	393,849	108
Stoke Heath	301,910	249,703	83	301,152	121	482,394	160
Styal	245,601	230,306	94	238,478	104	277,910	117
Sudbury	414,493	412,081	99	391,876	95	399,954	102
Swaleside	360,517	299,976	83	337,231	112	351,168	104
Swansea	234,158	180,318	77	146,683	81	130,088	89
Swinfen Hall	228,202	244,270	107	217,106	89	331,556	153
Thorn Cross	287,383	365,351	127	496,638	136	511,470	103
Usk/Prescoed	378,810	246,897	65	385,413	156	362,278	94
Verne (The)	272,071	411,824	151	224,120	54	211,964	95
Wakefield	381,573	362,875	95	349,726	96	359,617	103
Wandsworth	455,950	263,351	58	230,002	87	226,969	99
Wayland	489,750	401,023	82	434,827	108	413,968	95
Wealstun	424,943	444,615	105	382,561	86	343,721	90
Weare (The)	—	—	—	165,098	—	318,446	193
Wellingborough	288,771	209,685	73	227,193	108	227,327	100
Werrington	217,266	160,067	74	195,469	122	201,345	103
Wetherby	283,267	228,420	81	444,925	195	497,377	112

Establishment	1995–96 spend at 1998–99 prices £	1996–97 spend at 1998–99 prices £	1996–97 as % of 1995–96 %	1997–98 spend at 1998–99 prices £	1997–98 as % of 1996–97 %	1998–99 spend £	1998–99 as % of 1997–98 %
Whatton	379,617	312,413	82	311,847	100	298,068	96
Whitemoor	600,985	442,938	74	410,264	93	432,700	105
Winchester	303,629	308,643	102	314,370	102	323,249	103
Woodhill	551,458	508,685	92	503,416	99	486,963	97
Wormwood Scrubs	300,565	290,010	96	296,875	102	280,952	95
Wymott	208,603	359,781	172	415,976	116	399,012	96

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will set out the amount per head of population of each prison available for education courses for each of the past 10 years. [94571]

Mr. Boateng: Information is not available in the form requested. The tables set out actual annual expenditure on certain separately identifiable areas of education spend covering payments to education service providers and purchase of education materials divided by the average population for each prison in that year. These cover the financial years 1995–96 to 1998–99; information for earlier years is not readily available, neither is information on education costs at private sector prisons. The figures are at current, 1998–99, prices.

The percentage of the population which would have been engaged in education will have varied from prison to prison and from year to year, so any conclusions drawn from these figures must be treated with caution.

£

Establishment	1995–96 spend per head at 1998–99 prices	1996–97 spend per head at 1998–99 prices	1997–98 spend per head at 1998–99 prices	Spend per head 1998–99
Acklington	503	395	347	356
Albany	587	256	369	399
Aldington	1,384	937	987	966
Ashwell	959	820	754	740
Askham Grange	1,528	1,124	1,034	1,143
Aylesbury	1,760	1,345	1,367	1,593
Bedford	734	646	541	548
Belmarsh	659	472	493	545
Birmingham	332	214	196	189
Blantyre House	1,446	1,500	1,541	1,340
Blundeston	860	571	617	712
Brinsford	663	387	333	482
Bristol	430	282	287	265
Brixton	741	662	753	474
Brockhill	2,036	1,667	1,274	1,246
Bullingdon	1,072	798	723	603
Bullwood Hall	1,708	1,821	1,608	1,716
Camp Hill	894	882	733	744
Canterbury	810	644	576	480
Cardiff	487	300	264	315
Castington	888	720	784	753
Channings Wood	868	706	613	611
Chelmsford	540	421	364	457
Coldingley	784	626	556	660
Cookham Wood	1,216	1,002	927	835
Dartmoor	859	731	600	657
Deerbolt	987	835	800	1,045
Dorchester	1,313	1,004	436	588
Dover	666	463	510	547
Downview	822	811	668	608
Drake Hall	1,030	665	613	599
Durham	545	400	389	402
East Sutton Park	1,444	1,127	1,002	966
Eastwood Park	—	1,384	1,145	837
Elmley	783	469	311	430
Erlestoke	1,271	1,064	998	1,020
Everthorpe	1,140	970	975	959
Exeter	533	309	290	344
Featherstone	471	333	301	304
Feltham	492	486	536	674
Ford	654	643	630	616
Foston Hall	—	—	1,134	1,709
Frankland	782	589	624	739
Full Sutton	1,226	1,158	973	841
Garth	781	710	645	660
Gartree	864	673	611	572
Glen Parva	684	507	516	671

£

Establishment	1995–96 spend per head at 1998–99 prices	1996–97 spend per head at 1998–99 prices	1997–98 spend per head at 1998–99 prices	Spend per head 1998–99
Gloucester	892	808	760	849
Grendon	1,012	864	830	839
Guys Marsh	853	995	717	752
Haslar	1,608	1,487	877	925
Hatfield	1,363	1,155	1,529	1,477
Haverigg	574	455	560	542
Hewell Grange	1,172	815	807	797
High Down	918	650	488	523
Highpoint	808	584	747	846
Hindley	1,373	1,427	1,429	1,345
Hollesley Bay Colony	1,584	1,151	859	980
Holloway	671	659	745	839
Holme House	696	685	656	402
Hull	1,043	879	686	755
Huntercombe	1,438	1,310	1,252	1,160
Kingston	1,292	1,079	791	684
Kirkham	511	361	362	400
Kirklevington Grange	1,025	405	326	207
Lancaster Castle	855	880	783	792
Lancaster Farms	1,002	914	936	1,193
Latchmere House	370	130	110	108
Leeds	340	465	430	454
Leicester	643	610	581	579
Lewes	1,099	1,037	581	586
Leyhill	717	671	646	651
Lincoln	635	549	366	443
Lindholme	748	667	635	661
Littlehey	1,056	785	675	621
Liverpool	251	251	234	253
Long Lartin	700	580	623	574
Low Newton	1,411	1,226	1,186	1,209
Maidstone	507	430	374	351
Manchester	553	453	455	527
Moorland	1,191	1,017	1,050	1,089
Morton Hall	1,460	1,144	965	989
Mount (The)	1,055	777	600	614
New Hall	1,546	1,657	935	1,024
North Sea Camp	816	719	658	681
Northallerton	1,367	976	894	1,054
Norwich	1,638	857	560	605
Nottingham	1,152	1,090	679	592
Onley	702	644	808	938
Parkhurst	778	704	648	622
Pentonville	378	284	290	284
Portland	1,048	926	829	893
Preston	482	452	375	396
Pucklechurch	2,115	—	—	—
Ranby	690	726	678	588
Reading	1,137	737	641	603
Risley	937	750	671	684
Rochester	1,082	735	379	499
Send	1,229	944	659	1,526
Shepton Mallet	1,312	1,108	988	876
Shrewsbury	588	440	363	386
Stafford	678	489	465	422
Standford Hill	660	584	597	637
Stocken	923	791	795	745
Stoke Heath	1,048	793	672	793
Styal	1,032	921	877	985
Sudbury	1,006	875	796	810
Swaleside	720	577	569	569
Swansea	1,079	670	439	399
Swinfen Hall	1,240	1,075	1,080	1,188
Thorn Cross	1,661	1,752	2,247	2,357
Usk/ Prescoed	1,592	1,359	1,372	1,258
Verne (The)	507	440	393	371
Wakefield	534	580	575	614
Wandsworth	440	287	261	207
Wayland	919	697	675	649
Wealstun	961	793	647	559
Weare (The)	—	—	581	907

£

Establishment	1995–96 spend per head at 1998–99 prices	1996–97 spend per head at 1998–99 prices	1997–98 spend per head at 1998–99 prices	Spend per head 1998–99
Wellingborough	947	833	708	695
Werrington	1,940	1,417	1,261	1,598
Wetherby	2,146	1,919	1,561	1,535
Whatton	1,791	1,427	1,368	1,173
Whitemoor	1,138	842	786	847
Winchester	575	554	519	542
Woodhill	1,096	814	732	700
Wormwood Scrubs	371	260	223	250
Wymott	493	488	522	501

EU Documents

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what draft documents were presented by the Presidency of the European Union to be considered at the European Council in Tampere, on 15 and 16 October concerning any aspect of the Union's area of freedom, security and justice; when these were received by Her Majesty's Government; and what steps were taken by the Presidency to make documents publicly available prior to the meeting. [94363]

Mr. Straw: The Presidency have produced only one draft document for consideration at the European Council itself. This was a paper dated 5 October on the composition and working arrangements for the body to be charged with the preparation of a draft European Union Charter of Rights; I understand that it was not published. In July, the Presidency presented three discussion papers on possible themes for the Tampere European Council intended to assist member states in their preparations. I understand that these documents were not published.

I should add that the Presidency have been happy to make widely known their developing policy towards this European Council. In this regard, for example, they gave oral evidence before Sub-Committee F of the House of Lords European Communities Committee on 6 July, in the context of that Sub-Committee's inquiry into Prospects for the Tampere European Council. They have also placed extensive material on their internet website.

Rapparee Cove, Devon

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, pursuant to his answer of 16 June 1999, *Official Report*, column *162*, regarding the status of the human remains found in 1997 at Rapparee Cove in Devon, if the scientific examination has commenced; and when he estimates it will be completed. [94801]

Mr. Boateng: I understand tests to establish the origin of the remains have commenced, but are not yet completed.

Airguns

Mr. Ron Davies: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will revise the guidance he has issued to the Firearms Consultative Committee on strengthening the provisions on the ownership and use of airguns. [94839]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Government have asked the Firearms Consultative Committee (FCC) to look at a wide range of firearms issues as part of its work programme for this year, including the controls on air weapons. The FCC has made clear that its main focus in considering these issues, including the controls on air weapons, is in terms of protecting and improving public safety. We look forward with interest to the FCC's annual report at the end of the year and any recommendations the Committee may make.

Convention on Mutual Assistance in Criminal Matters

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the procedure for the transfer of persons held in custody under the Convention on Mutual Assistance in Criminal Matters (1999/C251/01); if the burden of proof will be equivalent to that required in British courts; and what is the status of this proposal. [95255]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Article 9 of the draft Convention on Mutual Assistance in Criminal Matters provides that a member state requesting a criminal investigation in another member state may temporarily transfer a person in custody in its own territory to the member state carrying out the investigation to assist in that investigation. Transfer can take place only with the agreement of the competent authorities of both member states concerned, which includes agreement on the date by which the prisoner is to be returned to the requesting member state. Paragraph 3 of the Article would also enable the United Kingdom to seek the prisoner's consent to be transferred. The period of detention in the territory of the requested member state must be deducted from the period of detention that the prisoner would serve in the requesting member state.

Since the transfer is temporary and is not done for the purpose of prosecuting the prisoner in the state to which he is transferred, the question of burden of proof does not arise.

The wording of this Article of the draft Convention has been agreed by all the member states.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will estimate the number of requests he will receive for telecommunications intercepts following ratification of the Convention on Mutual Assistance in Criminal Matters between EU states. [95254]

Mr. Charles Clarke: It is not possible to provide a meaningful estimate of the number of requests likely to be received for the interception of telecommunications under the European Union Convention on Mutual Assistance in Criminal Matters if it is agreed and ratified.

The number of requests made will depend on the requirements of other member states. However, requests to intercept the telecommunications of targets in the United Kingdom will not be granted unless all the tests for issuing a warrant under the United Kingdom's domestic interception legislation have been met.

Defence Exhibition

Mr. Fitzpatrick: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what was the cost of policing the Defence Systems and Equipment International Exhibition flotilla this summer in the Isle of Dogs. [94898]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Metropolitan Police Commissioner tells me that the total cost for policing this event was about £331,000.

Ms Snejana Fournadjieva

Mr. Gapes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when a decision will be taken on the applications by Ms Snejana Fournadjieva for leave to remain in the United Kingdom, References F1001194 and PO 15309/99. [95321]

Mrs. Roche: Leave to remain on the basis of marriage was granted to Ms Fournadjieva on 21 October.

Senator Pinochet

Mr. Greenway: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what has been the cost of policing demonstrations in London connected with the arrest and detention of Senator Pinochet. [94899]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Metropolitan Police Commissioner tells me that the cost of policing these demonstrations has been about £94,500.

Immigration

Ms Oona King: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many applications for indefinite leave to remain on the basis of the concession to overseas domestic workers have been received by the Immigration and Nationality Directorate; how many of those applicants have now received a decision on their application; and how many of those applications were successful. [95166]

Mrs. Roche: The introduction of a revised concession to overseas domestic workers was announced on 23 July 1998. Some 230 such workers were granted indefinite leave to remain in the period July 1998 to September 1999. Available data on the number of applications received for indefinite leave to remain and the number refused do not separately identify overseas domestic workers.

Metropolitan Police Authority

Ms Oona King: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what criteria the proposed Metropolitan Police Authority will use in determining whether a police/community consultative group continues to receive approval and support; and what role PCCGs themselves will have in devising an acceptable process for assessing each PCCG's performance. [95167]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Subject to the passage of the Greater London Authority Bill, it will be the responsibility of the Metropolitan Police Authority (MPA) (after consulting the Commissioner of Police for the Metropolis) to make arrangements for obtaining the views of Londoners about matters concerning policing in the Metropolitan Police District and for securing their co-operation with the police in preventing crime in that area. This responsibility will be identical to that currently falling on police authorities outside London. It will be for the Metropolitan Police Authority to determine what criteria it will use to assess whether and to what extent individual Police/Community Consultative Groups help it to fulfil its statutory responsibility. In assessing the effectiveness of all its arrangements for public consultation, the MPA will be under the duty of Best Value.

Drug Treatment Programmes

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what was in total and in respect of each prison and young offender institution in England and Wales *(a)* the number of prisoners currently taking part in a drug treatment programme, *(b)* the number of current prisoners who have completed a drug treatment programme and *(c)* the number of prisoners who are waiting to join a drug treatment programme. [94904]

Mr. Boateng: As an integral part of the £76 million programme to expand drug treatment for prisoners, the Prison Service will be introducing early next year a comprehensive monitoring system to evaluate the effectiveness of both the new services and those already operating. Until then, the information requested cannot be provided.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will state in respect of each police force in England and Wales the number of offenders entering drug treatment programmes as a result of arrest referral schemes *(a)* during 1998–99 and *(b)* during 1999–2000 to date; and if he will make a statement. [94907]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The information requested is not currently available. Information from Drug Action Teams' plans for 1999–2000, submitted in December 1998, suggested that coverage of custody suites by arrest referral schemes was partial across police forces. We have set targets to double the number of schemes this year, with coverage of all custody suites to be achieved by 2002.

Tackling drug related crime is one of the Home Secretary's Policing Priorities for 1999–2000, and it is accompanied by a supporting key performance indicator concerned with the numbers entering treatment as a result of arrest referral. Police forces will report to my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary on their performance at the end of this financial year.

To assist the national roll out of arrest referral, my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary announced in July that up to £20 million will be available to police forces to

accelerate the introduction of arrest referral schemes and to help ensure that treatment is available for those with drug problems identified by these schemes.

Prisons (Drugs)

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what was in total and in respect of each prison and young offender institution in England and Wales, *(a)* the number of prisoners who were tested for drugs in (i) 1997, (ii) 1998–99 and (iii) 1999–2000 to date and *(b)* the number of such prisoners who tested positive for drugs. [94903]

Mr. Boateng: The number of prisoners tested under the random mandatory drug testing programme by establishment and as a total figure, for the periods 1997–98, 1998–99 and 1999–2000 to date, together with the number of prisoners who tested positive, is given in the table.

The number of prisoners tested for drugs under the random mandatory drug testing programme and the number of those tested who were positive for drugs for the periods 1997–98, 1998–99, 1999–2000 to date[1]

	1997–98		*1998–99*		*1999–2000 to date*	
	Number of:		*Number of:*		*Number of:*	
Prison	*Prisoners tested for drugs*	*Prisoners who tested positive*	*Prisoners tested for drugs*	*Prisoners who tested positive*	*Prisoners tested for drugs*	*Prisoners who tested positive*
Altcourse	—	—	673	128	322	36
Askham Grange	144	20	141	15	68	7
Acklington	793	229	793	216	298	61
Albany	783	59	523	7	152	0
Aldington	164	39	157	35	19	5
Ashwell	516	207	561	214	224	70
Aylesbury	370	47	346	48	165	19
Belmarsh	770	62	1,013	122	360	40
Buckley Hall	432	167	390	146	183	42
Blundeston	220	57	313	44	106	16
Bedford	335	121	418	102	157	33
Blantyre House	133	5	142	1	56	1
Brockhill	77	25	128	19	47	9
Bristol	692	186	686	158	168	29
Birmingham	1,290	423	1,260	381	367	81
Bullingdon	549	190	483	128	220	47
Brinsford	603	108	574	120	181	46
Blakenhurst	921	426	1,019	393	375	19
Bullwood Hall	25	5	77	10	33	6
Brixton	709	106	450	51	401	46
Chelmsford	313	75	402	93	57	11
Cardiff	710	192	559	142	174	48
Camp Hill	279	89	184	50	45	15
Cookham Wood	176	12	186	11	62	1
Coldingly	483	141	212	30	107	11
Colchester	31	6	9	2	—	—
Castington	352	38	342	61	83	13
Channings Wood	671	134	477	77	187	8
Canterbury	324	60	343	46	141	20
Dartmoor	740	124	440	25	147	3
Drake Hall	268	48	293	52	99	21
Durham	1,279	403	1,282	203	301	51
Doncaster	1,256	286	1,335	171	538	61
Dorchester	130	58	187	63	50	9
Deerbolt	473	71	419	37	96	21
Dover	285	47	275	34	129	14
Downview	413	18	365	14	116	4
Erlestoke	348	99	373	96	148	44
Eastwood Park	133	11	229	35	126	21
East Sutton Park	116	9	120	5	40	0
Everthorpe	399	108	564	168	118	30
Exeter	287	99	323	89	65	18
Elmley	1,076	145	987	117	355	55
Ford	555	55	481	52	169	19
Foston Hall	37	5	154	12	84	6
Frankland	532	192	555	98	218	26
Feltham	538	112	540	116	191	38
Full Sutton	592	38	664	46	255	26
Featherstone	433	176	267	112	123	57
Garth	653	111	709	83	239	42
Gloucester	313	111	312	93	143	51
Guys Marsh	380	129	271	92	217	74
Grendon	150	23	165	17	45	4
Glen Parva	884	184	907	135	307	58
Gartree	283	87	315	81	151	21
Hollesley	393	90	238	61	99	28
Huntercombe	315	56	227	40	93	28

The number of prisoners tested for drugs under the random mandatory drug testing programme and the number of those tested who were positive for drugs for the periods 1997–98, 1998–99, 1999–2000 to date [1]

Prison	1997–98 Number of: Prisoners tested for drugs	1997–98 Number of: Prisoners who tested positive	1998–99 Number of: Prisoners tested for drugs	1998–99 Number of: Prisoners who tested positive	1999–2000 to date Number of: Prisoners tested for drugs	1999–2000 to date Number of: Prisoners who tested positive
Hatfield	156	21	172	27	57	6
Hewell Grange	197	30	232	24	77	13
Holme House	1,278	245	875	98	390	35
Hindley	250	89	185	45	87	15
Hull	614	126	596	92	115	16
High Down	349	89	652	134	236	41
Highpoint	226	56	448	90	145	15
Haslar	161	7	167	4	77	2
Haverigg	1,011	160	622	112	167	34
Holloway	622	150	619	63	172	31
Kirkham	280	71	297	70	87	16
Kirklevington	169	9	164	12	59	1
Kingston	110	12	68	13	17	2
Lancaster	276	102	277	101	107	34
Leicester	309	100	248	68	94	29
Leeds	709	171	922	175	346	92
Lancaster Farms	587	29	423	25	207	12
Lowdham Grange	19	3	528	162	239	44
Lindholme	764	178	778	233	271	86
Lincoln	541	187	525	138	222	44
Long Lartin	437	99	424	60	170	20
Latchmere House	317	46	206	30	83	6
Low Newton	125	51	108	42	63	12
Liverpool	1,277	242	1,531	270	456	83
Littlehey	687	116	746	107	294	33
Lewes	598	162	576	192	279	57
Leyhill	478	63	439	59	169	25
Moorland	824	89	770	43	356	16
Morton Hall	236	22	208	17	76	6
Manchester	1,332	242	1,425	221	465	70
Maidstone	656	96	663	86	164	16
Mount	268	75	577	117	98	17
Newhall	352	28	413	20	129	10
Nottingham	325	101	281	72	131	32
Northallerton	308	49	329	49	127	18
North Sea Camp	187	44	223	53	62	18
Norwich	403	97	209	48	166	37
Onley	577	27	539	21	111	12
Parc	14	8	823	367	356	117
Portland	645	66	610	57	203	18
Parkhurst	315	21	440	14	149	2
Preston	733	145	382	88	255	69
Pentonville	753	240	955	302	292	79
Rochester	497	21	429	18	137	6
Reading	132	32	147	43	13	3
Ranby	679	108	833	72	353	31
Risley	972	238	914	198	279	59
Send	216	65	102	20	47	6
Stafford	696	141	634	109	179	28
Stoke Heath	458	37	283	28	122	16
Stocken	500	170	570	176	218	51
Standford Hill	237	28	479	54	142	20
Swaleside	650	126	682	122	208	36
Shepton Mallet	144	69	248	79	94	27
Swinfen Hall	219	32	326	19	134	6
Spring Hill	190	36	177	24	87	10
Styal	213	51	240	32	53	8
Sudbury	603	66	606	68	104	13
Swansea	231	122	327	121	137	37
Shrewsbury	295	47	288	49	145	24
Thorn Cross	240	62	247	57	91	37
Usk/Prescoed	342	27	342	19	132	8
Verne	287	104	134	24	125	9
Weare	218	61	327	92	161	22
Wellinborough	386	128	405	93	163	45
Winchester	519	151	298	93	124	34
Wakefield	721	21	695	8	185	5
Wealstun	662	176	494	122	141	36
Woodhill	796	201	712	118	194	20

The number of prisoners tested for drugs under the random mandatory drug testing programme and the number of those tested who were positive for drugs for the periods 1997–98, 1998–99, 1999–2000 to date [1]

Prison	1997–98 Number of: Prisoners tested for drugs	1997–98 Number of: Prisoners who tested positive	1998–99 Number of: Prisoners tested for drugs	1998–99 Number of: Prisoners who tested positive	1999–2000 to date Number of: Prisoners tested for drugs	1999–2000 to date Number of: Prisoners who tested positive
Wayland	225	75	228	83	133	32
Wymott	894	177	970	158	278	33
Werrington	136	7	128	6	47	3
Wolds	477	86	494	87	189	28
Whitemoor	627	80	470	36	91	7
Wormwood Scrubs	826	136	840	192	185	21
Whatton	280	15	300	13	129	2
Wandsworth	1,067	39	931	71	331	21
Wetherby	398	16	349	18	147	77
Total	62,674	13,038	63,182	11,540	22,544	3,762

[1] Figures for 1 April to 31 August 1999

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will state in respect of each month from January to date *(a)* the number of occasions when visitors to prisons or young offender institutions have been caught trying to smuggle illegal drugs, *(b)* the number of such visitors who have been banned from further visits, *(c)* the number of such visitors who have been charged with a criminal offence, *(d)* the number of such visitors who have been prosecuted in court and *(e)* the number of such visitors who have been convicted. [94906]

Mr. Boateng: The total number of visitors arrested for drug offences is given in the table, together with the number of visitors banned. Figures for the number of visitors subsequently charged, prosecuted and/or convicted are not recorded by the Prison Service.

Visitors to prisons arrested for drug offences

	Number of visitors arrested	Number of visitors banned
January 1999	71	Not previously recorded
February 1999	57	
March 1999	105	
April 1999	71	138
May 1999	65	186
June 1999	72	63
July 1999	73	Not yet available
August 1999	73	
September 1999	53	
October 1999	32	

Prison Officers (Assaults)

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will state, in respect of each prison and young offenders institution, the number of prosecutions which have been brought against inmates for assault on prison officers in each year from 1992 to date. [94913]

Mr. Boateng: The information is not held centrally and could be provided only at disproportionate cost. However, information on prosecutions for assault is now being collected and will be available in future years.

The Prison Service collects centrally information on the numbers of proven charges of assault at adjudications under the Prison Rules, and the available information is set out in the table. These figures relate to assaults on staff of all grades, not solely prison officers, together with any assaults on others excluding prisoners, such as contractors or visitors.

Proven adjudications for assaults by prisoners on staff/others [1]

Prison	Year ending 31 March 1997	Year ending 31 March 1998	Year ending 31 March 1999
Acklington	13	4	6
Albany	2	2	8
Aldington	0	0	0
Altcourse	[2]—	18	65
Ashwell	20	4	3
Askham Grange	1	0	0
Aylesbury	32	66	87
Bedford	23	24	13
Belmarsh	114	104	70
Birmingham	51	42	46
Blakenhurst	38	49	65
Blantyre House	0	0	0
Blundeston	23	17	8
Brinsford	20	40	17
Bristol	26	24	42
Brixton	46	30	70
Brockhill	4	18	26
Buckley Hall	13	9	10
Bullingdon	52	36	36
Bullwood Hall	36	15	10
Camp Hill	5	17	11
Canterbury	5	9	2
Cardiff	28	19	18
Castington	21	15	35
Channings Wood	2	3	4
Chelmsford	21	31	17
Colchester	0	0	0
Coldingley	6	5	0
Cookham Wood	13	3	6
Dartmoor	22	35	28
Deerbolt	10	19	25
Doncaster	53	70	48
Dorchester	11	18	10
Dover	10	24	19
Downview	0	1	1
Drake Hall	3	1	1
Durham	34	33	41
East Sutton Park	0	0	0
Eastwood Park	25	26	25
Elmley	28	37	37
Erlestoke	2	1	2
Everthorpe	4	9	7
Exeter	11	14	19
Featherstone	14	11	6

Proven adjudications for assaults by prisoners on staff/others [1]

Prison	Year ending 31 March 1997	31 March 1998	31 March 1999
Feltham	115	93	82
Ford	0	1	0
Foston Hall	0	6	13
Frankland	40	47	18
Full Sutton	23	23	18
Garth	17	17	10
Gartree	7	3	10
Glen Parva	56	55	81
Gloucester	26	35	27
Grendon	2	4	2
Guys Marsh	4	5	10
Haslar	[2]—	1	1
Hatfield	0	0	1
Haverigg	5	4	6
Hewell Grange	0	1	1
Highdown	67	91	83
Highpoint	14	23	21
Hindley	35	32	58
Hollesley Bay	7	11	11
Holloway	115	126	95
Holme House	16	26	26
Hull	29	21	22
Huntercombe	7	15	13
Kingston	0	0	0
Kirkham	2	0	0
Kirklevington	0	0	0
Lancaster	4	1	2
Lancaster Farms	18	31	19
Latchmere House	0	0	0
Leeds	50	51	65
Leicester	31	16	17
Lewes	15	23	14
Leyhill	0	0	0
Lincoln	17	13	8
Lindholme	3	6	7
Littlehey	11	8	12
Liverpool	47	50	59
Long Lartin	30	32	12
Low Newton	17	36	23
Lowdham Grange	0	0	22
Maidstone	1	11	8
Manchester	63	49	59
Moorland	61	62	38
Morton Hall	0	1	0
Mount	5	8	13
New Hall	32	31	32
North Sea Camp	0	0	0
Northallerton	5	13	9
Norwich	30	41	37
Nottingham	12	17	19
Onley	24	67	65
Oxford	0	0	0
Parc	[2]—	11	34
Parkhurst	17	13	16
Pentonville	59	69	95
Portland	13	10	21
Preston	27	49	44
Pucklechurch	0	0	0
Ranby	4	10	18
Reading	20	19	18
Risley	41	52	77
Rochester	20	21	16
Send	0	0	1
Shepton Mallet	3	0	2
Shrewsbury	1	3	15
Stafford	24	22	16
Stanford Hill	1	1	0
Stocken	11	13	13
Stoke Heath	22	46	88
Styal	15	14	9
Sudbury	2	2	1
Swaleside	16	26	35
Swansea	15	11	14
Swinfen Hall	2	14	18
Thorn Cross	4	6	1
Usk	0	1	0
Verne	1	1	0
Wakefield	11	10	9
Wandsworth	46	42	57
Wayland	7	5	9
Wealstun	2	2	7
Weare	[2]—	4	3
Wellingborough	9	8	7
Werrington	7	25	10
Wetherby	4	10	25
Whatton	0	0	0
Whitemoor	55	36	58
Winchester	27	28	27
Wolds	18	12	26
Woodhill	36	48	61
Wormwood Scrubs	83	93	49
Wymott	2	7	7

[1] The definition staff/others includes staff of all grades, contractors, visitors to prisoners, official visitors and anyone else in the prison with the exception of other prisoners. Assaults on other prisoners are recorded separately.

[2] Indicates that this establishment was not open during this year

Club Closures

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department on how many occasions to date local authorities have used powers under the Public Entertainments Licences (Drug Misuse) Act 1997 to shut down clubs; and if he will list the local authorities which have exercised these powers. [94908]

Mr. Charles Clarke: No arrangements exist to collect this information centrally. Close contact with the police and the club trade suggest, however, that the powers of the Public Entertainments Licences (Drug Misuse) Act 1997 have not yet been used by a local authority to close a club.

Martin McGartand

Mr. Maginnis: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what further progress has been made by Northumbria Police in identifying those involved in the attempted murder of Martin McGartand at Whitley Bay on 17 June; if the weapon used has been identified and/or connected with any other crime; and if he will make a statement. [95335]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Northumbria Police continue to make inquiries into this crime. I understand that, at the present time, there is no firm evidence to identify those involved in the shooting; nor has the weapon used been identified or confirmed as being connected with any other crime.

Cycling Fines

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many on-the-spot fines for cycling on the pavement have been issued by each police force since the scheme was introduced. [95310]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The information is not yet available.

Each police force has been asked to monitor the new fixed penalty provisions which came into force on 1 August 1999, but the figures are not likely to be available until early in the new year.

Racing Pigeons

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many people have been convicted of offences involving racing pigeons in each of the last three years for which figures are available under the criminal law section of the Theft Act 1969 and section 1 of the Criminal Damage Act 1971; and if he will make a statement. [95319]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The information is not collected centrally. Although the Home Office Court Proceedings database identifies the legislation under which a defendant is proceeded against, it generally does not hold information on the characteristics of individual cases dealt with by the courts.

Prisoners (Civil Claims)

Mr. Soley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many civil claims by prisoners against the Prison Department have been settled out of court in each year since 1995. [95074]

Mr. Boateng: The information is available only from 1997 onwards and is given in the table.

Civil claims by prisoners against the Prison Service settled out of court [1]

Year	*Civil claims*
1997	106
1998	83
1999 (to 20 October)	25

[1] These figures exclude any cases where a settlement has been reached but final resolution on matters such as costs have not yet been completed.

Paramapathy Pavanathan

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when Mr. Paramapathy Pavanathan of Acre Road, Kingston, will hear the results of his application for refugee status. [95235]

Mrs. Roche: On 21 October, Mr. Pavanathan was granted leave to remain in the United Kingdom until 1 March 2000.

Domestic Fires

Mr. Chidgey: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many fires occurred in domestic dwellings caused by *(a)* an electrical source and *(b)* misuse of electrical equipment and appliances in the United Kingdom during each of the years from 1989 to 1998. [94974]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The information is given in the table.

Accidental fires in dwellings where source of ignition was electrical, and where cause was misuse of equipment 1989–98 United Kingdom

Year	*Number* [1]
Total number of dwelling fires where sources of ignition was electrical	
1989	26,976
1990	26,432
1991	27,410
1992	27,844
1993	28,167
1994[1]	29,659
1995[1]	29,468
1996[1]	32,364
1997[1]	34,094
1998[1,2]	33,280
Total number of dwelling fires where source of ignition was electrical, and cause was misuse of equipment and appliances	
1989	17,006
1990	16,414
1991	16,823
1992	16,786
1993	17,603
1994[1]	10,402
1995[1]	11,284
1996[1]	11,252
1997[1]	12,395
1998[1,2]	11,936

[1] Includes additional "late" call and heat and smoke damage incidents, which were not recorded prior to 1994

[2] Provisional figures

Asylum Applications

Mr. Gerrard: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) what has been the average time from the lodging of the asylum application to the determination of the appeal for those cases where a determination of an appeal to an adjudicator against an initial asylum decision has been made in each of the last three calendar months; [95884]

(2) what has been the average time from the lodging of the application to the initial decision for those cases where an initial decision has been made on an asylum claim, where the asylum seeker was a single person, in each of the last three calendar months; [95883]

(3) what has been the average time from the lodging of the application to the initial decision for those cases where an initial decision has been made on an asylum claim, where the asylum seeker had dependent children, in each of the last three calendar months; [95886]

(4) what has been the average time from the lodging of the application to the initial decision for those cases where an initial decision has been made on an asylum claim in each of the last three calendar months; and how this average has been calculated. [95885]

Mrs. Roche: The available information is given in the table. The figures were calculated by taking the mean length of time between the date that the asylum application was lodged and the date of the initial decision, for asylum decisions taken in July, August and September 1999. The figures relate to asylum applications lodged by

principal applicants only. Separate figures for single people and for people with dependent children are not presently available.

Average time to initial decision, in months [1,2,3] July, August and September 1999

Month of decision	Pre 1993 Act cases	Post 1993 Act cases	Total
July	84	28	48
August	85	28	49
September	88	26	49
July-September	88	27	49

[1] Figures are estimates based on cases for which information is recorded
[2] Mean average is used
[3] Excluding dependants

Immigration and Asylum Bill

Mr. Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what discussions he has had with Amnesty International regarding the provisions of the Immigration and Asylum Bill; and if he will make a statement. [95568]

Mrs. Roche: I met representatives of Amnesty International on 19 October to discuss the provisions of the Immigration and Asylum Bill.

Laser Pens

Mr. Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to regulate the use of laser pens; and if he will make a statement. [95668]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Anyone carrying a laser pointer as a weapon in a public place or a school may be liable to prosecution under section 1 of the Prevention of Crime Act 1953. In addition, laser pointers which may present an unacceptable risk in the hands of the general consumer, are subject to consumer safety legislation.

We have no plans to introduce further regulation in this area.

Police Officers

Mr. Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many police officers were employed in England and Wales during the most recent year for which figures are available; and how many he expects will be employed in *(a)* 2000–01 and *(b)* 2001–02. [95664]

Mr. Charles Clarke: As at 31 March 1999, there were 126,096 police officers in England and Wales. Under legislation passed by the previous Government, the powers of the Home Secretary to set overall police numbers were removed. The number of police officers at any given time is determined by chief constables on the basis of resources made available to them. The Government are making available additional resources, in a new ring-fenced crime fighting fund, to provide 5,000 extra police recruits over the next three years.

Vivisection

Mr. Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what assessment he has made of the benefits to medical science of vivisection; what plans he has to review the practice; and if he will make a statement. [95722]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The development of many new drugs and medical technologies has depended on, and continues to depend on, the use of animals. Their use is regulated by the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986, which is widely viewed as the most rigorous piece of legislation of its type in the world.

In 1998, the Animal Procedures Committee completed a review of the operation of the Act. Its results were published in November 1998 as part of the Committee's annual report for 1997. The Committee concluded that further examination of the cost/benefit assessment should be undertaken and that the validity of science using animals could be part of their review. The Committee is planning to consult publicly and I await their further advice.

Convicted Sex Offenders

Mr. Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what requirement there is *(a)* for convicted sex offenders against children to notify authorities of addresses they are staying at abroad and *(b)* for sex offenders convicted abroad for offences against children to notify authorities when residing in the UK; and if he will make a statement. [95564]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Under the Sex Offenders Act 1997, there is no requirement for offenders to register if they travel abroad or for those with overseas convictions to register if they reside in the United Kingdom. This is one of a number of issues we are looking at in evaluating the operation of the registration requirement in the 1997 Act. Once the review is completed, we shall then need to consider whether, and if so what, changes are necessary.

TREASURY

Departmental Twinning

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many requests there have been to his Department for placement of officials from Central, East European and CIS states as twins of his officials; how many such officials have been accepted as twins; and from which countries *(a)* those who were accepted and *(b)* those who were not accepted came. [93994]

Miss Melanie Johnson *[holding answer 25 October 1999]:* I refer my hon. Friend to the answer given by the Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester, East (Mr. Vaz) on 25 October 1999, *Official Report*, columns *739–40*.

ONS

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) what the reasons are for the Office for National Statistics five-year survey of companies' fixed assets; [95917]

(2) how many companies in *(a)* manufacturing and *(b)* food-processing industries have been sent questionnaires by the Office for National Statistics requesting details of their fixed assets; and what is his estimate of the total compliance cost involved. [95916]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the Director of the Office for National Statistics. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Tim Holt to Mr. Nick Gibb, dated 26 October 1999:

As Director of the Office for National Statistics (ONS), I have been asked to reply to your parliamentary questions on companies' fixed assets.

The new Fixed Assets Survey to collect details of capital stocks held by businesses is one of a number of measures introduced to improve the quality of the National Accounts. The survey was introduced in 1999 to provide a more reliable basis for calculating the value of fixed assets held in the UK, required for the National Accounts. It will cover all industries in a rolling programme so that each industry is surveyed only once in about five years.

The questionnaire requesting details of fixed assets was sent to a sample of 264 companies in manufacturing, of which 257 were in the food processing industry. The estimate of the total compliance cost for these industries is £19,000.

Revenue

Mr. Field: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what proportion of total revenue was raised *(a)* directly and *(b)* indirectly (i) 30 years ago, (ii) 20 years ago, (iii) 10 years ago and (iv) currently. [95517]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the Director of the Office for National Statistics. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Tim Holt to Mr. Frank Field, dated 26 October 1999:

As Director of the Office for National Statistics (ONS), I have been asked to reply to your recent parliamentary question on revenue as a proportion of direct and indirect taxation.

The ONS does not publish data under the headings of direct and indirect taxation.

In table 10.1 of the United Kingdom National Accounts (Blue Book) 1999 a full list of UK taxes is published on a European System of Accounts (ESA 1995) basis. Copies of this publication are available in the House of Commons Library. Broadly speaking they are split into:

(i) taxes on products and production (D.2 taxes) including taxes such as VAT and business rates

and the rest which includes

(ii) taxes on income and wealth including taxes such as income tax, corporation tax, motor vehicle duties (D.5)

(iii) social contributions including employers and employees compulsory contributions (D.611)

(iv) capital taxes including taxes such as inheritance tax (D.91)

Year	*1968*	*1978*	*1988*	*1998*
Taxes on production as a percentage of total taxes	39.0	35.2	38.1	38.4
Other taxes as a percentage of total taxes	61.0	64.8	61.9	61.6

EU Funding (Wales)

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what representations he has received from the National Assembly for Wales with regard to the provision of additional funds from the Treasury for the financial year 2000–01 and subsequent years, to enable Wales to take up European Union strategic funds fully in each year from April 2000, without having to reduce spending on other services to provide the necessary Welsh funding; and if he will make a statement. [95769]

Mr. Andrew Smith: My predecessor discussed these matters with the First Secretary of the National Assembly for Wales. I have also held discussions with the Secretary of State for Wales.

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will ensure that the full sums of money provided by the EU for Objective 1 strategic projects in Wales will be passed to Wales outside the Welsh block and not be subject to the application of the Barnett formula; and if he will make a statement. [95770]

Mr. Andrew Smith: UK Government Departments, the Scottish Executive and the National Assembly for Wales are required to find full public expenditure cover for EU Structural Funds expenditure.

I will consider on their merits representations from the National Assembly about the public spending implications arising from Objective 1 status as part of next year's spending review.

Crown Estate

Mr. Welsh: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will list for each of the past five years payments to the Consolidated Fund made by the Crown Estate Commissioners. [95271]

Mr. Andrew Smith: The information requested is as follows:

Financial year	*£ million*
1994–95	81.9
1995–96	94.3
1996–97	103.1
1997–98	116.6
1998–99	122.0

Fuel Duty

Mr. Welsh: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make it his policy to end the above-inflation rises in fuel duty; and if he will make a statement. [95274]

Mr. Timms: The Government's policy on fuel duty escalators is set out on page 121 of the 1999 Financial Statement and Budget Report.

Mortgage Mis-selling

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what evidence he has received in the past four months on the mis-selling of mortgages. [95158]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The deadline for submissions to the Treasury's consultation on whether mortgages should be regulated was 22 October. The Treasury has received over 150 responses to date. Analysis is now taking place, with some responses still being received. A decision will be announced by the end of the year.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Incapacity Benefit

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will estimate the median total weekly income of those current recipients of Incapacity Benefit or Invalidity Benefit below state pension age who have private pension income in excess of £50 per week. [94698]

Mr. Bayley: Around 80 per cent. of current recipients of Incapacity Benefit below State pension age either have no private pension or a pension of less than £50 a week.

The median weekly household income before housing costs of current recipients of Incapacity Benefit below State pension age with income from a private pension in excess of £50 a week is £309 a week. The average weekly household income for this group is £343 a week. The average is higher than the median because a significant proportion have high pension incomes.

Notes:

1. Incapacity Benefit replaced Sickness Benefit and Invalidity Benefit in April 1995. All existing recipients at that date became Incapacity Benefit recipients.

2. Weekly income is unequivalised income net of tax and other deductions of the household that the benefit recipient lives in.

3. All figures are in April 1999 prices and are rounded to the nearest £.

4. Figures are estimates from the Households Below Average Income (HBAI) dataset based on the 1997–98 Family Resources Survey (FRS) for Great Britain.

5. Private pensions are defined as occupational and personal pensions.

Departmental Publications

Mr. Maclean: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will list his Department's spending on official publications since May 1997. [93682]

Mr. Rooker: The Department has spent £3.216 million on official publications in the period May 1997 to the end of September 1999.

Income Support

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what assumption about the indexation arrangements for Income Support underlies his estimate that on unchanged policies one in three pensioners will be in receipt of Income Support by 2050. [94699]

Mr. Rooker: For the above estimate, Income Support is assumed to increase in line with average earnings from the year 2000. The assumed rate of increase in average earnings is 1.5 per cent. per year above the rate of inflation.

Notes:

1. The estimate referred to above was obtained through an approximate extension of the results for 2025 of the Departments' microsimulation model, PENSIM.

2. PENSIM provides estimates of pensioners' incomes up to 2025. Using the 2025 income estimates, all sources of private incomes were assumed to increase in line with average earnings (1.5 per cent. per year above inflation) up to 2050. State income (other than Income Support) was assumed to increase only with prices. This provided an estimate of the distribution of pensioners' incomes in 2050. The model's caseload was re-weighted to reflect the projected size and composition of the pensioner population in 2050.

3. The number of pensioners in 2050 with estimated income below Income Support levels in this year was calculated. The same proportion of this group receiving Income Support in 2025 was assumed to receive Income Support in 2050. This resulted in an estimate of around 30 per cent. of the total pensioner population in 2050 receiving the benefit.

4. The Department does not currently have a tool to estimate pensioners' incomes in 2050 although a long-term project is underway to develop one.

Fraud

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what proportion of benefits claimants receive benefits by *(a)* cash payment through the Post Office and *(b)* direct credit transfer; and what amount of benefit fraud arises from (i) cash payments and (ii) direct credit transfer. [95176]

Mr. Rooker: As at August 1999, about 65 per cent. of all benefit recipients were receiving payment in cash by order book or girocheque at the Post Office. Thirty-four per cent. were receiving payment by direct credit transfer and 1 per cent. by other methods of payment into banks (these include payable orders and the small proportion of girocheques paid into bank accounts).

It is estimated that fraudulent losses during 1998–99 from cash payments were £19 million in respect of girocheques and £83 million in respect of order books. No fraud has been detected to date directly arising from payment by direct credit transfer.

Overseas Pensions

Dr. Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what representations have been received from *(a)* the Canadian Government and *(b)* other Governments since 1 May, in favour of restoring parity between the state pension available to British citizens resident overseas and that available to United Kingdom residents. [95076]

Mr. Rooker: The issue of frozen rate pensions was raised by Donald Campbell, of Canada's Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade, during a meeting with my noble Friend the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs on 6 October 1999 in Canada.

The Australian Government made representations in July 1999 for a limited unfreezing of pensions for some UK pensioners living in Australia. We rejected this proposal. The Australian Government indicated that it would be abrogating the Social Security agreement with the UK. Formal notification of this has not been received.

We have had no other formal approaches from Governments about unfreezing pensions during the period.

Pensions

Mr. O'Hara: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what was the value of the basic state pension for *(a)* single pensioners and *(b)* pensioner couples for each

year since November 1979 to April 1999; what it would have been if it had been uprated in line with whichever was the higher of average earnings or prices; and what were the average earnings and retail prices index figures in the month which determined the level of the state pension each year since 1979. [95678]

Mr. Rooker: The information is in the tables.

Single pensioners

Uprating date	*Actual rates £'s per week*	*Increased by higher of earnings or prices £'s per week*	*Earnings Percentage*	*Retail Prices Percentage*	*Period used*
November 1979	23.30	23.30	—	—	—
November 1980	27.15	27.60	18.5	15.3	November 1979–80
November 1981	29.60	30.90	11.5	12.0	November 1980–81
November 1982	32.85	33.50	8.4	6.3	November 1981–82
November 1983	34.05	36.40	8.7	3.7	May 1982–83
November 1984	35.80	38.25	5.0	5.1	May 1983–84
November 1985	38.30	41.60	8.7	7.0	May 1984–85
July 1986	38.70	43.45	4.5	1.1	May 1985-January 1986
April 1987	39.50	45.90	5.6	2.1	January 1986-September 1986
April 1988	41.15	49.50	7.8	4.2	September 1986–87
April 1989	43.60	53.85	8.8	5.9	September 1987–88
April 1990	46.90	59.05	9.7	7.6	September 1988–89
April 1991	52.00	65.50	9.5	10.9	September 1989–90
April 1992	54.15	70.50	7.6	4.1	September 1990–91
April 1993	56.10	73.90	4.8	3.6	September 1991–92
April 1994	57.60	76.25	2.5	1.8	September 1992–93
April 1995	58.85	78.85	3.4	2.2	September 1993–94
April 1996	61.15	81.95	2.8	3.9	September 1994–95
April 1997	62.45	85.40	4.2	2.1	September 1995–96
April 1998	64.70	88.90	4.1	3.6	September 1996–97
April 1999	66.75	93.25	4.9	3.2	September 1997–98

Pensioner couples

Uprating date	*Actual rates £'s per week*	*Increased by higher of earnings or prices £'s per week*	*Earnings Percentage*	*Retail Prices Percentage*	*Period used*
November 1979	37.30	37.30	—	—	—
November 1980	43.45	44.20	18.5	15.3	November 1979–80
November 1981	47.35	49.50	11.5	12.0	November 1980–81
November 1982	52.55	53.65	8.4	6.3	November 1981–82
November 1983	54.50	58.30	8.7	3.7	May 1982–83
November 1984	57.30	61.25	5.0	5.1	May 1983–84
November 1985	61.30	66.60	8.7	7.0	May 1984–85
July 1986	61.95	69.60	4.5	1.1	May 1985-January 1986
April 1987	63.25	73.50	5.6	2.1	January 1986-September 1986
April 1988	65.90	79.25	7.8	4.2	September 1986–87
April 1989	69.80	86.20	8.8	5.9	September 1987–88
April 1990	75.10	94.55	9.7	7.6	September 1988–89
April 1991	83.25	104.85	9.5	10.9	September 1989–90
April 1992	86.70	112.85	7.6	4.1	September 1990–91
April 1993	89.80	118.30	4.8	3.6	September 1991–92
April 1994	92.10	121.95	2.5	1.8	September 1992–93
April 1995	94.10	126.10	3.4	2.2	September 1993–94
April 1996	97.75	131.05	2.8	3.9	September 1994–95
April 1997	99.80	136.55	4.2	2.1	September 1995–96
April 1998	103.40	142.15	4.1	3.6	September 1996–97
April 1999	106.70	149.10	4.9	3.2	September 1997–98

Notes:

1. The Retail Prices Index (all items) has been used as published by the Office for National Statistics.

2. Average Earnings Index Whole Economy (Non Seasonally Adjusted) as published by the Office for National Statistics.

3. Figures have been rounded to the nearest 5 pence at each uprating.

4. From April 1994 the basic rate of Retirement Pension has been increased by 50p on a single person and 70p on a pensioner couple to reflect VAT on fuel.

5. The figures for November 1978 to November 1982 have been calculated using actual increases in Retail Prices Index rather than forecast increases.

Disability Living Allowance

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many cases have been considered to date under the Periodic Inquiry into Disability Living Allowance; and of these, how many have resulted in *(a)* a higher assessment, *(b)* an unchanged assessment and *(c)* a lower assessment. [95477]

Mr. Bayley: The administration of Disability Living Allowance is a matter for Mr. Peter Mathison, Chief Executive of the Benefits Agency. He will write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Peter Mathison to Mr. Steve Webb, dated 25 October 1999:

The Secretary of State has asked me to reply to your recent Parliamentary Question asking how many cases have been considered to date under the Periodic Enquiry into Disability Living Allowance; and of these, how many have resulted in (a) a higher assessment, (b) an unchanged assessment and (c) a lower assessment.

Statistics for periodic enquiry are to be published on a quarterly basis. The first figures, which will show the position up to and including 30 September, are due for publication within the next two weeks. They, and all further Periodic Enquiry statistics, will be available in the House of Commons library.

I hope this is helpful.

Changes to Regulations

Mr. Swinney: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will place in the Library a list of all changes to Social Security regulations since May 1997, giving a brief summary of the effect of each change, the number of people affected, the cost or saving of each change and the average cost or gain to individuals as a result of each change; and if he will make a statement. [95266]

Mr. Rooker: The information is not available in the format requested. Such information as is available has been placed in the Library.

It is only possible to provide a list of subordinate legislation made by the Secretary of State for Social Security since 1 May 1997. Summaries of the legislation can be found in the explanatory note attached at the end of each piece of subordinate legislation which are also held in the Library.

State Pension

Mr. Swinney: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will estimate the annual cost in the next five years of raising the state pension over inflation by *(a)* £3, *(b)* £5 and *(c)* £8 for single claimants and (i) £5, (ii) £8 and (iii) £11 for couples. [95284]

Mr. Rooker: The information is not available in the format requested. Such information as is available is in the table.

The estimated annual cost of raising the state pension over inflation

£ million (1999 prices)

	2000–01	*2001–02*	*2002–03*	*2003–04*	*2004–05*	*2005–06*
£3, £5						
RP only:						
Gross costs	1,470	1,480	1,480	1,490	1,510	1,520
Net costs	1,150	1,160	1,170	1,190	1,210	1,230
With linked benefits:						
Gross costs	1,740	1,750	1,760	1,780	1,800	1,810
Net costs	1,330	1,350	1,360	1,380	1,410	1,430
£5, £8:						
RP only:						
Gross costs	2,410	2,420	2,430	2,450	2,470	2,490
Net costs	1,880	1,900	1,920	1,950	1,990	2,020
With linked benefits:						
Gross costs	2,860	2,880	2,900	2,920	2,950	2,980
Net costs	2,190	2,210	2,240	2,270	2,310	2,350
£8, £11						
RP only:						
Gross costs	3,660	3,670	3,690	3,720	3,760	3,790
Net costs	—	—	—	—	—	—
With linked benefits:						
Gross costs	4,360	4,380	4,420	4,460	4,510	4,560
Net costs	—	—	—	—	—	—

Notes:

1. Gross costs have been calculated by the Government Actuary's Department. Net costs take account of means-tested benefit offsets using the 1999–2000 Policy Simulation Model based on the 1996–97 Family Resources Survey.
2. It is not possible to provide net costs for the third option (£8-single, £11-couples) because they involve disproportionate increases for different categories of pension, which the Policy Simulation Model cannot distinguish between.
3. Figures have been rounded to the nearest 10 million and are in 1999 prices.
4. Linked benefits include Widows Benefits and Incapacity Benefit.

HEALTH

Overseas Treatment

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if there is any Government funding for medical treatment overseas using advanced techniques currently not available in the United Kingdom. [94639]

Ms Stuart: National Health Service legislation contains no general power allowing purchase of treatment outside the United Kingdom for UK residents. European Community law does permit referral of individual patients elsewhere within the European Economic Area for treatment. Exceptionally, a health authority can seek approval from the Department of Health for ex-gratia funding of treatment outside the European Economic Area provided the costs are met from within the authority's existing resources.

Waiting Lists

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Health in each year from 1994 to 1999 for Southport and Ormskirk Trust and Fazakerley Trust hospitals *(a)* how many people were on waiting lists and *(b)* what was the average waiting time for an operation involving (i) orthopaedic, (ii) heart, (iii) urology, (iv) carcinoma and (v) opthamology matters. [94591]

Mr. Denham: Table 1 shows the size of the waiting list at the end of March 1994 to 1999 for each provider site.

Tables 2 and 3 show the average waiting time by selected hospital provider for the financial years 1994–95 to 1997–98 for the following areas:

An operation involving the trauma and orthopaedic, urology and ophthalmology specialties.

Heart operations.

An operation involving a selected primary diagnosis of neoplasms (carcinoma).

Table 1: Total number of patients waiting for elective admission at the end of March

	Aintree NHS Trust	*Southport and Formby Trust*	*West Lancashire NHS Trust*
1993–94	8,143	3,135	1,705
1994–95	8,951	3,250	1,999
1995–96	9,889	3,792	2,173
1996–97	10,251	4,197	2,411
1997–98	9,105	4,122	2,735
1998–99	8,458	3,635	2,332

Table 2: Ordinary admissions and day cases combined: mean waiting time (days) for an operation involving selected specialities and selected hospital provider: NHS hospitals, England

	Aintree Hospitals NHS Trust	*West Lancashire Trust*	*Southport and Formby NHS Trust*
1994–95			
Trauma and Orthopaedics	107.1	151.4	101.4
Urology	96.3	93.5	70.2
Ophthamology	96.5	91.1	119.4
1995–96			
Trauma and Orthopaedics	103.5	144.4	136.0
Urology	100.0	100.9	73.1
Ophthalmology	81.9	174.7	144.2

Table 2: Ordinary admissions and day cases combined: mean waiting time (days) for an operation involving selected specialities and selected hospital provider: NHS hospitals, England

	Aintree Hospitals NHS Trust	*West Lancashire Trust*	*Southport and Formby NHS Trust*
1996–97 [1]			
Trauma and Orthopaedics	95.5	147.4	154.9
Urology	114.2	86.9	88.3
Ophthalmology	52.7	223.2	130.6
1997–98 [1]			
Trauma and Orthopaedics	131.0	162.8	196.8
Urology	93.4	90.0	48.2
Ophthalmology	37.1	239.7	164.0

Table 3: Ordinary admissions and day cases combined: mean waiting time (days) for an operation involving neoplasms shown by selected hospital provider: NHS hospitals, England

	Aintree Hospitals NHS Trust	*West Lancashire Trust*	*Southport and Formby NHS Trust*
1994–95	63.9	48.1	40.4
1995–96	54.5	43.3	27.0
1996–97[1]	63.0	38.2	29.7
1997–98[1]	54.0	38.6	24.8

[1] Figures are provisional, no adjustments have yet been made for shortfalls in data (i.e. the data is ungrossed).

Notes:

ICD-9 codes 140–239: Neoplasms were used for 1994–95.

ICD-10 codes C00-D48: Neoplasms were used for 1995–96 to 1996–97.

Waiting time statistics from HES are not the same as the published waiting list statistics. HES provides counts and waiting times for all patients admitted to hospital within a given period whereas the published waiting list statistics count those waiting for treatment at a given point in time and how long they have been on the waiting list. Also, HES calculates the waiting time as the difference between the admission and decision to admit dates. Unlike published waiting list statistics, this is not adjusted for self-deferrals or periods of medical/social suspension.

Source:

Department of Health, Hospital Episode Statistics (HES)

Eye Tests

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many people in Sefton over the age of 65 years had their eyes tested in each year between 1995 and 1998. [94590]

Mr. Hutton: From information obtained on the age of patients from an annual, national sample survey of opticians' workload, we estimate that the following numbers of sight tests were carried out among the 54,400 people aged over 65 who we estimate are resident in Sefton.

	Number of sight tests
1995–96	21,000
1996–97	21,400
1997–98	21,900
1998–99	22,200

Trust Funding

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how much funding over and above base budgets

was received by Fazakerley Trust and Southport and Ormskirk Trust hospitals in each year from 1992 to 1999; and what specific projects were so funded. [94589]

Mr. Denham: The table gives details of the funding above base budgets and the projects funded for Aintree Hospitals National Health Service Trust (including Fazakerley Hospital), the former West Lancashire NHS Trust (acute services only) and the former Southport and Formby NHS Trust for each year from 1992–93 to 1998–99.

The information provided is not kept centrally and was obtained from Southport and Ormskirk Hospitals NHS Trust and Aintree Hospitals NHS Trust. Further details may be obtained from the trusts if required.

Developments funded above base budgets 1992/93–1997/98 for Aintree Hospitals NHS Trust and the predecessor NHS Trusts of Southport and Ormskirk Hospital NHS Trust

£000

	Total	1992–93	1993–94	1994–95	1995–96	1996–97	1997–98	1998–99
Aintree Hospitals NHS Trust								
C.P.N. Posts—Mental Health	46	46	—	—	—	—	—	—
Community M.H. Team	160	—	—	100	—	—	60	—
Link Nursing—Mental Health	101	—	—	101	—	—	—	—
Stoddart Nursing—Mental Health	100	—	—	—	100	—	—	—
Primary Care Team—Mental Health	136	—	—	—	136	—	—	—
Liverpool Investment—Mental Health	385	—	—	—	385	—	—	—
Mental Health Intensive Care and Security	230	—	—	—	—	—	230	—
Mental Health Intensive Home Support	186	—	—	—	—	—	115	71
EMI Consultant—Mental Health	165	—	—	—	—	—	142	23
New Community Mental Health Team (Sefton)	60	—	—	—	—	—	—	60
Activity Workers (Stoddart House)—Mental Health	59	—	—	—	—	—	—	59
All Other Mental Health Service Developments	307	—	—	—	69	104	48	86
Open Access	63	—	63	—	—	—	—	—
Consultant	100	—	100	—	—	—	—	—
A.E.D. Nursing	57	—	—	—	57	—	—	—
A.E.D. Physician	65	—	—	—	65	—	—	—
Anaesthetic Task Force	62	—	—	—	62	—	—	—
3rd Consultant	62	—	—	—	62	—	—	—
Cardiac Rehabilitation	85	—	—	—	85	—	—	—
3rd M.R.I. Session	40	—	—	—	40	—	—	—
Chair in Rehabilitation	67	—	—	—	67	—	—	—
Consultant Rheumatologist	156	—	—	—	51	105	—	—
High Dependency Unit	761	—	—	—	—	410	314	37
Final H.A. Pick-up of Palliative Care Nursing	53	—	—	—	—	—	53	—
Palliative Care Consultant	58	—	—	—	—	—	58	—
Vascular Surgeon	88	—	—	—	—	—	88	—
All Other Service Developments	749	15	—	221	250	86	146	31
Waiting List Initiatives	1,645	397	—	151	77	—	1,020	—
Additional Activity	1,672	—	—	—	1,058	—	614	—
Total	7,718	458	163	573	2,564	705	2,888	367
Southport and Ormskirk Hospital NHS Trust								
Former West Lancashire NHS Trust								
Resource Management Initiative	674	225	309	100	—	—	—	40
ENT	158	158	—	—	—	—	—	—
Activity increase	302	52	—	—	250	—	—	—
Waiting List Initiative	309	—	309	294	306	123	143	313
Obstetric and Gynaecologist consultant	60	—	60	—	—	—	—	—
A&E Consultant	60	—	60	—	—	—	—	—
CT Scanner costs	140	—	—	140	—	—	—	—
Ophthalmology	100	—	—	100	—	—	—	—
Consultant Gastroenterologist	62	—	—	62	—	—	—	—
Winter Pressures/Emergency Medical Admissions	694	—	—	92	37	90	185	290
Consultant Dermatologist	57	—	—	57	—	—	—	—
Consultant Haematologist	57	—	—	57	—	—	—	—
Cardiologist	60	—	—	—	60	—	—	—
Cardiology Out-Patients	44	—	—	—	—	44	—	—
Admissions	55	—	—	—	—	—	—	55
All Other Service Developments	—	26	30	13	91	20	31	101
Former Southport and Formby NHS Trust								
Waiting List	3,215	481	722	199	398	100	465	850
Winter Pressures	637	—	20	60	26	97	98	336
Spinal Injuries	40	—	40	—	—	—	—	—
MRI Scanning	84	—	84	—	—	—	—	—
GUM	64	—	64	—	—	—	—	—
Dermatology	83	—	83	—	—	—	—	—
Pressures	211	—	—	—	—	211	—	—
Emergency Medical Admissions	150	—	—	—	—	—	—	150
Consultant Microbiology	40	—	—	—	—	—	—	40
All Other Service Developments	404	—	166	115	63	—	—	60
Total	7,760	942	1,947	1,289	1,231	685	922	2,235

Young Disabled People

Mr. Oaten: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to collect information on the long-term care needs of younger disabled people. [93829]

Mr. Hutton: The Department has recently introduced a new collection—the Resources, Assessment and Packages of Care (RAP) Project—which will provide information on the numbers of disabled people aged 18–64 assessed by social services and the services identified as being required to meet their needs as a result of the assessment. The data are not broken down further by age. The report of the first "Dress Rehearsal" for the RAP Project has just been published. Copies are available in the Library.

The Department also collects information on the numbers of younger disabled people in residential or nursing care and the residential and nursing care market provision. Information is also available on the numbers of younger disabled people who receive different forms of day and domiciliary care. Again, this information is available for the 18–64 age group, but it is not possible to break these figures down further by age.

NHS Direct

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) how NHS Direct will be funded once the pilot funding has been discontinued; and if he will make a statement; [94892]

(2) if primary care groups and primary care trusts will acquire budgetary responsibilities for NHS Direct once the current pilot funding is discontinued. [94895]

Ms Stuart: NHS Direct is currently funded through a central budget. The National Health Service Executive Headquarters and NHS Executive Regional Offices will continue to have budgetary responsibilities for NHS Direct for the foreseeable future.

Airlines (Emergency Medical Equipment)

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what advice he plans to offer commercial airlines in respect of the equipment they routinely carry against the possibility of medical emergencies; [94893]

(2) what assessment his Department has made of the equipment carried by commercial aircraft for use in medical emergencies. [94894]

Ms Stuart: Following informal discussions with the Department, the Medical Directors of the Association of European Airlines are reviewing current provision of emergency equipment and training on aircraft with the European Resuscitation Council. This will take account of what the Civil Aviation Authority already set out, the updated requirements of the EC harmonised Joint Airline Regulations covering commercial airlines, recommendations from the Aerospace Medical Association and ongoing international work. We will consider the expert advice when it is ready and discuss what action may be needed with Ministerial colleagues in other government departments and with the industry.

Surgical Operating Departments

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what action he has taken to establish a scheme of statutory registration for surgical operating department practitioners. [95234]

Mr. Hutton: Under powers provided by the Health Act 1999, we are reviewing the Professions Supplementary to Medicine Act 1960. As part of that review, consideration is being given to the regulation of health professions which are not currently state registered, including operating department practitioners. The aim will be to provide for an NHS which is modern, reliable and fully responsive to patient needs. There will be full consultation before a final decision is taken.

Community Prescribing

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he expects the second part of the Crown review on community prescribing to be published. [95245]

Yvette Cooper: The final report of the Review of Prescribing, Supply and Administration of Medicines was published for consultation and comment on 8 March. We are currently giving detailed consideration on how best to take forward the Report's recommendations in the light of all comments.

NHS Trusts (Capital Charges)

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to review the capital charges on health service buildings and lands payable by NHS trusts. [95244]

Mr. Denham: All the land and buildings in the National Health Service estate were re-valued by the Valuation Office Agency in an exercise completed by 31 June 1999. The resulting valuations will be brought to account in NHS trusts' financial statements at 31 March 2000 and will consequently determine the amount of capital charges payable by NHS trusts in the financial year 2000–01.

Estimates of capital charges payable in 2000–01 were received from NHS trusts by the NHS Executive in August 1999. These estimates inform the process of allocating funding to health authorities for 2000–01 such that the NHS trusts sector is fully funded for capital charges thus estimated.

Carers

Mr. Sanders: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many carers' assessments have been carried out under the Carers Act 1995; and if he will make a statement. [95334]

Mr. Hutton: Using information provided from the first dress rehearsal of the Referrals, Assessments and Packages of Care Project, which not all local authorities in England completed, we have been able to extrapolate an indicative number of carers' assessments carried out under the Carers (Recognition and Services) Act 1995 for the period 1 January 1999 to 31 March 1999. This indicative figure is 62,384. No earlier data are available centrally.

St. Dunstan's

Mr. Waterson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health for what reasons St. Dunstan's recent application for Government funding was rejected. [95911]

Mr. Hutton: St. Dunstan's has submitted an application under the current round (2000–01) for section 64 grants. No decision has yet been made. It is expected that Ministers will make their decisions early in 2000.

Under section 64 of the Health Services and Public Health Act 1968, the Department has powers to fund voluntary organisations in England whose activities support the Department's policy objectives relating to health and social services. St. Dunstan's is eligible, as are all registered charities, to apply under the scheme.

Coronary Heart Disease

Mr. Collins: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what additional sums for treating coronary heart disease will be allocated to the Morecambe Bay Health Authority in *(a)* 1999–2000 and *(b)* 2000–01. [95483]

Mr. Hutton: Plans for allocating the additional £50 million to help the National Health Service increase numbers of heart operations over the next two years, which my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State announced on 18 October, have yet to be finalised.

Parliamentary Questions

Mr. Pike: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he intends to reply to the Question tabled for answer on 16 July on winter pressures (91791). [95811]

Mr. Denham: I shall let my hon. Friend have a reply to his earlier Question as soon as possible.

Human Tissue Act 1961

Mr. Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to review the provisions of the Human Tissue Act 1961 to require coroners to consult relatives before removing body organs; and if he will make a statement. [95571]

Mr. Hutton: In view of the concerns raised about the removal and retention of organs at post mortem, we have asked the Chief Medical Officer to conduct an investigation. This investigation will look at what has happened in the country generally and at the implications for the National Health Service. Any recommendations relating to coronial practice emerging from the CMO's investigation, the Bristol Inquiry, or other local reviews will receive full consideration.

Social Workers

Mr. Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what action he is taking to reduce the incidence of violence against social workers; and if he will make a statement. [95730]

Mr. Hutton: I refer the hon. Member to the reply given to the right hon. Member for Caernarfon (Mr. Wigley) on 25 October 1999, *Official Report*, column *750*.

Beta Interferon

Mr. Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he expects to receive the report from the National Institute for Clinical Excellence regarding the benefits to sufferers of multiple sclerosis of being prescribed Beta Interferon; and if he will make a statement. [95560]

Mr. Denham: We consulted earlier in the summer on a proposal to refer beta interferon to the National Institute for Clinical Excellence (NICE), for an authoritative appraisal of the available evidence, and an announcement will be made about the outcome of the consultation in the near future

It will be for NICE to determine its timetable for the appraisal of technologies once they are referred by the Government.

Response Times Targets

Mr. Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what representations he has received over the response times targets for Category B and Category C calls; what discussions he has had with Community Health Councils over these response times; what plans he has to review the times; and if he will make a statement. [95565]

Ms Stuart: My noble Friend the Baroness Hayman and I have recently replied to Gloucestershire Community Health Council on the subject of Category C calls and officials have written directly to a number of Community Health Councils setting out Government policy in this area.

Ambulance response times are reviewed annually and published in a Statistical Bulletin. We have asked ambulance services to submit proposals for pilot studies looking at alternative ways of dealing with less urgent non-life threatening 999 calls. Several services are already piloting such projects, however careful monitoring and evaluation is needed to ensure patients receive appropriate clinical care.

Health Inequality

Mr. David Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what recent assessment his Department has made of current levels of health inequalities in England. [93175]

Yvette Cooper: My right hon. Friend the Member for Holborn and St. Pancras (Mr. Dobson) commissioned an Independent Inquiry into Inequalities in Health, under Sir Donald Acheson, whose report was published in November 1998. This report contained an assessment of current levels of health inequalities in England.

Our new health strategy, "Saving Lives: Our Healthier Nation", sets out the main measures of success we shall be using. We shall shortly be publishing a Technical Supplement which will outline in more detail the types of information that will be collated nationally and locally.

Published alongside the health strategy was "Reducing Health Inequalities: An Action report" which sets out the action being taken across Government—and through partnerships between local and regional organisations—to reduce health inequalities.

Mental Health Services

Mr. David Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what further improvements he plans to make to the quality and provision of mental health services. [93176]

Mr. Hutton: Our plans for improving mental health services were set out last year in "Modernising Mental Health Services". This made clear that improvements would be delivered through the implementation of the National Service Framework for Mental Health, reviewing mental health legislation and through new investment and reprioritisation of existing resources.

We published the National Service Framework on 30 September which sets out detailed standards, service models and milestones for measuring improvements in services. Implementation of the National Service Framework will be subject to rigorous performance management.

We have made clear our commitment to investing new resources in mental health services over this and the next two years to help health and social services reshape mental health services.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

EU Regulations

Dr. Cable: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what is the Government's current position in relation to the European Commission proposal to adopt the amended Brussels Convention and the new draft Rome II Convention, pursuant to Article 65 of the Amsterdam Treaty; and if a regulatory impact assessment of the costs and benefits to small and medium sized enterprises of the implementation of this proposed EU regulation has been undertaken. [95174]

Mr. Lock: Pursuant to the Protocol to the Treaty of Rome governing the special position of the United Kingdom and Ireland in relation to measures adopted under the Title IV of that treaty, the Government is not yet required to decide whether the United Kingdom should opt-in to the negotiations on the recent proposal for a regulation to replace the 1968 Brussels convention. This decision must be taken before 8 December 1999.

No proposal for a regulation has yet been made in relation to the draft Rome II Convention which will establish choice of law rules in relation to non-contractual matters; negotiations on this proposed agreement are still at an early stage. There will be proper consultation on it at the appropriate time.

No regulatory impact assessment of the costs and benefits to small and medium sized enterprises of the implementation of the proposed regulation to replace the Brussels Convention has been undertaken. Such an assessment was not considered appropriate in this case.

Competition Law (QCs)

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if he has examined the effect of EU competition law, with particular reference to articles 52 and 85, in relation to the operation of the Queen's Counsel system. [95083]

Mr. Lock: My noble and learned Friend the Lord Chancellor is satisfied that the operation of appointments of Queen's Counsel is consistent with the Treaty provisions mentioned.

Robert Hamill

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department when the inquest into the death of Robert Hamill will be held. [95358]

Mr. Lock: The holding of an inquest into the death of Robert Hamill is a matter for the Coroner for the District in which Mr. Hamill died. The Coroner has indicated that the inquest will be held on a date to be fixed in the New Year.

Public Trust Office

Mr. Robertson: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what is the constitution of the Public Trust Office; who are its members and officers; to whom it is accountable; how it calculates its charges; and if he will make a statement. [95575]

Jane Kennedy: The Public Trust Office was established as an executive agency on 1 July 1994. Its purpose is to ensure the effective management of private assets and financial affairs entrusted to its care. This includes the administration of private trusts, the supervision or management of the financial affairs of mentally incapable persons and the care of funds paid into court.

The responsible minister is the Lord Chancellor. The head of the agency is the Chief Executive who holds the statutory offices of Public Trustee and Accountant General of the Supreme Court. The Public Trust Office employs around 580 staff.

The Chief Executive is responsible for decisions relating to the day to day management of the Public Trust Office and is directly accountable to the Lord Chancellor for the effective and efficient management of the Public Trust Office.

The Public Trustee is required by statute to cover the cost of work related to the administration of trusts. Fees are fixed by the Treasury and sanctioned by the Lord Chancellor.

In relation to mental health work, the Public Trust Office charges a fee calculated against annual income after certain deductions e.g. non-taxable social security benefits.

The Court Funds Office recovers its costs out of income from investments which are managed by the National Investments and Loans Office in accordance with the provisions of Section 39(2)(b) of the Administration of Justice Act 1982.

Hereford Crown Court

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what plans the Lord Chancellor has to review the *(a)* site and *(b)* operation of Hereford Crown Court; and if he will make a statement. [95933]

Jane Kennedy: The lease on the current court building will expire on 31 December 2001. A review will be necessary in advance of that date to determine how the court should operate in future. At this stage, it is too early to judge whether changes to the site or operation of the court will be required.

SCOTLAND

Departmental Publications

Mr. Maclean: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will list his Department's spending on official publications since May 1997. [93688]

Dr. Reid: The spending on official publications by my Department and its predecessor, The Scottish Office, since May 1997, which includes the costs incurred by the Department in publishing, preparation and purchase of copies for official use was £225,802. These costs exclude the cost of publications produced for internal use. Where the Department makes use of a private sector publisher, the publishing, printing and design costs are generally met by the publisher as part of their acceptance of the risks of publication.

CABINET OFFICE

Ecstasy

Mr. Shaw: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office how many *(a)* women and *(b)* men aged 16 to 25 years died as a direct result of ecstasy overdose in 1998–99. [95871]

Miss Melanie Johnson: I have been asked to reply.

The information requested falls within the responsibility of the Director of the Office for National Statistics. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Tim Holt to Mr. Jonathan Shaw, dated 26 October 1999:

As Director of the Office for National Statistics (ONS), I have been asked to reply to your parliamentary question on how many (a) women and (b) men aged 16 to 25 years died as a direct result of ecstasy overdose in 1998–99.

In 1997, the latest year for which data are available, there were five drug-related deaths among men aged 16 to 25 years in which ecstasy was mentioned on the death certificate. No deaths associated with ecstasy were recorded among women in this age-group in 1997.

Neighbourhood Renewal

Mr. Love: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what progress she has made in implementing the national strategy for neighbourhood renewal. [94214]

Mr. Ian McCartney: The Government will publish the national strategy for neighbourhood renewal for consultation in Spring 2000. It will set out a proposed approach for dealing with England's most deprived neighbourhoods.

The strategy will aim to bridge the gap between the most deprived neighbourhoods and the rest; and to deliver on four key outcome targets in deprived neighbourhoods: more jobs, less crime and better health and educational achievement.

The Social Exclusion Unit has set up 18 Policy Action Teams to drive forward the work to develop the strategy, focusing on key problem issues. These teams bring together civil servants from across Whitehall and outside experts. But the strategy will also need to draw on other work, particularly on ensuring that mainstream public services are enabled to do their job in deprived areas.

Next Steps Agencies

Mr. Swinney: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office if he will list for each of the Next Steps agencies (1) the number of civil servants employed in Scotland; [95281]

(2) *(a)* the total wage bill and *(b)* the wage bill for staff based in Scotland. [95282]

Mr. Ian McCartney: This is a matter for which the Scottish Executive is responsible.

WALES

Wages Growth

Mr. Denzil Davies: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what is his estimate of the average percentage growth in wages in Wales in 1997 and 1998 respectively. [94873]

Mr. Paul Murphy: Figures for the percentage increase in average gross weekly earnings of full time employees, on adult rates in Wales for 1997 and 1998 are set out in the following table:

	Percentage
April 1996 to April 1997	5.3
April 1997 to April 1998	4.1
April 1998 to April 1999	3.2

Source:
New Earnings Survey, Office for National Statistics

GDP

Mr. Denzil Davies: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what is his estimate of the percentage GDP growth in Wales in 1997 and 1998. [94875]

Mr. Paul Murphy: There is no official estimate for GDP growth in Wales.

Departmental Title

Ms Lawrence: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will make a statement on the title of his Department. [96245]

Mr. Paul Murphy: With the agreement of the Prime Minister, my Department is known as "Wales Office (Office of the Secretary of State for Wales)".

The name is designed to address the new, post-devolution, role of my post in Government. It is important that it is clear that I do not retain responsibility for matters which are devolved to the National Assembly for Wales. The name reflects the responsibilities I have for representing Wales in Parliament and in the UK Government. At the same time it points to my role in

Wales—that is promoting Government policies and making sure that a wide constituency of interest in Wales are able to make their views known directly to the UK Government.

In Cardiff, I have an office in the National Assembly for Wales building; to avoid confusion my Department will be known there as "The Office of the Secretary of State for Wales".

World Wide Web

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what proposals he has to secure a Wales Identifier on the World Wide Web. [95159]

Mr. Paul Murphy: The Wales Office has already secured such an identity on the World Wide Web at: http://www.ossw.wales.gov.uk.

Calf Scheme

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what role he played with regard to negotiating with the European Commission about the acceptance of the calf scheme proposed by the National Assembly for Wales; and if he will make a statement. [95777]

Mr. Paul Murphy: It is for the UK Government to put any proposals for a calf-processing scheme to the Commission, and for the National Assembly for Wales to develop any proposals for such a scheme in Wales. I have every confidence in the way the Assembly contributed to the informal discussions which MAFF and UKRep held with the Commission on the proposal. I have been in close contact throughout with my right hon. Friend the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, and with the First Secretary and Secretary for Agriculture and Rural Development of the National Assembly for Wales.

Written Answers to Questions

Wednesday 27 October 1999

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

National Lottery

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what data he has collated on National Lottery ticket sales by *(a)* constituency and *(b)* social class. [95533]

Kate Hoey: Information on National Lottery ticket sales by constituency is not available. Ticket sales are only broken down on a geographical basis by television region. Average weekly spend on the Saturday and Wednesday draws between July 1998 and April 1999 is shown in the following table, which was provided by the Lottery operator, Camelot Group plc.

TV Region	*Average weekly spend by those participating (£)*	*Average percentage participating*
LWT Carlton	3.55	44
Meridian/South	3.44	48
Anglia	3.08	50
West Country	3.09	49
Wales and West	3.23	51
Central	3.11	50
Granada	3.20	48
Yorkshire	3.37	55
Tyne Tees	3.45	63
Scottish	3.26	52
Ulster	3.00	43
Total	3.29	49

Ticket sales by social class as shown in the following table, also provided by Camelot.

percentage

Social class	*Saturday game*	*Wednesday game*
AB	21	20
C1	25	25
C2	26	27
DE	28	28

Note:
No breakdown is available for instants sales.

Mr. Welsh: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will provide an estimate of moneys he anticipates will be received by each of the good causes up until the end of the current lottery contract; how much has been received by each good cause to date; and if he will make a statement. [95275]

Kate Hoey *[holding answer 26 October 1999]:* By 30 September 1999 the total income (including interest) to the Good Causes from the National Lottery was as follows:

£ billion

Good cause	*Lottery income received (including interest)*
Charities	1.48
Heritage	1.50
Arts	1.44
Sports	1.48
Millennium Commission	1.66
New Opportunities Fund	0.63
Total	8.19

The forecast income for the Good Causes to the end of the current Licence has been estimated using three different scenarios:

£ billion

Good cause	*Low forecast*	*Medium forecast*	*High forecast*
Charities	1.88	1.91	1.97
Heritage	1.89	1.92	1.99
Arts	1.85	1.88	1.94
Sports	1.88	1.91	1.98
Millennium Commission (including interest)	2.019	2.019	2.019
New Opportunities Fund	1.16	1.22	1.36
Interest for the period 1 October 1999 to 30 September 2001	0.34	0.35	0.38
Total (including interest)	11.02	11.21	11.64

The income data for the individual Good Causes (except the Millennium Commission) exclude interest for the period from 1 October 1999 to the end of the Licence. It is not possible to calculate the future allocation of interest between the Good Causes, because this will depend on the rate at which the Distributors draw income from the NLDF. The estimated total interest for all the Good Causes from 1 October 1999 to the end of the Licence is shown separately.

Television Licences

Mr. Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what guidelines he gives to the Television Licensing Authority regarding the purchasing of licences part-way through a calendar month; and if he will make a statement. [95711]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 26 October 1999]:* My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has issued no such guidelines. Since 1991, the BBC has had statutory responsibility for the administration of the television licensing system and Television Licensing carries out the day to day administration as agent for the Corporation. However, I understand that the practice of issuing new licences to expire 12 months from the end of the month preceding that in which they are issued follows previous Home Office practice.

Public Bodies (Vacancies)

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will set out the current vacancies on non-governmental public bodies sponsored by his Department, together with the dates on which the vacancies arose and when they were advertised. [95154]

Mr. Chris Smith *[holding answer 25 October 1999]:* The information is listed. For reasons of proportionality, it is my Department's policy only to consider advertising for posts which are of widespread public interest and/or with annual remuneration of above £10,000. The majority of appointments to my Department's public bodies do not fall within this definition.

Vacancy from	*Body*	*Role description*
30 September 1999	British Library	Trustee
16 June 1999	Public Lending Right Committee	Trustee
30 September 1999	Broadcasting Standards Commission	Trustee
30 September 1999	Independent Television Commission	Deputy-Chairman
17 August 1999	Independent Television Commission	Member
15 August 1999	Radio Authority	2 Members
30 June 1999	National Film and Television School	Governor
8 February 1999	English Tourism Council	Member
27 May 1999	New Opportunities Fund	Member
30 September 1999	Horniman Museum	Trustee
5 December 1998	Imperial War Museum	Trustee
12 January 1999	Geffrye Museum	Trustee
20 January 1999	Museum of London	Governor
29 November 1998	Museum of London	Governor
30 June 1998	Museum of London	Governor
31 March 1999	National Museum and Galleries on Merseyside	2 Trustees
7 June 1998	Royal Armouries	Trustee
15 July 1998	Royal Armouries	Trustee
25 February 1999	Royal Armouries	Trustee
3 April 1999	Tate Gallery	Trustee
19 May 1999	Wallace Collection	Trustee
30 September 1999	Victoria and Albert Museum	3 Trustees
3 August 1999	Royal National Theatre	Member
18 September 1999	English Sports Council	2 Members
8 March 1998	English Heritage	Commissioner
8 June 1998	English Heritage	Commissioner
31 March 1999	Advisory Committee for Historic Wrecks	2 Members
1 October 1999	Theatres Trust	Trustee
5 April 1999	Theatres Trust	2 Trustees
9 October 1999	Architectural Heritage Fund	Trustee

Note:
These are the vacancies which are in the process of being filled

National Museum of Pop

Mr. Fearn: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what plans he has to support further the National Museum of Pop in Sheffield. [95756]

Mr. Alan Howarth: I regret that the National Centre for Popular Music is in difficulty. This is an exciting venture designed to celebrate the world's rich heritage of popular music. I understand that the NCPM is working with all interested parties, including the Arts Council of England, Yorkshire Arts, English Partnerships and Sheffield City Council, to arrive at a solution to the Centre's difficulties.

Mr. Fearn: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what plans he has to visit the National Museum of Pop in Sheffield. [95470]

Mr. Alan Howarth: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has at present no plans to visit the National Centre for Popular Music in Sheffield.

World Cup

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will list the European Commission officials who were given World Cup tickets at the time of that event; if these officials were involved in assessing the fine on the football authorities imposed by the Commission; and if he will make a statement. [95498]

Kate Hoey: My Department does not hold information on the distribution of tickets for the 1998 World Cup Finals to European Commission officials. That is a matter for the organisers of the 1998 World Cup Finals and the European Commission.

Tourism

Mr. Fearn: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how many holidays were taken in the United Kingdom by British residents in *(a)* 1996, *(b)* 1997 and *(c)* 1998. [95436]

Janet Anderson: In 1996 UK residents took 64.8 million holidays within the United Kingdom. By 1997 this figure had risen by 6 million to 70.8 million, an increase of 9 per cent. However, in 1998 the number of holidays taken had declined by 5.7 million to 65.1 million, a decrease of 9 per cent.

Local Libraries

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will list those local

authorities to which, within the last year, he has made written representations over their plans to reduce local library services. [95130]

Mr. Chris Smith *[holding answer 25 October 1999]:* My Department has been involved in detailed discussions with 10 authorities about major changes to their library services, including service reductions. It is our policy at this stage not to name or list the authorities concerned. Our experience is that there is more chance of finding acceptable resolutions if this policy is followed, and indeed this has happened in several cases already.

Television Advertising (Children)

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what his policy is regarding television advertising to children; and if he will make a statement. [95924]

Janet Anderson: Under the Broadcasting Act 1990, it is the duty of the Independent Television Commission to draw up and maintain a code covering advertising on television. Appendix 1 of the Commission's Code of Advertising Standards and Practice includes detailed regulations which ensure that television advertisements aimed at children do not mislead or exploit or encourage unsafe or dangerous behaviour. The regulations also prohibit the advertising of certain types of product during childrens' programmes. The Code was revised last year following consultation with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State, the television and advertising industries, viewer and listener groups and other bodies.

Trafalgar Square

Mr. Fearn: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how many people are estimated to have celebrated the New Year in 1999 in Trafalgar Square; and what the capacity of Trafalgar Square for celebrating the New Millennium will be if proposals to create an ice skating rink there go ahead. [95927]

Mr. Alan Howarth: Approximately 90,000 people attended the New Year's Eve celebration in Trafalgar Square in 1999 and it is anticipated that this number will be exceeded on New Year's Eve this year. The proposed ice rink will be removed from the Square before New Year's Eve for public safety reasons.

HOUSE OF COMMONS

Low Fat Diet

Mr. Winnick: To ask the Chairman of the Catering Committee if a low fat diet is to be available in the canteens and restaurants in the House; and what medical advice has been sought on this subject. [94932]

Mr. Dennis Turner *[holding answer 25 October 1999]:* The House of Commons Refreshment Department is committed to a policy of encouraging "healthy eating" throughout all its cafeterias and dining rooms, ensuring that customers are given a sufficiently wide choice of foods to be able to modify and regulate their own diet. Regular promotions are held in conjunction with the House of Commons Occupational Health Service to help educate customers and to assist them in making healthier food choices.

The availability of low fat foods is an important part of this approach to the promotion of a balanced diet, and the Refreshment Department has for several years adapted its recipes and cooking methods to make use of healthier alternatives wherever possible. A "healthy eating" dish is publicised on daily cafeteria and dining room menus, in addition to which fish is offered on most menus and can generally be served without sauce or added fat. Skimmed and semi-skimmed milk is available throughout the Department, as are butterless vegetables, lean meats, un-dressed salads and reduced fat dressings, low fat yoghurts and sandwiches, and a wide range of fruit and vegetables. In addition there is usually a vegetarian option in all outlets which tends to be more healthy and lower in fat.

The Department aims to ensure that adequate choice is available for customers wishing to follow a low fat diet and plans to continue to develop its policy of encouraging a rounded approach to healthy eating and a balanced diet.

In fulfilling this policy, the Refreshment Department liaises closely with the medical and lay staff of the House of Commons Occupational Health Service, as well as with staff of the Gymnasium. Many senior managers and chefs of the Department have received some formal education or training in nutrition and dietetics, but further advice and guidance on specific issues is taken from external dieticians, the Health Education Authority or other professional bodies.

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

Gender Impact Analysis

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what initiatives and policies have been subjected to a gender impact analysis in his Department. [94497]

Ms Beverley Hughes: As an employer we monitor the impact on women of our recruitment, appraisal and promotion processes. To help women balance the demands of work and home, we have a range of policies including support for childcare, career breaks of up to five years and a policy that all posts (with very few exceptions) are available for part-time working and job-sharing.

We are continuing to make use of consultations, research projects and disaggregated statistics to identify the impact of policy on women. Specific examples of these include the recent consultation of various women's organisations on smoking in taxis and the development of a public transport gender audit. We are also requiring the inclusion of policy appraisal statements in each Ministerial policy submission. Other initiatives include the requirement to promote social inclusion (including meeting the transport needs of women and other social groups) in the Department's assessment of local authorities' provisional Local Transport Plans.

Our policies are subject to evaluation and will pick up differential impacts on specific groups, particularly where they are disadvantaged. Some policies do have intentional differential gender impacts; for example, the priority afforded to pregnant women and lone parent households (the majority of which are headed by women) in the allocation of council housing.

Equal Opportunities

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if an action plan for increasing the representation of women in public life has been *(a)* prepared by his Department and *(b)* published since November 1998. [94851]

Ms Beverley Hughes: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given by my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Cabinet Office on 25 October 1999, *Official Report*, column *682*.

Railway Vandalism

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what proportion of offenders who committed vandalism causing train accidents in 1998–99 are being prosecuted; and what action he is taking to ensure that train operators and Railtrack provide adequate security. [95172]

Mr. Hill: The Health and Safety Executive reported that in 1997–98 there were 1,098 reported railway accidents caused by malicious action, including 512 incidences of damage to the cab driver's window. The figures provided by the British Transport Police for the same year show that they dealt with 6,419 reported incidences of 'stone throwing' or 'Line of Route' offences, such as obstructing the line, of which 718 were either charged or cautioned, or no crime was found to be committed.

Train operating companies are expected to follow the crime prevention strategies in our guidance 'Personal Security on Public Transport—Guidelines for Operators', including measures such as CCTV, improved lighting and the availability of trained staff. My Department also encourages train operators to join the 'Secure Station' and 'Secured Car Park' schemes where they apply for accreditation by meeting agreed standards on crime prevention measures.

Federal Express

Mr. MacGregor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what concessions he obtained from the United States Government in return for the rights recently given to Federal Express to deliver freight from Prestwick Airport to third countries. [95331]

Mr. Prescott: In granting fifth freedom rights from Prestwick to US cargo carriers, we have said to the US Government that we would expect it to give favourable consideration to equivalent applications for extra-bilateral rights to UK carriers. Although United Kingdom airlines will not benefit directly from the granting of these rights at Prestwick, there will be significant economic benefits accruing to the region. In the longer run, UK airlines and airports will gain when we have achieved our wider goal, which is the liberalisation of the overall market.

Private Sector Renting

Mr. Sanders: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will publish the numbers of private sector rooms for rent in each standard region for the last five years for which figures are available. [94884]

Mr. Mullin: The term 'private sector rooms' is open to interpretation and so the following table shows estimates from the Survey of English Housing of the number of private tenancies in each Government Office region.

Private tenancies (excluding rent free) by Government Office region

Thousand

	1994–95	*1995–96*	*1996–97*	*1997–98*	*1998–99*
North East	78	66	81	74	85
North West (including Merseyside)	202	202	250	262	246
Yorks & Humber	169	176	158	201	185
East Midlands	155	150	132	152	138
West Midlands	135	176	149	131	158
East	182	205	194	220	210
London	408	478	445	442	408
South East	350	353	400	320	352
South West	273	222	247	245	232
England	1,952	2,028	2,056	2,047	2,015

Notes:
1. Each private tenancy corresponds to a separate agreement by which a tenant or tenants rent their accommodation from their landlord.
2. Excludes rent free tenancies, but includes those where whole rent is met by Housing Benefit.

Artificial Reefs

Mr. Fearn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) if his Department plans to investigate the environmental impact of building artificial reefs to create surfing waves around Britain's coast; [95929]

(2) what investigation his Department has carried out to assess the impact on the surrounding coastline of creating an artificial reef off the coast at Bournemouth. [95930]

Mr. Mullin: No assessments have been made because no firm proposals have been submitted. More than one permission would be required. Constructing an artificial reef to create surfing waves would require prior written

consent from this Department to ensure that danger or obstruction to navigation was not likely to result. Such works would also require a licence from the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food under the Food and Environment Protection Act 1985. They would take full account of effects on the marine environment.

Under 18-year-olds

Mr. Michael J. Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what was the number of residents under 18 years of age at 30 June 1996, as used in the local government finance settlement, in each local authority area in England. [95734]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The Registrar General's estimates of the number of residents under 18 years of age at 30 June 1996 were used in the 1998–99 and 1999–2000 local government finance settlements. The Office for National Statistics published revised population estimates for 1996 on 27 August 1998. These were used in the 1999–2000 settlement.

The following table details the estimates of the number of residents under 18 years of age for each relevant local authority as used in the 1998–99 and 1999–2000 local government finance settlements.

Local authority	*Population aged 0 to 17 as used in 1998–99 SSAs*	*1999–2000 SSAs*
Cornwall	103,602	103,602
Cumbria	106,625	106,625
Gloucestershire	124,095	124,095
Hertfordshire	235,936	235,936
Lincolnshire	133,032	133,032
Norfolk	163,488	163,488
Northamptonshire	146,515	146,515
Northumberland	68,080	68,080
Oxfordshire	139,581	139,581
Somerset	108,202	108,202
Suffolk	151,628	151,628
Surrey	230,697	230,697
Warwickshire	111,008	111,008
West Sussex	157,715	157,715
North Yorkshire	121,597	121,318
Bedfordshire	86,655	86,655
Buckinghamshire	111,123	111,123
Derbyshire	159,579	159,579
Dorset	78,579	78,579
Durham	114,946	114,946
East Sussex	103,390	103,390
Hampshire	281,077	281,077
Leicestershire	134,380	134,380
Staffordshire	181,698	181,698
Wiltshire	95,900	95,900
Cambridgeshire	120,210	120,210
Cheshire	150,256	150,256
Devon	142,841	142,841
Essex	286,972	286,972
Kent	299,256	299,256
Lancashire	264,045	264,045
Nottinghamshire	166,322	166,322
Shropshire	60,515	60,515
Worcestershire	119,717	119,717
Isles of Scilly	475	475
Barking and Dagenham	39,393	39,393
Barnet	71,862	71,862
Bexley	50,937	50,937
Brent	59,524	59,524
Bromley	62,205	62,205
Croydon	78,345	78,345
Ealing	68,773	68,773
Enfield	61,898	61,898
Haringey	49,363	49,363
Harrow	49,286	49,286
Havering	50,739	50,739
Hillingdon	56,353	56,353
Hounslow	48,678	48,678
Kingston upon Thames	29,694	29,694
Merton	39,751	39,751
Newham	68,438	68,438
Redbridge	54,334	54,334
Richmond upon Thames	35,623	35,623
Sutton	39,836	39,836
Waltham Forest	53,855	53,855
Camden	35,973	35,973
Greenwich	54,062	54,062
Hackney	50,741	50,741
Hammersmith and Fulham	29,060	29,060
Islington	38,964	38,964
Kensington and Chelsea	27,165	27,165
Lambeth	61,263	61,263
Lewisham	57,319	57,319
Southwark	56,327	56,327
Tower Hamlets	50,629	50,629
Wandsworth	49,496	49,496
Westminster	32,790	32,790
City of London	669	669
Bolton	64,578	64,578
Bury	42,824	42,824
Manchester	113,070	113,070
Oldham	56,249	56,249
Rochdale	53,544	53,544
Salford	53,818	53,818
Stockport	65,700	65,700
Tameside	53,303	53,303
Trafford	50,669	50,669
Wigan	71,929	71,929
Knowsley	41,999	41,999
Liverpool	112,094	112,094
St. Helens	41,008	41,008
Sefton	65,177	65,177
Wirral	77,447	77,447
Barnsley	52,055	52,055
Doncaster	70,259	70,259
Rotherham	60,695	60,695
Sheffield	113,028	113,028
Gateshead	44,106	44,106
Newcastle upon Tyne	62,028	62,028
North Tyneside	42,814	42,814
South Tyneside	36,816	36,816
Sunderland	71,104	71,104
Birmingham	263,776	263,776
Coventry	75,274	75,274
Dudley	69,925	69,925
Sandwell	70,768	70,768
Solihull	46,772	46,772
Walsall	63,567	63,567
Wolverhampton	59,925	59,925
Bradford	127,643	127,643
Calderdale	45,755	45,755
Kirlees	94,008	94,008
Leeds	164,436	164,436
Wakefield	74,414	74,414
Isle of Wight Council	25,758	25,758
Bath and North East Somerset	33,843	33,843
Bristol	87,918	87,918
South Gloucestershire	54,024	54,024
North Somerset	39,568	39,568
Hartlepool	22,780	22,780
Middlesbrough	38,190	38,190
Redcar and Cleveland	34,169	34,169
Stockton-on-Tees	45,143	45,143
East Riding of Yorkshire	66,904	66,930
Kingston upon Hull	65,210	65,212
North East Lincolnshire	39,284	39,285
North Lincolnshire	35,570	35,492
York	36,988	37,248
Luton	49,669	49,669
Milton Keynes	52,697	52,697
Derby	55,091	55,091
Bournemouth	29,692	29,692

Local authority	Population aged 0 to 17 as used in 1998–99 SSAs	1999–2000 SSAs
Poole	30,071	30,071
Darlington	23,594	23,594
Brighton and Hove	47,164	47,164
Portsmouth	40,616	40,616
Southampton	47,314	47,314
Leicester	75,859	75,859
Rutland	8,336	8,336
Stoke-on-Trent	58,456	58,456
Swindon	41,532	41,532
Bracknell Forest	27,619	27,619
West Berkshire	34,860	34,860
Reading	32,100	32,100
Slough	28,243	28,243
Windsor and Maidenhead	31,373	31,373
Wokingham	34,473	34,473
Peterborough	40,405	40,405
Halton	32,475	32,475
Warrington	44,381	44,381
Plymouth	57,836	57,836
Torbay	24,924	24,924
Southend-on-Sea	37,016	37,016
Thurrock	32,305	32,305
Herefordshire	36,666	36,666
Medway	59,727	59,727
Blackburn and Darwen	38,648	38,648
Blackpool	30,862	30,862
Nottingham	68,314	68,314
Telford and Wrekin	36,724	36,724

Water Industry

Mrs. Gilroy: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) what representations he has received and what research he has commissioned on the likely effect of the periodic review of water prices in England and Wales on those employed *(a)* directly and *(b)* indirectly within the water industry; and if he will make a statement; [95553]

(2) what representations he has received and what research his Department has *(a)* evaluated and *(b)* commissioned, on the implications of the loss of further jobs in the water industry in England and Wales for (i) safety, (ii) customer service standards, (iii) continuity of supply and (iv) environmental standards; and if he will make a statement; [95554]

(3) what discussions he has held with *(a)* the Director General of Ofwat and *(b)* other organisations over likely job losses in the water industry in England and Wales as a result of the periodic review of water prices; and if he will make a statement. [95555]

Mr. Mullin: My Department has received representations about possible job losses in the water industry, from some water companies, from Water UK, from employees of water companies and from the union, UNISON. My Department has not undertaken or commissioned research on employment in the water industry, nor discussed this with the Office of Water Services.

The examination of the water industry's costs and efficiency assumptions is a matter for the Director General of Water Services. He has a statutory duty to secure that water companies properly carry out their functions and are able to finance them. These functions must be carried out in full compliance with all legal requirements, including drinking water quality (regulated by the Drinking Water Inspectorate), health and safety (regulated by the Health and Safety Executive), environmental standards (regulated by the Environment Agency) and customer service and continuity of supply (regulated by the Director General himself). In conducting his periodic review of water price limits the Director General is expecting companies to improve on efficiency savings that they have already achieved. It will be for water and sewerage undertakers to ensure that they maintain the necessary staff and other resources to meet these obligations in full.

The Government believe that it is possible to deliver substantial quality improvements and reductions in customers' bills, for the benefit of consumers. The environmental and water quality improvement programmes will create significant new employment opportunities.

MPG6

Mr. Todd: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to revise Minerals Planning Guidance Note 6, Guidelines for Aggregates Provision in England; and if he will make a statement. [95453]

Ms Beverley Hughes: Review of the Guidelines for Aggregates Provision in England has commenced and it is expected that a paper on the main issues will be published for public consultation early in the New Year. Following consideration of the responses, a revised draft of the guidance will be published for consultation later in 2000.

Housing (Voluntary Transfers)

Mr. Waterson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many housing units are currently the subject of proposals for large-scale voluntary transfers. [95914]

Mr. Mullin: Seventeen local authorities on the 1999–2000 Housing Transfer Programme are proposing, subject to the approval of tenants, to transfer 112,432 housing units in this financial year. Details are set out in the table.

Local authority	Number of units
Boston BC	5,015
Burnley BC	5,354
Coventry CC	20,479
Elmbridge DC	5,022
Huntingdonshire DC	7,134
Manchester CC	3,336
Newcastle-under-Lyme DC	10,042
North Devon DC	3,399
Restormel BC	3,781
LB Richmond	8,780
Tameside MBC	16,959
Test Valley DC	5,789
Tynedale DC	3,731
Weymouth and Portland DC	3,526
Wyre Forest DC	6,440
LB Hackney	2,394
LB Tower Hamlets	1,251
Total	112,432

Mr. Waterson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many housing units were the subject of large-scale voluntary transfers in each of the last three years. [95912]

Mr. Mullin: The Housing Transfer Programme currently runs from 1 April each year until 31 March the following year. In 1996–97, 22,248 housing units were transferred. In 1997–98, 32,982 units were transferred, and 73,900 units transferred in 1998–99. Details are set out in the table:

Local authority	*Number of units*
1996–97	
Stratford District Council	6,003
West Wilts DC	1,769
Cotswold DC	4,282
South Staffs DC	5,273
Lichfield DC	4,921
Total	22,248
1997–98	
South Oxfordshire DC	5,018
Eden DC	1,510
LB Lambeth[1]	515
LB Bexley	8,215
Congleton DC	4,061
Oldham DC[1]	642
Liverpool CC[1]	493
LB Merton[1]	1,018
LB Tower Hamlets[1]	1,852
Kerrier DC	3,732
LB Hackney[1]	951
LB Brent[1]	1,481
Basildon DC[1]	708
West Somerset DC	1,869
Stoke-on-Trent[1]	917
Total	32,982
1998–99	
Tewkesbury DC	3,066
Rother DC	3,058
LB Lambeth[1]	681
LB Tower Hamlets[1]	2,431
Wirral DC[1]	1,082
Tameside MBC[1]	901
West Devon BC	1,446
South Somerset DC	8,883
East Lindsey DC	5,102
Liverpool CC[1]	646
Manchester CC	1,030
LB Hackney[1]	1,084
South Hams DC	3,096
LB Hammersmith and Fulham[1]	668
LB Hackney[1]	1,000
Telford and Wrekin DC	13,081
LB Enfield	1,194
Worthing DC	2,525
Bath and North East Somerset	9,887
Manchester CC[1]	6,667
LB Greenwich[1]	1,280
LB Hackney[1]	661
Allerdale DC	3,704
Allerdale DC[1]	727
Total	73,900

[1] Denotes a transfer facilitated with grant from the Estates Renewal Challenge Fund.

Thames Transport

Mr. Fearn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) what action he is taking to ensure that London River Services and the Port of London Authority honour the contracts which they entered into with Thames riverboat operators under the Partners in Progress scheme; [95481]

(2) what powers he has to enforce sanctions against London River Services and the Port of London Authority should they fail to honour the contracts which they entered into with Thames riverboat operators under the Partners in Progress scheme. [95480]

Mr. Hill: As part of the Government's Thames 2000 initiative to revitalise passenger transport on the Thames, London River Services (LRS) took over key central London piers from the Port of London Authority (PLA) on 1 April this year. LRS has been in discussion with Thames riverboat operators about the arrangements to transfer the licence agreements reached with the PLA to LRS.

LRS hope to be able to reach agreements with all the Thames riverboat operators on the transfer of licences. Indeed, the majority of operators have now signed new LRS licences. However, I am aware that some operators are still in negotiation with LRS about contractual arrangements, and I understand that the possibility of legal proceedings has been raised. In view of this it would be inappropriate for me to comment further.

Railtrack

Mr. Woodward: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what is the current status of the proposal to give Railtrack plc infrastructural control of the sub-surface lines of London Underground; and when he expects an agreement to be made. [95992]

Mr. Hill: Railtrack and London Underground are continuing to work together to explore the options for linking the sub-surface Underground lines with the national rail network in a Public Private Partnership.

Subject to the outcome of the discussions currently underway, Railtrack would submit a priced bid for the sub-surface railway PPP contract and the integration schemes next year. As with the two deep tube PPPs, no bid will be entertained that does not contribute significantly to Tube safety.

London Underground

Mr. Woodward: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what powers the Mayor for London will have to alter the terms of the proposed public-private partnership for London Underground Ltd. [95998]

Mr. Hill: The Mayor and Transport for London will take over PPP contracts designed to secure the efficient maintenance and improvement of the Tube network. These will be contractually binding, but they will have built into them flexibility for the Mayor to make adjustments over time, to deliver changing performance requirements. The Mayor, through Transport for London, will have the necessary controls to ensure that the Tube plays its full part in a properly integrated strategy for

transport in London. Fares, ticketing, service levels and the operation of stations and trains will be the responsibility of the Mayor.

Mr. Woodward: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what studies he has undertaken into the operation of public/private partnerships in other countries similar to that proposed for London Underground Ltd. [95997]

Mr. Hill: Public private partnership is an area in which the UK is leading the way. The London Underground PPP is a bespoke arrangement to cater expressly for the needs of our Underground.

Mr. Woodward: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many extra District Line trains were run each day during the closure of the Circle Line service. [95994]

Mr. Hill: This is an operational matter for London Underground. However, I understand that two extra District Line trains ran each peak period during the closure of the Circle Line service. Demand in out-of-peak hours did not require the additional services.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Child Maintenance

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will estimate the number of absent parents who are liable to pay child maintenance following an assessment by the Child Support Agency but who do not do so; and if he will estimate the number of these who are currently in receipt of *(a)* income support/jobseekers allowance or *(b)* a disability benefit. [94697]

Angela Eagle: The administration of the Child Support Agency is a matter for the Chief Executive, Mrs. Faith Boardman. She will write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Mike Isaac to Mr. Steve Webb, dated 26 October 1999:

I am replying to your Parliamentary Question to the Secretary of State for Social Security about the number of non-resident parents (NRPs) who do not pay child maintenance following an assessment by the Child Support Agency. You also asked how many of these non-resident parents are in receipt of Income Support(IS)/Job Seekers Allowance Income Based (JSAIB) or a Disability Benefit.

The most recent figures available show that at the end of May 1999 there were 863,960 NRPs with a full maintenance assessment and that 98,620 (11.4%) were known to be paying nothing at all. Included in this latter figure are 1,520 individuals on an Incapacity/Disability Benefit. As recipients of IS/JSAIB have nil maintenance liability, they will not therefore be included in the category of payers or non-payers. A contribution to maintenance may however be payable and may be deducted at source by the Benefits Agency.

When an NRP refuses to cooperate with the Agency in calculating a maintenance assessment we may impose a punitive Interim Maintenance Assessment (IMA). This may be for a much higher amount than would otherwise be due and is intended to encourage the NRP to provide the information needed. At the end of May there were 78,340 IMAs in force with 45,560 NRPs not making any payment. The very lack of information that led to the IMA prevents us knowing the precise number in receipt of Incapacity/Disability Benefit though we are aware of 240 such cases.

The Department's Analytical Services Division produces a CSA Quarterly Summary of Statistics that is available in the House of Commons Library and you may find the information it contains of further interest.

I am very keen to improve compliance levels and to this end CSA has entered into partnership with Deloitte Touche. Working together, we will develop a strategy to increase the number of maintenance payments made on time and reduce the build up of arrears. The Agency will introduce effective compliance and enforcement procedures that will get rid of the 'soft touch' image it has acquired with some people. Furthermore, appropriate earlier contact with NRPs, by telephone, letter or face to face will encourage natural compliance. These measures will generate improvements in the short term and contribute to a sound base for achieving maximum benefit from the Child Support Reforms.

I hope this is helpful.

State Pension

Mr. Swinney: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will estimate the annual cost of reinstating the link with earnings for the state pension from 1 October. [95425]

Mr. Rooker *[holding answer 26 October 1999]:* Social Security benefits are uprated in April each year.

The net costs of uprating the basic state pension in line with the average earnings index from 1 April 2000

Million (1999–2000 prices)

Year	*Excluding linked benefits*	*Including linked benefits*
2000–01	730	850
2001–02	1,040	1,210
2002–03	1,510	1,750
2003–04	2,060	2,390
2004–05	2,610	3,040

Notes:

1. As annual costs are not constant over time the first five years are shown.
2. Costs are in 1999–2000 prices and are rounded to the nearest £10 million.
3. Net costs are estimated using gross costs provided by the Government Actuary's Department, together with income-related benefit offsets produced by the Policy Simulation Model and PENSIM in the Department for Social Security. Overseas cases are included.
4. Costings assume the Minimum Income Guarantee continues to be uprated in line with earnings. No allowance is made for introduction of the State Second Pension or the measures in the Welfare Reform Bill.

Discretionary Social Fund

Mr. Neil Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what changes he intends to make to the Discretionary Social Fund. [96567]

Angela Eagle: As a consequence of the Decision Making and Appeals provisions contained in the Social Security Act 1998, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State will be making changes to the Social Fund directions and guidance. These will come into effect on 29 November 1999. Also included is a range of other minor improvements, the need for which has been identified in the course of routine monitoring. Details of these changes have been placed in the Library.

I am also pleased to announce that the Social Fund guide will be made available on the DSS internet site from 29 November.

Equal Opportunities

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if an action plan for increasing the representation of women in public life has been *(a)* prepared by his Department and *(b)* published since November 1998. [94844]

Angela Eagle: I refer the hon. Member to the written answer from my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Cabinet Office on 25 October 1999, *Official Report*, column 682.

Correspondence

Mr. Winnick: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security when the hon. Member for Walsall, North will receive a reply from the Chief Executive of the Benefits Agency to his letter of 1 September regarding a constituent, ref: 15499. [94919]

Angela Eagle: A reply was issued to my hon. Friend on 22 October 1999.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Equal Opportunities

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if an action plan for increasing the representation of women in public life has been *(a)* prepared by his Department and *(b)* published since November 1998. [94847]

Mr. Straw: Yes. I refer the hon. Member to the reply given by the Minister for the Cabinet Office and Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, my right hon. Friend the Member for Redcar (Marjorie Mowlam), on 25 October 1999, *Official Report*, column 682.

Travel Documents

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many applicants for travel documents have been waiting for more than six months. [94795]

Mrs. Roche: There are approximately 3,000 travel document applications awaiting consideration which were received over six months ago. In recent weeks, there has been a substantial increase in staff numbers in the Travel Document Section of the Integrated Casework Directorate in order to process increasing volumes of new applications as well as older cases from the backlog.

This, combined with streamlined working practices, has resulted in dramatic increases in output from averages of 120 per week during August to well over 700 last week.

Corporate Killing

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to implement the 1996 recommendations of the Law Commission on the issue of corporate killing. [94821]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Government are well aware of the weaknesses in the current law on corporate manslaughter. An interdepartmental working group of officials, which includes a member of the Law Commission, is currently considering the recommendations made in the Law Commission's report Number 237, "Legislating the Criminal Code: Involuntary Manslaughter".

We expect to receive the conclusions of the interdepartmental working group within the next few weeks and will then consider the way forward.

HMP Liverpool

Mrs. Ellman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when the report of the investigation into allegations of bullying in relation to nursing staff at HMP Liverpool will be completed; and to whom it will be made available. [95948]

Mr. Boateng: The report of the investigation into allegations that nursing staff at Liverpool prison had been the victims of bullying and harassment from other staff has been completed. None of the allegations were substantiated. However, the report makes a number of recommendations to improve the management of the health care centre in the future. The area manager is considering these recommendations and is determined to ensure that nothing along the lines alleged could happen undetected at Liverpool prison.

The report is an internal document and contains information and unsubstantiated allegations which could cause further distress to individuals named in it if it was made public. However, the governor is making it available to the Board of Visitors at Liverpool prison. The investigating officer has discussed the contents of the report with the family of Robert Price, the former nurse whose death prompted the investigation. The Coroner recently recorded a verdict of suicide. Managers will arrange to discuss the report with any of the other members of staff involved who request it.

Pellet Guns

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what controls are available and how often they have been exercised in the last five years over the *(a)* manufacture, *(b)* sale, *(c)* possession and *(d)* use of ball-bearing pellet guns. [95367]

Mr. Charles Clarke: There are two basic categories of guns designed to fire small ball-bearings (BB guns).

The first is the ball-bearing repeater pistol. These guns usually have a muzzle energy of less than one joule. Under the definition of "firearm" given in section 57 of the Firearms Act 1968, guns with a muzzle energy as low as this are not classed as firearms because they are not lethal and are incapable of inflicting more than trivial injury. As such, they do not come under the control of the Firearms Acts.

The second category consists of BB rifles. These are air rifles which are capable of firing ball-bearings as well as the more normal waisted pellet. Being low-powered airguns, there is no requirement for them to be held on a firearm certificate but in all other respects they come under the control of the Firearms Acts.

There are no controls under the Firearms Acts on the manufacture of low-powered airguns but their sale to, possession and use by young people is controlled by the Acts, as is the use of such weapons by adults.

For the purposes of the legislation, airguns capable of firing ball-bearings are classed simply as "air weapons". For this reason, it is not possible to distinguish between convictions for offences in which guns firing ball-bearings were used and those involving guns capable of firing only the conventional waisted pellet.

The table gives the number of convictions for the most common airgun offences for the five years between 1993 and 1997 (the last year for which figures are available).

Offence	*1993*	*1994*	*1995*	*1996*	*1997*
Carrying a loaded air weapon in a public place	506	614	511	575	540
Person under 14 having an air weapon	92	95	92	82	60
Person under 17 having an air weapon in a public place	448	361	462	396	297

The figures relating to other offences under the firearms legislation cover the misuse of all types of firearms. It is not possible to separate out those convictions relating to air weapons except at disproportionate cost.

Police Funding

Mrs. Shephard: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what changes he intends to make to the police funding formula following the report into the sparsity element of the formula. [95781]

Mr. Charles Clarke: We are considering the findings of the research report on the cost of policing in rural areas. We intend to announce soon details of how the police funding formula will operate in relation to next year's finance settlement.

Farm and Country Watch Schemes

Mrs. Shephard: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what support his Department provides to farm and country watch schemes; how many such schemes are currently in place; and if he will make a statement. [95778]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Government recognise that people in rural communities have different policing needs from those who live in urban areas, although they suffer from most of the same sorts of crime as urban areas. Rural communities can also suffer the twin problem of the lack of an obvious police presence and longer response times to emergency calls.

That is why the partnership approach between the police and the local community is the most effective means of tackling crime in rural areas. We encourage farm and country watch schemes as means by which members of the public can help themselves and the police to engage in a positive way in the fight against crime.

As farm and country watch schemes are run in conjunction with local police forces, the Home Office does not keep records of such schemes.

Police Resource Implications

Mrs. Shephard: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what assessment he has made of the resource implications for the police service of *(a)* a ban on hunting with hounds and *(b)* the trialing of GM crops; and if he will make a statement. [95779]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Most police forces can, from time to time, face unexpected demands on their resources. We would normally expect forces to meet the additional costs from within their existing budgets or from their contingency reserves.

CCTV

Mrs. Shephard: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what proportion of his Department's planned expenditure on closed-circuit television schemes will be targeted on rural areas; and if he will make a statement. [95780]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Under the first round of the Crime Reduction Programme Closed Circuit Television (CCTV) initiative, Crime Reduction Partnerships in England and Wales have been invited to prepare final proposals on 376 bids for new and extended CCTV schemes with a potential capital cost of £68 million. The main priorities for the first round of the initiative have been to tackle vehicle crime and serious crime problems in housing areas, but shortlisted schemes to the value of over £1.5 million are specifically directed at rural crime. Final decisions will be announced later in the year.

The priorities for future rounds of the initiative have not yet been set, and increasing the emphasis on rural crime is one of the options that will be considered.

Prisons (Visitors)

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what was in total and in respect of each prison and young offender institution *(a)* the number of occasions in 1997–98, 1998–99 and 1999–2000 to date that visitors have been caught trying to smuggle illegal drugs, *(b)* the number of such visitors in 1997–98, 1998–99 and 1999–2000 who have been banned from further visits as a result of their actions, *(c)* the number of such visitors in each year who have been charged with a criminal offence as a result of drug smuggling, *(d)* the number of such visitors in each year who have been prosecuted in court and *(e)* the number of such visitors in each year who have been convicted. [94905]

Mr. Boateng: The total number of visitors arrested for drug smuggling and the breakdown for individual prisons is given in the table. From 1 April-30 June 1999, a total of 387 visitors were banned. The number of visitors banned by individual prisons is not collated centrally. Figures for the number of visitors subsequently charged, prosecuted and/or convicted are not recorded by the Prison Service.

Prison	Number of visitors arrested 1997–98	1998–99	1999–2000 [1]
Acklington	18	13	8
Albany	2	0	0
Aldington	3	1	0
Altcourse	2	9	3
Ashwell	6	6	3
Askham Grange	0	0	0
Aylesbury	1	4	2
Bedford	7	19	6
Belmarsh	1	5	1
Birmingham	2	13	6
Blakenhurst	24	25	21
Blantyre House	0	0	0
Blundeston	13	11	2
Brinsford	3	2	0
Bristol	7	22	6
Brixton	3	3	0
Brockhill	3	8	2
Buckley Hall	8	6	0
Bullingdon	4	23	11
Bullwood Hall	0	0	2
Camp Hill	5	5	3
Canterbury	15	5	1
Cardiff	54	40	29
Castington	4	9	5
Channings Wood	7	8	2
Chelmsford	8	7	1
Coldingley	1	1	0
Cookham Wood	2	1	2
Dartmoor	7	3	2
Deerbolt	3	3	2
Doncaster	24	28	1
Dorchester	3	1	2
Dover	2	2	0
Downview	1	1	0
Drake Hall	0	0	0
Durham	16	22	7
East Sutton Park	0	0	1
Eastwood Park	0	1	0
Elmley	24	19	5
Erlestoke	10	5	1
Everthorpe	8	3	3
Exeter	8	21	6
Featherstone	5	5	2
Feltham	114	48	2
Ford	0	0	0
Foston Hall	0	0	0
Frankland	6	6	1
Full Sutton	4	10	3
Garth	30	9	6
Gartree	1	3	0
Glen Parva	3	6	4
Gloucester	5	7	1
Grendon/Spring Hill	1	1	0
Guys Marsh	3	5	0
Haslar	0	0	0
Hatfield	0	0	0
Haverigg	16	6	2
Hewell Grange	0	0	0
Highdown	2	1	2
Highpoint	19	17	6
Hindley	0	0	0
Hollesley Bay	1	0	1
Holloway	20	15	8
Holme House	42	22	6
Hull	15	11	5
Huntercombe	0	1	0
Kingston	0	0	0
Kirkham	3	0	2
Kirklevington Grange	0	0	0
Lancaster Castle	4	2	5
Lancaster Farms	22	15	3
Latchmere House	0	0	0
Leeds	39	31	17
Leicester	12	3	2
Lewes	18	6	5
Leyhill	0	0	0
Lincoln	11	9	6
Lindholme	5	8	3
Littlehey	4	9	10
Liverpool	4	2	2
Long Lartin	5	7	4
Low Newton	2	8	6
Lowdham Grange	0	9	5
Maidstone	6	6	1
Manchester	71	79	39
Moorland	16	19	3
Morton Hall	0	0	0
The Mount	11	3	5
Newhall	0	0	0
North Sea Camp	0	1	0
Northallerton	11	3	1
Norwich	21	19	14
Nottingham	14	15	0
Onley	10	8	1
Parc	6	23	12
Parkhurst	8	1	1
Pentonville	13	25	9
Portland	2	2	1
Prescoed/Usk	2	2	0
Preston	9	3	6
Ranby	11	2	4
Reading	5	9	1
Risley	17	18	5
Rochester	1	1	0
Send	0	0	0
Shepton Mallet	1	0	0
Shrewsbury	5	12	4
Stafford	19	30	5
Standford Hill	0	0	0
Stocken	3	7	0
Stoke Heath	2	2	2
Styal	2	1	3
Sudbury	0	0	0
Swaleside	10	18	5
Swansea	9	11	4
Swinfen Hall	1	11	9
Thorn Cross	0	1	0
Verne	4	12	5
Wakefield	2	1	0
Wandsworth	7	14	8
Wayland	6	12	9
Wealstun	2	5	0
Weare	2	1	0
Wellinborough	6	11	1
Werrington	0	0	0
Wetherby	0	1	0
Whatton	0	0	0
Whitemoor	2	10	5
Winchester	1	0	0
Wolds	17	10	5
Woodhill	21	7	3
Wormwood Scrubs	27	7	0
Wymott	2	3	0
Total	1,110	1,063	436

[1] Year to date

Bail

Mr. Allan: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what estimate he has made of the proportion of persons granted bail who subsequently returned to court for breaching their bail conditions in the year 1998–99. [95550]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Information is not collected centrally on the number of persons granted bail who are returned to court for breaching bail conditions. Information is available on those granted bail who fail to appear for trial; the most recent figures are published in "Criminal statistics England and Wales 1997".

At magistrates courts in 1997, out of 549,900 bailed defendants, 64,600 (11 per cent.) failed to appear for trial; and 44,200 defendants (68 per cent. of those who failed to appear) were proceeded against for failing to surrender to bail.

At the Crown court in 1997, out of 72,000 bailed defendants, 5,400 (8 per cent.) failed to appear for trial. Bench warrants were issued against 4,000 defendants (74 per cent. of those failing to appear).

Research undertaken in 1996 to provide a detailed picture of the extent and nature of offending on bail, particularly in relation to police conditional bail, found that 9 per cent. of those given conditional bail by courts in parts of Northumbria and Greater Manchester were detected in breach.

Voucher System

Mr. Coleman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what discussion his Department has held with *(a)* the retail trade and *(b)* other appropriate agencies in relation to the new voucher system set out in the Asylum and Immigration Bill; and if he will make a statement. [95685]

Mrs. Roche: A seminar about the proposed voucher system, at which many of the major retail groups were represented, was held in June. Officials have also had discussions separately with some of the retail groups and with security printing companies, various banks, other Government Departments and local authorities. Meetings were also held recently with the asylum authorities in Berlin, where they have had experience of asylum seekers being issued with vouchers with which to obtain essential living needs since 1993.

Asylum Seekers

Mr. Coleman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what discussions his Department has held with member authorities of the Local Government Association outside London in relation to the dispersal of asylum seekers from London; and if he will make a statement. [95687]

Mrs. Roche: The Asylum Support Project Team has been working very closely with the Local Government Association and the Association of London Government for the past 12 months, concerning the new asylum support arrangements and in particular the new dispersal schemes. My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary wrote jointly with Sir Jeremy Beecham to the leaders of all local authorities in England in November 1998 encouraging them to participate in a voluntary dispersal scheme. Since then, officials have issued consultation documents and held discussions with a variety of local authorities around the country. These discussions continue and further meetings are scheduled.

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what numbers are proposed for the new agreed dispersal programme for asylum seekers in each local authority area in the north-east. [95878]

Mrs. Roche: No firm decisions have yet been made on the number of asylum seekers to be sent to any given region within the United Kingdom.

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many placements in the north-east of England have been made under the Refugee Allocations Project; how many have been allocated to each local authority area; and what the costs of such allocation have been. [95877]

Mrs. Roche: The Refugee Arrivals Project assists about 75 newly arrived asylum seekers a month to access private rented accommodation in the north-east of England. Most of the accommodation is situated in the Newcastle local authority area, and it is that authority which pays the housing benefit entitlement to the landlords. The other costs involved are the transport costs from London to the north-east and the payments of income support by the Benefits Agency. No records of these costs are kept by the Home Office.

Dyfed-Powys Police Authority

Mr. Denzil Davies: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many police officers were employed by the Dyfed-Powys Police Authority on 1 April 1997, 1998 and 1999. [95792]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Information on police numbers is collected at the end of March and September. The figures for the period requested are set out in the table.

	Total officer strength
31 March 1997	1,005
31 March 1998	1,002
31 March 1999	1,026

Licensing Laws

Mr. Fearn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to amend the licensing laws for restaurants after 11 pm. [95928]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: On 8 October, we published a consultation paper seeking views on proposals to allow restaurants to serve alcohol with meals after 11 pm without needing to apply for a supper hour certificate or provide entertainment. Copies of the consultation paper have been placed in the Library.

Police Cells (Rural Areas)

Mr. Luff: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what is his policy on the provision of police cells in rural areas. [95765]

Mr. Charles Clarke: It is an operational matter for Chief Constables to determine the number and location of police cells and stations. Chief Constables are best placed to judge these matters, in consultation with the local community where appropriate. It would not be right for Ministers to intervene in operation decisions.

Departmental Twinning

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many requests there have been to his Department for placement of officials from Central, East European and CIS states as twins of his officials; how many such officials have been accepted as twins; and from which countries *(a)* those who were accepted and *(b)* those who were not accepted came. [93997]

Mrs. Roche: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply given to him by the Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester, East (Mr. Vaz), on 25 October 1999, *Official Report*, columns *739–40*.

Anti-social Behaviour Orders

Mr. Malins: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many anti-social behaviour orders have been *(a)* applied for and *(b)* granted. [95700]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Information on the number of Orders made is not held centrally, but we are aware of six Orders which have been made since 1 April 1999. We are not aware of any Orders applied for which were not granted.

Mr. Malins: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will estimate the costs incurred to date by *(a)* police authorities and *(b)* local authorities in setting up procedures aimed towards the obtaining of anti-social behaviour orders. [95450]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Crime and Disorder Act 1998 lays down no specific procedures which must be followed when considering applying for an anti-social order, other than that the police and local authority must consult each other. Where there is behaviour which is giving rise to concern, both agencies are already likely to be in touch with each other. Information about the cost of any additional consultation, or any other procedures which the police or local authority decide to establish, is not available centrally.

Road Traffic Law Enforcement

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to ensure that new technologies are utilised and developed by all road traffic law enforcement agencies. [94507]

Mr. Charles Clarke: New advances in technology are being regularly introduced for police use. The Home Office has responsibility for approving technological devices for road traffic law enforcement by the police. The Home Office Police Scientific Development Branch (PSDB) has a programme of work on road policing, to support all United Kingdom police forces and road traffic law enforcement agencies, specifically the Driver Vehicle Licensing Authority, the Department for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, the Highways Agency, and the Government Office for London. PSDB do this by providing technical, operational and policy support as well as experimental research and development of technology applicable to traffic law enforcement and road safety.

The Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) has an established sub-committee, ACPO (Traffic Enforcement Technology), whose prime function is to assess the usefulness of the new technologies being developed by manufacturers. The police must be satisfied that any new device is a genuine technical advance in helping law enforcement. All devices must also be tested rigorously by PSDB or the Forensic Science Service to ensure that evidence provided by the device is accurate and will give reliable evidence.

Council of Ministers (Action Plan)

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what documents were presented to Parliament relating to the Action Plan adopted by the Council of Ministers of the European Union on 3 December 1998 concerning implementation of the provisions in the European treaties now in force for the development of an area of freedom, security and justice; to what Parliamentary procedures they were subject; and if he will make a statement on the future implementation of this plan. [94364]

Mrs. Roche: In addition to the Action Plan itself (12028/1/98 REV 1), the following documents were presented to Parliament in accordance with the current arrangements for Parliamentary scrutiny as amended in November 1998:

Commission Communication "Towards an Area of Freedom, Security and Justice" (10787/98), and Presidency paper for the Europol Working Group on Implementation of the Treaty of Amsterdam and Action Plan of the Council and the Commission on how best to implement the provisions of the Treaty of Amsterdam establishing an Area of Freedom, Security and Justice with a view of Europol (6245/99).

Further implementation of the Action Plan will be carried forward in the light of the Presidency Conclusions from the Tampere European Council on 15 and 16 October.

NORTHERN IRELAND

Boarding Schools

Mr. John D. Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many boarders there were in each of the boarding schools *(a)* five years ago and *(b)* in this academic year. [94376]

Mr. McFall: The figures for the academic year 1999–2000 are not yet available.

The numbers of boarders in 1998–99 and in 1993–94 is included in the following table:

Grant-aided schools

	Preparatory departments		*Secondary departments*	
	1993–94	*1998–99*	*1993–94*	*1998–99*
Campbell College	11	2	94	47
Methodist College	9	3	162	137
Victoria College	1	3	47	37
Hunterhouse College	7	5	78	54
Portora Royal	[1]	[1]	15	0
Coleraine Academical Institution	[1]	[1]	78	5
Dominican Portstewart	[1]	[1]	33	0
Friends' School Lisburn	0	0	44	44
St. Colman's Newry	[1]	[1]	53	47
Royal School Dungannon	3	0	36	29
Royal School Armagh	0	2	66	54
St. Patrick's Armagh	[1]	[1]	72	41
Coleraine High School	[1]	[1]	34	0

[1] Not applicable

Independent schools

	1993–94	*1998–99*
Glencraig	48	43
Rockport	25	20

Road Schemes (Carryduff)

Mr. John D. Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what is the present volume of traffic on the Saintfield road near its junction with Buckhill road; what is the maximum volume of traffic which is acceptable at this location; what is the estimated increase in volume of traffic if all present planning applications for housing developments in the Carryduff area were approved; what plans there are to improve the Saintfield road between Buckhill road and Carryduff; what area plans are proposed for the Carryduff area; and if he will make a statement. [94549]

Mr. McFall: Responsibility for the subject in question has been delegated to Mr. G. P Fraser of the Roads Service. I have asked him to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from G. P. Fraser to Mr. John D. Taylor, dated 25 October 1999:

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland has asked our Chief Executive to respond to your recently tabled Parliamentary Question about, inter alia, the present volume of traffic on a section of Saintfield Road, Belfast and associated issues. In the absence of our Chief Executive, I am replying.

It is assumed that your question relates to the volume of traffic on Saintfield Road near its junction with Beechill Road and not Buckhill Road as stated in the question. The latest traffic figures available for this location relate to surveys carried out in 1998. These show that the 2-way average 24-hour flow on Saintfield Road is approximately 30,000 vehicles at the Ivanhoe Inn with a peak hour 2-way flow of 2,700 vehicles.

As regards the maximum acceptable volume of traffic at this location, I should explain that there are many factors that have an influencing effect on road capacity and it is not possible to quote an 'acceptable' maximum volume of traffic for any particular road. For most urban roads, it is the junctions that act as the constraint on traffic capacity rather than the road links between them. However, the theoretical design flow capacity for a 4-lane undivided carriageway, such as Saintfield Road, is 1,700 vehicles per hour in each direction. On this basis, current traffic flow on this section of Saintfield Road is below the theoretical design capacity.

You also asked what is the estimated increase in volume of traffic if all present planning application for housing developments in the Carryduff area were approved. At present we are not in a position to determine the estimated increase in traffic generated by proposed developments in the area as the developers for the major applications have not yet completed Transportation Impact Assessments for their respective developments.

As to plans to improve Saintfield Road between Beechill Road and Carryduff, Roads Service has no proposals at present to carry out any major road improvements on this section of road. We are, however, currently introducing "Quality Bus" measures in the Saintfield Road corridor between Carryduff and Belfast. These measures include bus lanes, bus stop infrastructure, improved traffic signal control and traffic management arrangements. The introduction of a "Park and Ride" site in the corridor is also being pursued.

Finally, you asked what area plans are proposed for the Carryduff area. Colleagues from the Department's Planning Service have advised me that the Carryduff area will be included in the proposed Belfast Metropolitan Plan which will encompass the district council areas of Belfast, Lisburn, Carrickfergus, Castlereagh, Newtownabbey and North Down.

I hope you find this information helpful.

Road Schemes (Ards Peninsula)

Mr. John D. Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland when a proposal for a bridge across Strangford Lough was last considered by the Department for the Environment; what is the estimated cost of such a bridge; what is the present planned investment in roads in the Ards Peninsula over the next 10 years; and if he will make a statement. [94720]

Mr. McFall: Responsibility for the subject in question has been delegated to the Roads Service under its Chief Executive Mr. C. James. I have asked him to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from C. James to Mr. John D. Taylor, dated 22 October 1999:

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland has asked me to respond to your recently tabled Parliamentary Question about the provision of a bridge across Strangford Lough and planned investment in roads in the Ards Peninsula over the next 10 years.

The Department of the Environment considered the proposal to construct a bridge across Strangford Lough as recently as September 1999 following a request from a local interest group. The span across the lough between Portaferry and Strangford measures approximately 0.6 miles and the cost of constructing a bridge at this location is estimated to be in the region of £25M-£30M, depending on detailed design requirements. The Department considers that such an investment would not represent value for money compared to other higher priority road schemes which are required across Northern Ireland.

As regards planned investment in roads in the Ards Peninsula over the next 10 years, approximately £180K is scheduled to be spent on minor road improvements during the 2-year period 2000/01–2001/02. The level of funding for future road programmes over the next 10 years is unknown, but assuming it is maintained at current levels, some £0.9M will be spent on minor road works in the Ards Peninsula over that period. While the Department's 5-year Major Road Works Programme 1999/2000–2003/04 does not include any schemes in the Ards Peninsula, the 6–15 year Forward Planning Programme includes 4 schemes in Newtownards (total value approximately £5.2M). This programme is, however, currently under review and, even if these schemes are retained, the timing of their implementation will depend on the availability of funding.

I hope you find this information helpful.

Pupil Statistics

Mr. John D. Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many pupils were enrolled *(a)* in this academic year and *(b)* five years ago in (i) each of the primary schools and (ii) each of the secondary and grammar schools in the constituency of Strangford. [94375]

Mr. McFall: The figures for the 1999–2000 academic year are not yet available. The information for 1998–99 and 1993–94 is included in the following table:

Strangford	*1993–94*	*1998–99*
Primary Schools [1]		
Abbey PS	523	588
Alexander Dickson PS	213	209
Andrews Memorial PS	511	493
Ballycloughan PS	73	67
Ballykeigle PS	66	49
Ballywalter PS	141	170

Strangford	*1993–94*	*1998–99*
Brooklands PS	537	679
Carrickmannon PS	75	90
Carrowdore PS	137	128
Carryduff PS	279	274
Castle Gardens PS	441	388
Comber PS	412	389
Darragh Cross PS	68	91
Derryboy PS	73	73
Dundonald PS	563	605
Greyabbey PS	71	69
Killinchy PS	238	218
Killyleagh PS	154	118
Kircubbin PS	58	90
Kirkistown PS	53	64
Londonderry PS	292	322
Loughries PS	93	85
Moneyrea PS	134	146
Newtownards Model PS	365	398
O'Neill Memorial PS	41	33
Portaferry Integrated PS	44	55
Portavogie PS	157	134
Regent House School Prep. Department	172	160
St. Finians PS	194	124
St. Joseph's PS	475	739
St. Mary's PS (Portaferry)	313	261
St. Mary's PS (Killyleagh)	175	139
St. Mary's PS (Comber)	33	28
St. Mary's PS (Ballygowan)	66	48
St. Mary's PS (Kirkcubbin)	225	195
St. Patrick's PS	91	108
Victoria PS	556	581
Victoria PS (Ballyhalbert)	100	101
West Winds PS	203	206
Secondary Schools		
Comber High School	460	448
Dundonald High School	637	634
Glastry High School	554	579
Lagan College	849	966
Movilla High School	752	895
Saintfield High School	299	341
St. Columba's High School	363	306
Grammar Schools		
Regent House Schools	1,428	1,434

[1] Figures include reception and nursery pupils

Police Stations

Mr. William Ross: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what plans the Chief Constable of the RUC has to close police stations in Northern Ireland within the next three months. [95340]

Mr. Ingram: None.

21-gun Salutes

Mr. William Ross: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what factors underlay the decision to look at alternative venues to Parliament building, Stormont for traditional 21-gun salutes to mark royal anniversaries; and if he will make a statement. [95342]

Mr. Ingram: Gun salutes are fired by the Army to honour various anniversaries connected with members of the Royal family. As the Crown and Armed Forces remain excepted (i.e. non-devolved) matters under the Northern Ireland Act 1998, it is felt that it might be more appropriate for future salutes to be fired at a location other than Stormont, which is effectively transferred to the Northern Ireland Assembly under the Act. Alternative locations are being considered but no final decisions have yet been taken.

DEFENCE

BVRAAM Programme

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when his Department started discussions with the United States Government regarding the Beyond Visual Range Air to Air Missile capability; when these discussions are expected to be concluded; with which section of the United States Department of Defense his Department is holding these discussions; and whether his Department is holding discussions with other United States Departments regarding this matter. [93864]

Mr. Kilfoyle: Discussions with the United States Government regarding the UK's Beyond Visual Range Air to Air Missile (BVRAAM) programme commenced after the receipt of the Raytheon Systems Ltd. (RSL) bids in May 1998. These discussions will continue until the BVRAAM competition concludes around the end of the year. Discussions have been held with the US Air Force Departments of Acquisition, International Affairs, and Armaments Co-operation in Washington D.C. and with the Air to Air Joint Systems Program Office at the US Air Force Base Eglin, Florida. The MOD is not currently involved in discussions with any other US Government Departments regarding this matter.

UN-designated Standing Reserves

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence which units will replace UN-designated standing reserves when those units are otherwise deployed. [95410]

Mr. Hoon: The UK does not earmark specific forces for UN peacekeeping operations, and therefore the issue of replacing UN-designated units on deployment does not arise. We updated our declaration of forces potentially available to the UN in June in the form of a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU). The MOU makes clear that declared forces may not be available at the time of a UN request because of other commitments.

Indonesia

Ann Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many *(a)* Indonesian pilots and instructors are currently receiving training in the UK, *(b)* UK personnel are in Indonesia (i) to train Hawk pilots and (ii) to service Hawk aircraft; and what is the cost of the training and servicing. [95338]

Mr. Spellar: No Indonesia pilots or instructors are currently receiving training on Hawk in the UK, and no UK service personnel are in Indonesia to train pilots or service aircraft.

Rapier Missiles

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) what the security implications are to the United Kingdom of the manufacture of components of the Rapier missile system being undertaken outside the United Kingdom; [95344]

(2) what the value to Turkey will be of work undertaken there in respect of co-production of Rapier Mk 2 missiles for the Turkish Army and the Turkish Air Force Command and for the British Army and the RAF. [95343]

Mr. Kilfoyle: The value of work to be undertaken in Turkey for the Turkish and British Rapier missile procurement programmes is around £30 million. There are no security implications concerning the manufacture of these components outside the United Kingdom. The technology involved is not sensitive and the prime contractor, Matra BAe Dynamics, is responsible for meeting the MOD's contractual specification and for ensuring continuity of supply.

Challenger Tanks

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) how many Challenger 1 MBTs are to be sold to the Jordanian army; [95373]

(2) what is the value of the Challenger 1 MBTs to be sold to Jordan. [95345]

Mr. Kilfoyle: As part of its support for King Abdullah of Jordan on his accession to the throne, and in response to a request from His Majesty, the Government announced in March that we had agreed to supply Jordan with Challenger 1 Main Battle Tanks as they come out of service with the British Army over the next few years. Up to 288 Challenger 1s will be supplied.

The Challenger 1s currently in service with the British Army have a current average book value of £750K each but, on leaving service, that value will reduce to zero. The tanks will therefore be supplied to Jordan at no cost. However, agreement has been reached with Jordan that the Jordanian Government will meet the MOD's additional costs arising out of the Challenger 1 transfer programme.

Strategic Defence Review

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when he expects the Strategic Environmental Assessment examining the impact of the implementation of the Strategic Defence Review to be published; if the Assessment team has been authorised to make recommendations; and if he will make a statement. [95522]

Mr. Kilfoyle *[holding answer 25 October 1999]:* The Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) is still subject to consultation within MOD and with external Statutory Bodies, it is hoped that the final document will be available early next year. Its work is being taken forward within the methodology agreed with Statutory Bodies and will inform decision-making on the Strategic Defence Review outcomes.

Vehicle Movements

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence for what reason two tank transporters were stationary on the A303(T) near Winterbourne Stoke on 15 October; how long it was before they were moved; and what assistance was *(a)* sought and *(b)* given by the Wiltshire constabulary. [95805]

Mr. Spellar: At around 1700 hours on 15 October a single empty Scammell Crusader tank transporter travelling east on the A303 towards Stonehenge broke down due to engine failure. The civilian and MOD police were informed shortly afterwards and I understand that civilian police assistance arrived at around 1800 hours. The civilian police directed traffic at the scene of the incident. Due to the volume of traffic, the recovery vehicles, a Scammel Commander and a Seddon Atkinson tractor and trailer, did not arrive until around 1900 hours, and the broken down tank transporter was removed at around 1930 hours.

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is the cost of a return journey between RAF Honnington and Salisbury Plain training area by one low loader vehicle carrying equipment for use by the Joint NBC regiment. [95803]

Mr. Spellar: I will write to the hon. Member and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

Operation Abbott

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is the total cost of Operation Abbott. [95804]

Mr. Spellar: The cost to date of the operation to clear buried wartime ordnance at Winterbourne Gunner carried out between November 1998 and July 1999, Operation ABBOTT, is some £500,000. This amount relates to the clearance operation, compensation paid to freehold and tenant farmers for loss of harvest and payments made to DERA Porton Down. Negotiations continue with DERA Porton Down over the cost of disposal of the remaining items. The final cost of the operation will not be known until the disposal programme, scheduled to finish in the financial year 2002–03, has been completed.

Kosovo

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what communications he has had or plans to have with the new Secretary General of NATO in respect of the concerns expressed by the Chairman of the United Nations Balkan Environment task force over NATO co-operation with the task force on the use of depleted uranium shells by allied forces during the Kosovo conflict. [95635]

Mr. Hoon: None. The North Atlantic Council does not discuss the deployment of specific munitions by individual member states. However, my hon. Friend may wish to note that depleted uranium-based ammunition was not used by UK forces during the Kosovo campaign.

Gulf War Syndrome

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what plans his Department has to evaluate the study sponsored by the United States Department of Defense, published on 19 October, into the possible role played by exposure to pyriostigmine bromide in the causation of Gulf War Syndrome. [95631]

Mr. Spellar: My Department has already undertaken a preliminary assessment of the RAND review of the scientific literature on pyridostigmine bromide (PB), as it pertains to Gulf War illnesses. The report does not present

any new research on PB and does not imply that PB is necessarily a causal factor in Gulf veterans' illnesses, only that the possibility cannot be dismissed. We will now be studying this large and comprehensive report in detail.

The report calls for more substantial research into the effects of PB. MOD is currently funding research into possible interactions between PB and the vaccines given to UK troops in the Gulf (initial results show no untoward health effects). We are also conducting a neuromuscular symptoms study (one of the areas specifically mentioned in the RAND paper). The MOD welcomes new proposals for research into Gulf veterans' illnesses and would look favourably on any proposals recommended by the Medical Research Council who act as our independent assessors and advisers.

Naval Recruiting and Training Agency

Mr. Browne: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what key targets have been set for the Naval Recruiting and Training Agency for 1999–2000. [96021]

Mr. Spellar: The following Key Targets have been set for the Naval Recruiting and Training Agency for 1999–2000:

Key Target 1:

To deliver personnel to the trained strength (or to other training organisations) within 5 per cent. variance from the tasked requirement.

Key Target 2:

To obtain 95 per cent. satisfactory assessments from the employers of NRTA trainees.

Key Target 3:

To maintain success rates of 95 per cent. in Career Training and 97 per cent. in examined Pre-joining training.

Key Target 4:

To reduce the variance between RNR Trained Strength and Trained Requirement to 39 per cent.

Key Target 5:

To retain tasked capacity while operating NRTA within its 1999–2000 cash allocation.

Key Target 6:

To achieve net benefits of £8.1m in FY 1999–2000 from the partnering arrangement with Flagship Training Limited.

Departmental Controls

Mrs. Ewing: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list *(a)* the defence procurement contracts with value of greater than £5 million for each year since 1995 and *(b)* the companies involved in each of these contracts. [95351]

Mr. Kilfoyle *[holding answer 26 October 1999]:* I will write to the hon. Member and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

Army Regiments

Mrs. Ewing: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the current location in the United Kingdom of each army regiment; the number of service and support personnel at each such site; and the total wage bill for each such site in the last year for which figures are available. [95276]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 26 October 1999]:* I will write to the hon. Member and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

Japanese Prisoners of War

Mr. Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what plans he has to make ex-gratia payments to former prisoners of war who were held captive by the Japanese in the Second World War; and if he will make a statement. [95573]

Mr. Kilfoyle *[holding answer 26 October 1999]:* There are no plans to make an ex-gratia payment to former Japanese prisoners of war. The Government's emphasis is on providing support to those who are in current need, through health services, pensions and war pensions as appropriate.

Departmental Property Sales

Mr. Swinney: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list all former buildings of his Department or land sold since 7 May 1997, and the sale price for each. [95283]

Mr. Kilfoyle *[holding answer 26 October 1999]:* I will write to the hon. Member and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

Gurkha Pensions

Mr. Pickthall: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what progress has been made in the examination of Gurkha pensions and gratuities; and if he will make a statement. [96019]

Mr. Spellar: As my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister announced in the House this afternoon, gratuities payable in respect of death attributable to service for Gurkhas will be brought into line with those of their British counterparts. The new payments take effect from 26 May this year and so will apply to the widow of Staff Sgt Balaram Rai killed in Kosovo in June.

The announcement is the result of the first stage in our examination of Gurkha pensions and gratuities. The increase remains firmly within the conditions set out in the 1947 Tri-Partite Agreement between India, Nepal and the UK and follows increases that have been implemented recently by the Indian Government. To take account of the fact that the UK is the home base for British Gurkhas I have introduced a UK element to substitute for the Indian State Government payments which are variable throughout India. This will bring payments for all deaths attributable to service up to British Army rates.

We are also looking at Gurkha pensions, still within the context of the Tri-Partite Agreement, and I hope to report on this by the end of the year.

Soldiers (Minimum Age Limit)

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is the current minimum age for soldiers of the British Army to be sent into armed combat; and what plans he has to alter this limit. [96260]

Mr. Spellar: On 22 October 1998, *Official Report,* column *1161,* my predecessor announced that Service personnel would no longer be deployed on operations if

under 17 years of age, although in practice most personnel will be well over 17 prior to their being deployed. Personnel under 18 years of age are not deployed on UN peacekeeping operations, at the request of the UN. Both our recruitment and deployment policies are in line with international standards set by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the recent International Labour Convention 182.

TREASURY

Working Families Tax Credit

Mr. Webb: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what is the monetary value of the poverty line for a family with two children aged under 11 years which is consistent with his estimate of the number of children taken out of poverty by the working families tax credit; and what is the rate of Income Support for a family of this size and composition. [94694]

Dawn Primarolo: For the analysis behind the estimate that around 800,000 children will be lifted out of poverty by recent Budget measures, I refer the hon. Member to the answer given to him by the former Economic Secretary on 14 April 1999, *Official Report*, column *244*. Latest statistics on household incomes (covering 1997–98) can be found in "Households Below Average Income 1994–95 to 1997–98" and current rates of Income Support are published in "Social Security Statistics 1999", both published by the Department for Social Security. The Government have also increased the personal allowance for children under 11 on Income Support by £4.70 from this October, and announced a further increase of at least £1.05 from next April.

Equal Opportunities

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if an action plan for increasing the representation of women in public life has been *(a)* prepared by his Department and *(b)* published since November 1998. [94840]

Miss Melanie Johnson: I refer the hon. Member to the answer the Minister for the Cabinet Office gave her on 25 October 1999, *Official Report*, column *682*.

National Changeover Plan

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will list the organisations represented on each working group in respect of the national changeover plan; [95301]

(2) if he will make a statement on progress to date, by each working group, on the Outline National Changeover plan. [95302]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The Outline National Changeover plan identified the next steps in changeover planning. These are being taken forward in a number of working groups, which include representatives from the following organisations:

British Bankers Association
Association of British Insurers
Building Societies Association
Utilities
British Licensed Retailers Association
Association of Payment Clearing Services
Association of Unit Trust Investment Funds
Financial Services Authority
Consumers' Association
Local Authority Coordinating Body on Food and Trading Standards
British Shops and Stores Association
Mail Order Traders Association
British Hospitality Association
Food and Drink Federation
Royal National Institute for the Blind
Royal National Institute for the Deaf
Qualifications and Curriculum Authority
Age Concern England
Mencap
Local Government Association
Central Office of Information
British Retail Consortium
Citizens Advice Bureau
Confederation of Indian Industries
British Chambers of Commerce
Confederation of British Industry
The Royal Mint
Bank of England
Consumers in Europe Group
The Post Office
Automatic Vending Association of Britain
Securicor
Securitas
National Federation of Retail Newsagents
Institute of Chartered Accountants England and Wales
International Primary Markets Association
International Petroleum Exchange
International Underwriters Association
International Swaps and Derivatives Association
International Securities Markets Association
London Investment Bankers Association
LIFFE
Lloyds of London
London Stock Exchange
City Law Society
Fund Managers Association
National Association of Pension Funds
London Clearing Houses
Financial Services Authority
Association of Investment Trust Companies
Association of Corporate Treasurers
CHAPS Clearing Co.
CRESTCO
Finance and Leasing Association
Financial Law Panel
Futures and Options Association
Gilt Edged Market Makers Association.

Euro

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on the nature of the circumstances whereby the Bank of England will be required by the European Central Bank to prosecute

breach of copyright of euro banknotes, with reference to ECB/1999/3 (1999/656/EC); what manner of appeal is permitted; and what part he played in the discussions leading to the decision. [95400]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The Guideline of the European Central Bank (ECB) on certain provisions regarding euro banknotes (ECB/1999/3 and 1999/656/EC) is addressed to the national central banks of participating member states. As such, it does not apply to the Bank of England, and the Chancellor of the Exchequer was not involved in the adoption of the Guideline by the ECB Governing Council.

Stamp Duty

Mr. Maude: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will assess the cost in terms of lost revenue of exempting trades under £5,000 from stamp duty on share transactions. [95090]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The 1999 Budget forecast of revenue from stamp duty on transactions in shares and other securities is £3.3 billion in 2000–01.

Mr. Maude: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will assess the cost in terms of lost revenue of reducing the rate of stamp duty on share transactions to *(a)* 0.4 per cent., *(b)* 0.3 per cent., *(c)* 0.2 per cent., *(d)* 0.1 per cent. and *(e)* 0.003 per cent. [95091]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The 1999 Budget forecast of revenue from stamp duty on transactions in shares and other securities is £3.3 billion in 2000–01. The estimated costs of reducing the rate of duty from the current 0.5 per cent. are given in the table. These estimates take account of the impact the relevant changes would be expected to have on the value of share transactions.

£ billion

Reducing the rate of duty on share transactions to	*Estimated cost*
(a) 0.4 per cent.	0.6
(b) 0.3 per cent.	1.2
(c) 0.2 per cent.	1.8
(d) 0.1 per cent.	2.5
(e) 0.003 per cent.	3.3

Exchange Rate

Dr. Cable: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will list his Department's latest estimates for the real effective exchange rate on a monthly basis since May 1997, taking into account relative inflation and United Kingdom trade-weighted movements in other exchange rates. [95638]

Miss Melanie Johnson: Neither the Treasury nor the Office for National Statistics publishes monthly estimates of the real effective exchange rate. However, the OECD produce monthly estimates in their publication "Main Economic Indicators", with the latest estimates summarised on page 36 of the September 1999 Edition.

Pensions

Mr. Field: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many public service widows currently receive a pension based on *(a)* one half of their husband's pension entitlement and *(b)* one-third of that entitlement. [95516]

Mr. Andrew Smith: The major public service pension schemes do not hold information disaggregated on this basis, with the exception of the Teachers' Pension Scheme which can identify some 3,500 widows receiving a pension at one half rate; 60 at one third rate; and 31,700 receiving a widow's pension at the rate of some other fraction of their husband's pension. A widow's pension at a rate of between half and one third would result if the scheme member's service straddled the point at which public service pension schemes raised the rate of widow's pension from one third to one half, in 1972, and the member did not pay the maximum additional contributions fully to upgrade the entitlement in respect of previous service.

ISAs

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what is his most recent estimate of the number of people who have taken out both a mini and a maxi ISA. [95519]

Miss Melanie Johnson *[holding answer 25 October 1999]:* The Inland Revenue holds no data to enable it to make estimates of this kind.

WALES

Barnett Formula

8. **Mr. Livsey:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what discussions he has had with Treasury Ministers in relation to the operation of the Barnett Formula as regards Wales. [94082]

Mr. Paul Murphy: I have not had any discussions with Treasury Ministers regarding the operation of the Barnett Formula for Wales, as a sound framework is already in place.

Cross-border Environmental Management

9. **Mr. Llew Smith:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will make a statement on the liaison between his office, the National Assembly and the Welsh region of the Environment Agency on issues which affect Welsh-English cross-border environmental management issues. [94084]

Mr. Hanson: I have regular discussions with Assembly Secretaries and with Government Colleagues.

NHS Technical and Scientific Staff

10. **Mrs. Betty Williams:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Health about pay, recruitment and retention of qualified technical and scientific staff in the NHS in Wales. [94085]

Mr. Hanson: I have had no discussions with the Secretary of State for Health on these issues. When considering the annual pay settlements for NHS staff, the pay review bodies will take evidence from the Assembly along with the Department of Health and other devolved administrations.

Welsh Assembly (Funding)

11. **Mr. Gareth Thomas:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what representations he has received about the total amount of funding allocated to the National Assembly for Wales. [94086]

Mr. Paul Murphy: I have received a number of representations about this matter, including in particular about the need for funding to permit Wales to take advantage of its access to funds under Objective 1.

Fundholding (Abolition)

12. **Mr. Amess:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what discussions he has had with the Department of Health concerning the impact of the abolition of fundholding on waiting lists in English health authority areas adjacent to the Welsh border. [94087]

Mr. Hanson: None.

Ministerial Staff

14. **Mr. Rowlands:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will make a statement on the staffing of his office in *(a)* Cardiff and *(b)* London. [94089]

Mr. Paul Murphy: At present I have just over 30 staff. All except my special adviser and my legal adviser are based in London.

Assisted Areas

15. **Mr. John Smith:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what representations he has made to the Department of Trade and Industry following the publication of the new Assisted Areas map in Wales. [94091]

Mr. Paul Murphy: None. The Assisted Areas map published on 15 July 1999 constituted the Government's proposals to the European Commission. It is the European Commission which must approve the map and the matter is now with the Commission for a decision.

Policing (Millennium)

16. **Miss McIntosh:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what discussions he has had with the Welsh Executive on policing needs over the millennium period. [94092]

Mr. Paul Murphy: I understand that there have been liaison meetings between the National Assembly for Wales and local service providers, including the police services, in the interests of co-ordinating activities at the local level.

However, I have not had any discussions with the National Assembly for Wales on policing needs over the millennium period. Police issues are a matter for my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary, and millennium preparations in Wales are the responsibility of the National Assembly.

EU (Welsh Interests)

17. **Mr. Swayne:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what recent discussions he has had with the UKRep regarding the presentation of Welsh interests to the European Commission. [94093]

Mr. Paul Murphy: I plan to visit Brussels and meet senior UKRep officials shortly to discuss a range of issues. The UK Government remain responsible for relations with the European Union but wishes to involve the Assembly as fully as possible in decision-making on EU matters which touch on devolved areas. The concordat between the UK Government and the National Assembly for Wales on co-ordination of European Union policy issues, published earlier this month, sets out the framework for ensuring that the Assembly's interests are adequately represented.

Health and Education

18. **Mr. Robathan:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what representations he has received on the responsibilities of his Department in relation to *(a)* health and *(b)* education. [94094]

Mr. Hanson: The Secretary of State has been in consultation with the Assembly on aspects of Health and Education policy affecting Wales, which may be the subject of primary legislation in the near future.

Flood Control

19. **Mr. Öpik:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what negotiations he has had on measures to improve flood control in mid-Wales this winter. [94095]

Mr. Hanson: None. This is a matter for the National Assembly for Wales.

Universities (Grants)

20. **Mr. Edwards:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what representations he has made to the DfEE to ensure that Welsh universities receive a greater share of grants from UK research councils. [94096]

Mr. Hanson: None. I am aware of measures being undertaken by the National Assembly for Wales to address this situation.

Poverty

21. **Mr. Alan W. Williams:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what representations he has received about UK Government actions to tackle poverty in Wales. [94097]

Mr. Hanson: I regularly discuss this issue with colleagues and the appropriate Assembly Secretary to ensure that we are working together to reduce poverty in Wales.

Block Grant

22. **Mr. Llwyd:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how many representations he has received during the past three months with regard to the adequacy of the block grant provided for the National Assembly; and if he will make a statement. [94098]

Mr. Paul Murphy: I have received a number of representations on this subject over the last three months, including in particular the need for Wales to have adequate funding to take advantage of its access to Objective 1 grants.

Match Funding

23. **Mr. Wigley:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what representations he has received from the First Secretary of the National Assembly with regard to providing match funding for European structural funds for Wales. [94099]

Mr. Paul Murphy: I meet the Assembly First Secretary on a weekly basis to discuss a range of issues.

Post-16 Education and Training

24. **Mr. Touhig:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what plans he has to ensure that Welsh interests are advanced in any future reorganisation of post-16 education and training following the recent Government White Paper. [94100]

Mr. Hanson: The recent Government White Paper, "Learning to Succeed", put forward proposals for reorganisation of post-16 education and training in England.

The Welsh Office issued its own consultation paper which drew on work done by the Education and Training Action Group, which was set up by Welsh Office Ministers.

Any primary legislation brought forward to effect reorganisation as recommended in these papers will take account of Welsh interests.

Youth Unemployment

25. **Mrs. Ann Winterton:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Education and Employment on measures to help the young unemployed in Wales. [94101]

Mr. Hanson: I met my right hon. Friend, the Minister for Employment, Welfare to Work and Equal Opportunities, earlier this month and we discussed a range of issues in relation to the Government's Welfare to Work agenda in Wales.

Funding Programmes

26. **Mr. Dafis:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what provisions he intends to make to ensure that funding for European structural fund programmes in Wales is additional to funding allocated to the National Assembly for Wales under the Barnett Formula. [94102]

Mr. Paul Murphy: The Welsh Block currently has provision for European Structural Funds.

Next year's Spending Review is designed to review the Government's overall expenditure plans. The Treasury has agreed to consider on their merits representations from the National Assembly for Wales about the public spending implications of Objective 1 status for West Wales and the Valleys as part of the 2000 Review. I will be fully involved in those discussions.

Reserved Powers

Mr. Nicholas Winterton: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will publish a guide for the public on the reserved powers relevant to Welsh matters; and how they are dealt with in the House. [94088]

Mr. Paul Murphy: A Guidance Note is being prepared and will soon be placed in the Library.

Child Abuse Tribunal

Ms Lawrence: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales when he expects to receive the report of the North Wales Child Abuse Tribunal of Inquiry. [96415]

Mr. Paul Murphy: The Tribunal's report has been delivered to my Department this afternoon. We will now consider the report and set in hand arrangements for its printing and presentation to Parliament at the earliest opportunity. At the same time I will present an executive summary of the document which is still in preparation by the Tribunal. I will present this summary in Welsh and in English. I expect all this work to be completed by January and I do not plan to make any further statement on the report and its findings until then.

Road Infrastructure

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what discussions he has had with the Department for the Environment, Transport and the Regions concerning studies carried out into the impact of investment in road infrastructure in England upon the economy of Wales. [94078]

Mr. Hanson: None. I understand that Assembly officials are in direct contact with their DETR counterparts.

Sea Fishing

Mr. Luff: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will make a statement on the division of responsibilities between the National Assembly and the Welsh Office for sea fishing issues. [94083]

Mr. Paul Murphy: The National Assembly for Wales is responsible for all matters pertaining to the sea fishing industry for up to 12 miles from the Welsh coast line. The UK Government have powers from 12 miles to the British fisheries limit of 200 miles.

Cardiff International Airport

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what representations he has received about the potential for Cardiff International Airport to attract additional traffic from passengers living in South West England. [94090]

Mr. Paul Murphy: None. This is a matter for my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister.

HEALTH

Cancer Statistics

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what progress has been made by regional cancer registries in submitting 1997 information to the Office for National Statistics; and if he will make a statement; [94060]

(2) what steps he has taken to prevent future backlogs of submissions by regional cancer registries to the Office for National Statistics; and if he will make a statement; [94061]

(3) if he will list the regional cancer registries, indicating the latest year they have submitted data to the Office for National Statistics; and if he will make a statement. [94063]

Yvette Cooper: The latest year for which cancer registries in England have submitted complete data (as compared to the number of registrations in previous years) are:

Year	*Registries*
1997	East Anglia, South and West (Winchester), Oxford, Trent and West Midlands
1996	South and West (Bristol)
1994	Yorkshire, North Western
1993	Thames, Northern, Merseyside and Cheshire

For 1997 data, five registries have submitted substantially complete data, two have submitted some data and four have submitted no data.

We are concerned to promote more timely submission of cancer registration data. In February 1999, we commissioned Professor Charles Gillis of the Department of Public Health, University of Glasgow to review the cancer registration system in England and Wales and to make recommendations for improvement. His final report is expected early in the New Year and is expected to make recommendations to improve timeliness and quality of published cancer statistics.

Cancer Care Action Group

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when the Cancer Care Action Group has met; at each meeting what new best practice and joint working projects were established; and if he will make a statement. [94066]

Yvette Cooper: The Cancer Care Action Group (CCAG) was established to bring together the leading cancer voluntary organisations with the National Health Service Executive. It advises and makes recommendations to the National Cancer Forum on key issues on developments in cancer and palliative care policy at a national level and the implications for voluntary sector organisations, and represents those with cancer and their carers in so doing.

The CCAG has met twice so far, on 27 January 1999 and on 29 September 1999.

The CCAG has been consulted on the development of the New Opportunities Fund initiative for palliative care. It was also consulted on the cancer information strategy and as a result of this, CancerBacup and Macmillan Cancer Relief have joined the Departmental Steering Group which is developing the strategy.

Following the first meeting the National Council of Hospice and Specialist Palliative Care Services undertook to co-ordinate a project to scope the training and education provided by voluntary organisations. The findings were considered at the second meeting and it was agreed that they offered a good basis for considering further developments in this area.

NHS Pay Review Bodies

Mrs. Fiona Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what the current membership is of the NHS pay review bodies. [96271]

Mr. Denham: The current membership is as follows:

Review Body on Doctors' and Dentists' Remuneration

Chairman—Mr. Brandon Gough—First appointed 1999—Reappointed 1996 reappointed for further 2 years 1999;

Mr. David Penton—First appointed 1994—Reappointed 1997 until 2000;

Mr. Christopher King CBE—First appointed 1996—Reappointed 1999 until 2002;

Mrs. Carol Hui—First appointed 1996—Reappointed 1999 until 2002;

Professor Sheila McLean—First appointed 1998–2001;

Mrs. Matti Alderson—First appointed 1998–2001;

Mr. Alan Hawksworth—First appointed 1999–2002;

Dr. Gareth Jones—First appointed 1999–2002.

Review Body on Nursing Staff, Midwives, Health Visitors and Professions Allied to Medicine

Chairman Professor Clive Booth—First appointed 1998–2001;

Mr. Clive Monks OBE—First appointed 1998–2001;

Mr. Jim Bartlett—First appointed 1998–2001;

Mr. Mike Malone-Lee CB—First appointed 1998–2001;

Mrs. Sheila Gleig—First appointed 1994—Reappointed 1997 until 2000;

Professor Pauline Weetman—First appointed 1999–2002;

Mrs. Marlene Davies—First appointed 1999–2002;

Mrs. Urmila Banerjee—First appointed 1999–2002.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Equal Opportunities

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if an action plan for increasing the representation of women in public life has been *(a)* prepared by his Department and *(b)* published since November 1998. [94845]

Mr. Alan Johnson: I refer the hon. Member to the reply given by my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Cabinet Office, on 25 October 1999, *Official Report*, column 682.

Objective 2 Funding

Mr. John Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what representations he received from the Welsh Assembly on Objective 2 funding for Wales. [95741]

Mr. Caborn: The proposals for the Objective 2 map were prepared having regard to advice from the Assembly First Secretary and the Assembly Economic and Development Secretary. Their concern was to ensure, within a total population coverage agreed for Wales of 270, 000, that the best balance was struck between coverage of disadvantaged urban areas and rural areas.

Mr. John Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry which areas were identified in the submission by the Welsh Assembly for Objective 2 funding in Wales. [95742]

Mr. Caborn: The proposed Objective 2 map envisages coverage in Wales of parts of Powys, Newport and Cardiff. These proposals took account of advice from the Assembly First Secretary and the Assembly Economic and Development Secretary.

Mr. John Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what is the deadline for amendments to the draft map of areas of Objective 2 funding in Wales; and if he will make a statement. [95739]

Mr. Caborn: The UK proposals for Objective 2 coverage have been submitted to the European Commission, and these are now the subject of discussion with the Commission. We hope to have agreement on the proposals by the end of this year.

Mr. John Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what criteria were used to allocate Objective 2 funding to areas of Wales. [95740]

Mr. Caborn: The criteria that the Government used are set out in the document URN99/1021 "The Government's proposals for new Objective 2 areas", copies of which were sent to all hon. Members.

The criteria were based on levels of unemployment, in combination with measures of high dependency on industry or agriculture and a decline in those sectors. For urban areas, an index of local deprivation was used.

Textile Industry

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what recent steps he is taking to *(a)* promote and *(b)* safeguard the future of the UK textile industry. [95790]

Ms Hewitt: The Government work closely with the textiles industry on a number of key areas, including trade policy, education and training, exporting and industrial sponsorship.

On the latter, the Department of Trade & Industry's Textile, Clothing and Footwear Unit is dedicated to assisting these industries to compete effectively. The Unit is currently funding over 20 projects targeting specific areas for future development, including product innovation, design, marketing, benchmarking and the development of supply chain partnerships.

My hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State with responsibility for competitiveness met with the industry-led Textiles and Clothing Strategy Group on 13 October 1999 to discuss with them progress on the development of a national strategy for the industry.

Departmental Twinning

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many requests there have been to his Department for placement of officials from Central, East European and CIS states as twins of his officials; how many such officials have been accepted as twins; and from which countries *(a)* those who were accepted and *(b)* those who were not accepted came. [94019]

Mr. Byers *[holding answer 25 October 1999]:* I refer my hon. Friend to the answer given by the Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester, East (Mr. Vaz) on 25 October 1999, *Official Report*, columns *739–40*.

Mirror Group

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when he expects to publish the report into the circumstances of the Mirror Group flotation, following the appointment of inspectors in June 1992. [95520]

Mr. Byers *[holding answer 25 October 1999]:* The inspection is being conducted by independent inspectors.

They are still carrying out their work and consequentially they have yet to report to me.

Company Regulations

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list the regulations which a company manufacturing refrigerators and employing 1,500 people has to comply with. [95921]

Ms Hewitt: The regulations applying to a refrigerator manufacturer, employing 1,500 people, include those deriving from company law, taxation, health and safety, land planing requirements and environmental legislation.

Regulatory information relating to the operational aspects of all types and size of business will be available through the Direct Access Government (DAG) INTERNET web site, which is currently being updated and will be relaunched as part of the Small Business Service.

The Government announced a tougher approach to regulatory control in the Modernising Government White Paper in March, with the aim of eliminating unnecessary regulation and minimising the burdens that necessary regulations impose.

Telephone Dialling Codes

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what estimates his Department has made of the adjustment costs associated with the planned change in telephone dialling codes; and what proposals his Department has to assist charitable organisations which face exceptional costs in making the change. [95640]

Ms Hewitt: The administration of the National Numbering Scheme is a matter for Oftel. Oftel has not carried out any specific research into the adjustment costs associated with the planned changes to telephone codes. The changes to geographic codes have been made in response to the views of consumers and businesses following "Phoneday" in 1995 in order to meet additional demand for numbers. In order to minimise the costs to businesses, Oftel has given long periods of notice of changes and put in place parallel running for old and new numbers and "changed number announcements". This enables businesses to plan for the future.

This Department has no proposals to assist charitable organisations with their exceptional costs in making the change. Grants may in certain circumstances be awarded to bodies in the health sector under Section 64 of the Health Services and Public Health Act 1968, through a scheme administered by the Department of Health.

Droit de Suite

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on the effect on the London art market of introducing Droit de Suite. [95133]

Dr. Howells *[holding answer 25 October 1999]:* An independent assessment of the potential risk carried out earlier this year concluded that, business could be lost to markets where droit de suite is not applied and that, by 2005, sales of works covered by droit de suite could fall by as much as 78 per cent., from £280 million to £61 million, resulting in lost earnings of £57 million per annum; and total sales could fall by £750 million or 23 per cent. (due to vendors unwillingness to spilt lots), putting many jobs at risk.

Former Paymaster General

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what criteria will determine whether the report in preparation on the business affairs of the hon. Member for Coventry, North-West (Mr. Robinson) will be published. [95557]

Mr. Byers *[holding answer 25 October 1999]:* The criteria which determine whether information from an inquiry is made public are the nature of the case itself and other considerations such as the applicable law and commercial confidentiality. Subject to these constraints, I would wish to be as open as possible on these matters.

National Export Strategy

Mr. Baldry: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on the National Export Strategy. [95465]

Mr. Caborn: I hope to make a statement shortly.

Minimum Wage

Ms Kelly: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will break down the number of employers who have been reported by minimum wage inspectors for paying less than the national minimum wage by *(a)* region and *(b)* firm size. [95949]

Mr. Alan Johnson: National Minimum Wage compliance officers have dealt with over 3,000 cases of suspected underpayment of the national minimum wage. The latest available figures of complaints by region and by employer size is provided in the following tables. These data and other information on enforcement activity will be included in the Government evidence to the Low Pay Commission which we will publish shortly.

Complaints received by region, April-September 1999

Region	*Complaints*	*Percentage*
Scotland	204	7
N. Ireland	46	2
Wales	88	3
North East	114	4
Yorkshire	310	11
North West	211	7
Merseyside	29	1
W. Midlands	202	7
E. Midlands	183	6
Eastern England	120	4

Complaints received by region, April-September 1999

Region	*Complaints*	*Percentage*
London	79	3
South East	178	6
South West	162	6
Not known	922	32
Total	2,848	100

Notes:
1. Totals may not sum due to rounding.
2. The reason for the large number of complaints that appear to have no geographical region is that anonymous calls cannot be identified by Government Office regions since precise addresses are not taken; the complaints are simply dealt with by the nearest IR compliance team.

Source
Inland Revenue

Analysis of employer size for complaints cleared, April-August 1999

	Number	*Percentage (rounded)*
1 to 10	320	46
11 to 100	291	42
101+	78	11
Total	689	100

Climate Change Levy

Mr. Bill Michie: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what progress there has been in discussions with industry regarding the impact of the Climate Change Levy. [95953]

Mrs. Liddell: The Government have had extensive discussions with industry about the impact of climate change levy, which was announced by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer in his Budget Statement on 9 March 1999, *Official Report*, columns 173–90.

The Government have made clear that they wish to design the levy in a way which maximises its environmental benefit while seeking to protect competitiveness. They have been concerned to develop the best possible understanding of business's perspective in discussions over recent months, in order to inform their decision on the levy for the Finance Bill 2000.

The Government have said that they recognise the special circumstances of energy intensive sectors of business in this context including their energy usage and exposure to international competition. The Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions (DETR) has been leading the discussions with a number of key trade associations representing energy intensive sectors to develop negotiated agreement. Under these agreements, sectors which are to be subject to Integrated Pollution Prevention and Control regulation would earn significantly reduced rates of the climate change levy in return for commitments to targets for energy efficiency and/or emissions reduction. The DETR has been conducting detailed negotiations with an initial ten trade associations. Some initial offers of targets have now been made. The period for these discussions has been extended from mid-October to 20 December in order to give the trade associations more opportunity to consult their members.

Gas-powered Electricity Generation

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many applications to construct gas-powered electricity generating plants are awaiting consent. [95813]

Mr. Caborn: Currently there are 35 proposals involving gas-firing before the Department (a mixture of CCGT, CHP and other) awaiting a decision. Decisions on these will be taken in accordance with the policy set out in the White Paper entitled 'Conclusions of the Review of Energy Sources for Power Generation and Government response to fourth and fifth Reports of the Trade and Industry Committee' (Cm 4071), and announced in due course.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

New Deal (Over 50s)

Ms Rosie Winterton: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on the progress of the New Deal for the over 50s. [96391]

Ms Jowell: The New Deal 50plus has been introduced this week in the following nine areas of the country: Durham; Dorset; Oxfordshire; Black Country; North Derbyshire; Manchester—City Pride; Hull; North East Wales; and, Edinburgh, East and Midlothian. The programme will be introduced throughout the UK in Spring 2000.

Basic Skills Agency

Mr. Miller: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment when he proposes to undertake a review of the Basic Skills Agency. [96392]

Mr. Wicks: The Government have a policy of conducting five-yearly reviews of all non-departmental public bodies. As the Government are the major contributor to the funding of the Basic Skills Agency, we believe that the Agency should be subject to comparable review procedures. Since the last review of the Agency was in 1994, the Department has commissioned a new review of the Agency.

I am placing in the Library a copy of a letter to Sir Claus Moser, Chairman of the Basic Skills Agency, setting out further details of the review, including its terms of reference.

Age Diversity in Employment

Ms Kelly: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what assessment he has made of the impact of the Code of Practice on Age Diversity in Employment (June 1999) on reducing age discrimination in the workplace. [95950]

Ms Jowell: The Code was launched barely four months ago and it is therefore too soon to make a full assessment of its impact on age discrimination in the workplace.

The effectiveness of the Code is being evaluated through a large-scale research project looking in detail at its impact on employer policies, attitudes and practices. Specific topics to be covered include recruitment, selection, promotion, training, redundancy and retirement. The results of the evaluation will be published in early 2001.

Windfall Tax (New Deal)

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what amount and percentage of the proceeds of the windfall tax allocated in the 1998 Budget report [HC620] to *(a)* the New Deal for 18–24 year-olds, *(b)* the New Deal for the long-term unemployed, *(c)* the New Deal for lone parents and *(d)* the New Deal for the sick and disabled, for expenditure during the 1998–99 financial year were (i) spent during that year and (ii) carried forward for future years, giving reasons for any underspend. [95086]

Ms Jowell: The table shows the amount of windfall tax set out in the 1998 Budget Report allocated to the Department for Education and Employment, for the New Deal programmes shown, in 1998–99 together with expenditure and carry forward.

£ million

Programme	*1998–99 Allocation*	*Expenditure*[1] *Amount*	*Percentage*	*Carry forward*
New Deal for young people	534	189	35	345
New Deal for long term unemployed	114	12	10	102
New Deal for lone parents[2]	17	17	100	0
New Deal for disabled[2]	5	2	40	3
Totals	670	220	33	[3]450

[1] Expenditure excludes a total of £82 million spent out of existing Departmental provision

[2] New Deals for lone parents and the disabled are programmes operating jointly between the DfEE and DSS and figures given are those for DfEE only

[3] £103 million of which was returned to the windfall tax reserve

To some extent, underspends resulted from the timing of submission by contractors of their invoices for services provided to the New Deal. In addition, the numbers of people entering New Deal programmes were lower than had earlier been projected on the basis of the Government's unemployment assumption at the time. Finally, the success of the New Deal for young people itself contributed to underspends.

The programme aims to help as many young people as possible to leave its Gateway for jobs. The original planning assumption was that 60 per cent. would need to

move on from the New Deal Gateway into one of the four options. The Gateway performed much better in 1998–99 and some 55 per cent. of entrants were leaving New Deal without needing to move first into an option. Fewer young people into options has the effect of reducing expenditure on option provision, allowances and Follow-Through.

Expenditure on the New Deal is, of course, planned over the Parliament as a whole and unspent resources in any single year are available for spending on the New Deal in future years.

CABINET OFFICE

Gender Impact Analysis

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office which Government policies have been subject to gender impact analysis; and if the gender impact analyses are publicly available. [94504]

Ms Jowell: I have been asked to reply.

The Government are committed to ensuring their policies are fair and inclusive, of high quality and flexible. This aim is contained in guidance (published 1998) which helps Departments consider the impact of their policies on women and other groups, and is a cornerstone of the Modernising Government White Paper. It is for individual departments to consider how to make use of this guidance. There is no formal requirement to carry out a gender impact assessment for every policy or regulation, and the absence of a separate document does not mean that gender impact was ignored during policy making.

The Women's Unit in the Cabinet Office is working with the Home Office, and Department for Education and Employment to produce more comprehensive guidance for departments on equality impact assessment—to sit within the consolidated guidance described. In addition the Women's Unit is developing a framework for gender impact assessment.

The Government have introduced a wide range of policies clearly designed to meet the concerns, priorities and circumstances of women. These include the National Minimum Wage, Working Families Tax Credit and the Childcare Tax Credit, Sure Start and the National Childcare Strategy, the New Deal for Lone Parents and increases in Child Benefit. These measures help women make real choices in their lives.

Fight the Fog Campaign

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office if she will make a statement on developments since April 1998 in the Fight the Fog Campaign. [95293]

Marjorie Mowlam: "Fight the Fog" is an internal management initiative within the European Commission. I wish it every success.

Further information on the initiative can be obtained on the Commission's website at http://europa.eu.int/comm/sdt/en/ftfog/index.htm.

EU Working Groups

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office, pursuant to her predecessor's answer of 27 July 1999, *Official Report*, columns *155–56*, concerning EU working groups, for what reasons he did not make a statement at that stage. [95418]

Marjorie Mowlam: I refer the hon. Member to the Answer given by my hon. Friend the then Parliamentary Secretary on 27 July 1999, *Official Report*, columns *155–56*. My right hon. Friend the then Minister for the Cabinet Office did not make a separate statement as this Answer contained all the relevant information.

Property Advisers

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office how much the Property Advisers to the Civil Estate have *(a)* paid and *(b)* been contracted to pay to (i) S. J. Berwin and (ii) DTZ Debenham Thorpe since 2 May 1997. [94901]

Mr. Ian McCartney: Responsibility for this matter has been delegated under the terms of the Framework Document to the Property Advisers to the Civil Estate. I have asked its Chief Executive, Mr. John Locke, to write to the hon. Member and I will ensure a copy of the letter is placed in the Libraries of the House.

Letter from John C. Locke to Mr. David Lidington, dated October 1999:

The Minister of State, Cabinet Office has asked me, as Chief Executive of the Property Advisers to the Civil Estate to respond to your question about the level of the Agency's payments to S J Berwin and DTZ Debenham Thorpe since May 1997.

PACE do not, and never have, employed S J Berwin in any capacity, therefore the question of payment does not arise.

DTZ Debenham Thorpe have held a Management Commission with PACE since 1997 and have also received a number of smaller Commissions since that time. PACE has paid DTZ a total of £3,215,036.00 since May 1997. Work is normally ordered on a call-off basis and as a consequence there are no significant payments contracted in future, other than the current work in progress, which amounts to approximately £50k.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office if she will list the members of the Board of the Property Advisers to the Civil Service and the annual remuneration each board member receives. [94902]

Mr. Ian McCartney: The current members of the management board of Property Advisers to the Civil Estate (PACE) their salary and accrued pension (in £5,000 bands) and pensions increase for the last complete year (in £2,500 bands), is set out in the table:

£000

	Salary (including performance pay)	*Total accrued pension at 60 at 31 March 1999*	*Pension increase (net of inflation)*
Chief Executive			
Mr. John Locke	[1]75–80	5–10	0–2.5
Directors			
Mr. Barry Redfern	55–60	10–15	0–2.5
Mr. Arnold Butler	55–60	10–15	0–2.5
Mr. John Hathaway	55–60	15–20	0–2.5
Mr. Jay Jayasundara	45–50	5–10	0–2.5

[1] The Chief Executive's salary shown does not include performance-related pay. He is entitled to an annual performance bonus of up to
10 per cent. of basic salary, but the bonus payable in the current year has yet to be determined."

Further information on PACE's activities and its performance during the last financial year will be provided in PACE's Annual Report and Account 1998–99, which is due to be published shortly. Copies will be placed in the Libraries of the House.

Equal Opportunities

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what steps she has taken to promote policy appraisal for equal treatment; if she will promulgate a checklist for strategic policy making; and if she will place a copy of the checklist in the Library. [95371]

Marjorie Mowlam: Guidelines on policy appraisal for equal treatment were published jointly by the Home Office, Department for Education and Employment and the Women's Unit in the Cabinet Office in November 1998. These were circulated to all departments to ensure that the effects of any policy changes on all groups within society are considered at the earliest stage of policy development.

On 2 August 1999 the Cabinet Office Regulatory Impact Unit launched an IT-based checklist for policy makers on the Cabinet Office website. Among other things the checklist provides up to date information and advice in taking account of a range of issues including gender, ethnicity, disability and age in advice to Ministers. It also provides advice and contact points on statutory requirements, for example the Human Rights Act, good practice in consultation and other impact assessment tools like regulatory impact assessment. Policy makers are advised to use the checklist at the beginning of the policy formulation process, as part of their on-going work and in evaluation.

The checklist is IT-based to help ensure that it is kept up to date and is accessible to a wide range of users. It is available on the Cabinet Office website at *http://www.cabinet-office.gov.uk/regulation/1999/checklist/intro.htm*

A copy of the checklist is available from the Libraries of the House.

Government Car and Despatch Agency

Mrs. Ann Cryer: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what plans she has to review the Government Car and Despatch Agency. [96390]

Mr. Ian McCartney: The first review of the Government Car and Despatch Agency (GCDA) is due to be completed by the end of March 2000. I have decided that the Cabinet Office should now begin work on this review.

The review will consider the options for the future delivery of the Government Car and Inter Despatch mail services, taking account of the lessons of the Agency's past performance. The options are: continued agency status, contracting out, market testing, merger with another organisation, privatisation and abolition. Each option will be considered on its merits, and the preferred option will be the one that offers best value for money, taking into account the interests of the customers and staff of the Agency, and security issues.

Implementation of the review's recommendations and revision of the Framework Document (if appropriate) will follow.

Anyone who wishes to contribute to the review of GCDA should contact David Smith at the Cabinet Office Agencies Unit, Room 206, Ashley House, 2 Monck Street, London SW1P 2BQ (Tel: 020–7-276–2758/ Fax: 020–7-276–2739/ e-mail: dsmith@cabinet-office.x.gsi.gov.uk) by 31 January 2000.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Equal Opportunities

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if an action plan for increasing the representation of women in public life has been *(a)* prepared by his Department and *(b)* published since November 1998. [94850]

Mr. Battle: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given by my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Cabinet Office on 25 October 1999, *Official Report*, column *682*.

Working Time Directive

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations he has received concerning staff hours in connection with the Working Time Directive. [95402]

Mr. Battle: Ministers have regular meetings with staff representatives. Working hours have been discussed at such meetings. The staff of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office are committed to advancing British interests overseas. The outcome of the Comprehensive Spending Review is enabling the Department for the first time in years to recruit the staff it needs to meet its objectives, and to fill the gaps which have been a major cause of long hours.

Indonesia

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on measures taken to prevent the arrival in Indonesia of Hawk aircraft in line with the common position of the European Council of 16 September. [95249]

Mr. Battle: Following the adoption of the common position of the European Council of 16 September which imposed an immediate arms embargo and suspension of military cooperation with Indonesia, no Hawk aircraft have been exported from the UK. None will be exported while the embargo is in place.

East Timor

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what discussions he has had with *(a)* the Indonesian Government and *(b)* the UN regarding the return of East Timorese people held in camps in West Timor. [95241]

Mr. Battle: We are deeply anxious at the plight of the many thousands of East Timorese refugees in West Timor and elsewhere in Indonesia. Those wishing to return should be free to do so at the earliest opportunity. We have made it clear to the Indonesian Government that we

expect them to ensure the safety and security of the refugees. I raised this with former President Habibie on 8 September. My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary raised this with the then Indonesian Foreign Minister Alatas in New York on 22 September. And my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister wrote to the then President Habibie to reinforce our concerns. We welcome the news that several hundred returnees per day are being repatriated from West to East Timor by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). But there is an urgency to get the refugees moving in much larger numbers. To this end, we are providing financial support and working closely with UNHCR who have established an office in West Timor. We continue to assist the United Nations with this urgent task.

Rev. Martin Smyth: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the current situation in East Timor. [95432]

Mr. Battle: We welcomed Indonesia's decision on 20 October to reverse its claim on East Timor and look forward to welcoming East Timor as the newest member of the community of democratic nations. In the meantime we remain deeply anxious at the plight of the many thousands of East Timorese refugees in West Timor and elsewhere in Indonesia. We have made it clear to the Indonesian Government that we expect them to ensure the safety and security of the refugees. I raised this with the then President Habibie on 8 September. Over 18,000 East Timorese have so far been repatriated by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), but there is an urgency to get the refugees moving in much larger numbers. To this end, we are providing financial support and working closely with UNHCR who have established an office in West Timor. We have also fully supported international efforts to ensure that those guilty of human rights abuses in East Timor are brought to justice. We co-sponsored the resolution adopted on 27 September at the Special Session of the UN Commission on Human Rights which called for an International Commission of Enquiry to be set up. The Commission is to provide the UN with its conclusions by 31 December.

European Commission

Mr. Cash: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if it is the Government's policy that the President of the European Commission should be granted the authority to appoint, dismiss, and reshuffle commissioners. [95214]

Mr. Vaz: We support the process of reform in the new Commission. This is necessary following the events which led to the resignation of the Commission earlier this year. Next year's IGC is likely to consider Treaty provisions on appointment and dismissal of Commissioners.

EU Treaties

Mr. Cash: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what is Her Majesty's Government's policy in respect of granting the European Commission the authority to draft new European Union treaties. [94900]

Mr. Vaz: The Treaty sets out the Commission's role with respect to intergovernmental conferences. The Commission may make proposals to the IGC, but decisions are taken by the member states. We see no reason to change this.

Tunisia

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what steps Her Majesty's Government take to ensure that financial aid to Tunisia under the Euro-Mediterranean Agreement is not used to fund the Tunisian state security apparatus. [95094]

Mr. Vaz: Financial aid under the Euro-Mediterranean Agreement is administered by the European Commission which is responsible for ensuring that these funds are used to further the goals of the Agreement: the establishment of an area of peace and stability; shared prosperity; and partnership in human, social and cultural affairs. We monitor the use of these funds through our membership of the Med Committee established under the Agreement.

Consular Matters

Mr. Gapes: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on plans to change arrangements for dealing with representations from hon. Members on consular matters. [94915]

Mr. Vaz: It is the practice of hon. Members wishing to raise consular matters with the Foreign Secretary to write to him or to a Minister in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, Baroness Scotland of Asthal, is responsible for consular matters. There are no plans to change these arrangements.

Responsibility for representations on visa matters rests with me. I am currently reviewing the procedures for dealing with representations concerning visas. The objective will be to provide an efficient system to enable hon. Members to assist their constituents. All correspondence should in the first instance be sent to the Migration and Visa Correspondence Unit at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, 1 Palace Street, (Room 4.3.5) London, SW1 5HE.

Falkland Islands

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will arrange a comprehensive investigation into the complaints made by Mr. Mike Bingham, a resident at Stanley in the Falkland Islands as requested in his letter of 9 October in relation to the Governor's action in suspending Mr. Bingham's residency on 28 May 1998, and associated matters relating to his residency; and if he will make a statement. [95330]

Mr. Battle: The Government are aware of the allegations made by Mr. Bingham against the Falkland Islands Government. We have consulted the Governor of the Falkland Islands who has investigated the matter thoroughly. We have no grounds to believe that there has been maladministration on the part of the Falkland Islands Government or the Royal Falkland Islands Police in their dealings with Mr. Bingham. Some of the matters raised

by Mr. Bingham are between himself and his former employer, Falklands Conservation, which is entirely independent of the Falkland Islands Government.

Mr. Bingham already has a Residence Permit, valid until September 2000. It is his application for a Permanent Residence Permit which is under review. This process has been complicated by the various legal difficulties to which Mr. Bingham has been subject. The Governor is satisfied that the Falkland Islands Executive Council has handled the consideration of Mr. Bingham's applications for permanent residence status properly and impartially.

International Criminal Court

Mr. Malins: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when the UK will ratify the statute of the International Criminal Court. [95476]

Mr. Hain: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave to the hon. Member for Tewkesbury (Mr. Robertson) on 26 October 1999, *Official Report*, column *805*.

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list in the *Official Report* those countries which have *(a)* signed and *(b)* ratified the International Criminal Court Treaty. [95420]

Mr. Hain: Eighty-nine States have signed the Intentional Criminal Court Statute: Albania, Andorra, Angola, Antigua and Barbuda, Argentina, Armenia, Australia, Austria, Bangladesh, Belgium, Benin, Bolivia, Bulgaria, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cameroon, Canada, Chad, Chile, Colombia, Congo, Costa Rica, Cote d'Ivoire, Croatia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Djibouti, Ecuador, Eritrea, Finland, France, Gabon, Gambia, Germany, Georgia, Ghana, Greece, Haiti, Honduras, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Jordan, Kenya, Kyrgyzstan, Latvia, Lesotho, Liberia, Liechtenstein, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Macedonia (Former Yugoslav Republic), Madagascar, Malawi, Mali, Malta, Mauritius, Monaco, Namibia, Netherlands, New Zealand, Niger, Norway, Panama, Paraguay, Portugal, Poland, Romania, Samoa, Saint Lucia, San Marino, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Slovakia, Slovenia, Solomon Islands, South Africa, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Tajikistan, Trinidad and Tobago, Uganda, United Kingdom, Venezuela, Zambia and Zimbabwe. Four States have ratified the Statute: Italy, San Marino, Senegal and Trinidad and Tobago.

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when the United Kingdom Government intend to ratify the International Criminal Court Treaty. [95421]

Mr. Hain: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I gave to the hon. Member for Tewkesbury (Mr. Robertson) on 26 October 1999, *Official Report*, column *805*.

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what discussions he has had with the United States Government on their failure to sign the International Criminal Court Treaty. [95422]

Mr. Hain: The Secretary of State has frequently raised the International Criminal Court in contacts with the United States Government. In his talks with Mrs. Albright on 21 September in New York, he again urged the United States to sign the Statute.

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what discussions he had with the President of China during his visit to the United Kingdom on China's position concerning the International Criminal Court Treaty. [95423]

Mr. Battle: The issue was not specifically raised during the visit. The Chinese Government are well aware of our strong position on the International Criminal Court.

Pakistan

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations he has made to the Chief Executive of Pakistan concerning (i) the restoration of democratic Government and (ii) his plans for those persons under house arrest. [95789]

Mr. Hain: My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary has called for the restoration of democracy and the rule of law in Pakistan. He has also called on the new regime to respect the safety and legal rights of those arrested. The British High Commissioner in Islamabad reinforced these points on 15 October when he called on General Musharraf.

China

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if during the visit to the United Kingdom by the President of China he raised with the President *(a)* the use of capital punishment in China and *(b)* the Chinese policy on compulsory abortion; and what replies he received. [95424]

Mr. Battle: The use of capital punishment figures prominently in the human rights dialogues with the Chinese which we hold both bilaterally and with the EU. The Chinese Government are in no doubt about our strong opposition to the use of the death penalty. We have regularly raised our concerns about China's population policy in the EU and the bilateral human rights dialogues, and at higher levels. We believe that coercion has no place in family planning and our bilateral aid programme does not include funding for population programmes.

My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary was able to discuss human rights in China with the Chinese Foreign Minister, Tang Jiaxuan, when they met on 20 October, and my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister also raised human rights issues with President Jiang on 21 October. Specific issues, including capital punishment and the Chinese birth control policy, are also addressed through the regular high level human rights dialogue between us, which we remain convinced is the best way to secure progress over the longer term.

Business Ambassadors

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how the Ambassadors for British Business are held accountable for their duties. [95308]

Mr. Battle: The Ambassadors for British Business are asked to make a portion of their time available to the Ambassador for British Business scheme when travelling overseas on company business. This is entirely voluntary

and the Ambassadors for British Business receive no remuneration. There are no fixed duties and no obligation to undertake engagements.

Minurso Mission

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, pursuant to the answer to the hon. Member for Bury, North (Mr. Chaytor), of 26 July 1999, *Official Report*, column *143*, what was the previous United Kingdom commitment to Minurso *(a)* in manpower and *(b)* financially; and at what level the decision not to recommit was made. [95417]

Mr. Hain: From September 1991 until September 1993, the UK contributed 15 military observers, including the Chief of Staff to Minurso. The cost of this deployment was approximately £1,148,080.

Since the establishment of the mission, the UK has been liable for its share of UN assessed contributions. In the financial year 1998–99, the UK paid £2,359,371 in assessed contributions for Minurso.

The Government fully support the UN's efforts to bring peace to the region. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Ashfield (Mr. Hoon) made clear in his reply to my hon. Friend the Member for Bury, North (Mr. Chaytor) on 26 July 1999, we are unable to consider re-committing manpower to Minurso at this time due to heavy commitments elsewhere.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Intervention Board

Mr. Blizzard: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what key performance targets Ministers have set the Intervention Board for 1999–2000. [96526]

Mr. Nick Brown: In agreement with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, the Minister for Rural Affairs, Scotland and the Secretary for Agriculture and Rural Development, Wales, I have set the following targets for 1999–2000:

	Target
Percentage of claims processed within deadlines	99.0%
Percentage of claims process correctly	98.5%
Cumulative running cost efficiency gains	2.5%
Improvement in index of productivity	4.0%
Ratio of disallowance to EAGGF funds handled	0.40%
New value for money savings in procurement of goods and services	7.0%
Yield: cost ratio of anti-fraud activities	3.0:1.0
Percentage of invoices paid within deadlines	98.5%

Abattoirs

Mr. Gill: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what is *(a)* the range and *(b)* the average hourly rate of charge for official veterinary surgeons employed in abattoirs. [R] [90384]

Ms Quin: The current hourly rates for Official Veterinary Surgeons employed in abattoirs range from £25.01 to £106.18 and the average hourly rate is currently £40.76. This range reflects the results of the tendering exercise undertaken in 1997.

Departmental Publications

Mr. Maclean: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will list his Department's spending on official publications since May 1997. [93680]

Mr. Morley: Central expenditure on the production and printing of official publications, since May 1997 totals £1.5 million. Information about publications bought for official use and those produced for internal use only is not held centrally.

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will list the titles of the in-house publications and newsletters which were produced for the staff of his Department, excluding non-departmental public bodies and agencies, in the last five years, specifying the dates on which each title was first produced, the frequency with which each title is produced and the current secrecy classification of each title. [93854]

Mr. Morley: In house publication and newsletters produced for the staff in MAFF on a regular basis are as follows:

The MAFF Bulletin; the Department's staff magazine having been published monthly from April 1957 to August 1999. It has now been replaced by a new monthly magazine called "Landscape".

Infrastructure Support and Information Services (ISIS); a newsletter produced by the Departments Information and Technology Division and has been published on a bi-monthly basis for the last four years.

LIT (Library, Information and Translations) UPDATE; a quarterly newsletter produced by the Departments Library and Translation Service. It was first published four years ago.

Building and Estates Management (BEMD) Newsletters. Published periodically since June 1996.

IIP (Investors in People) Newsletter. A monthly newsletter first published in December 1998.

"FINRAB"; a newsletter from the Finance Planning and Resources Group commenced publication in August 1999 on a monthly basis.

Offices Notices; these inform staff about operational matters and have been published in a weekly journal since April 1985. Prior to that date notices were circulated individually.

Not included are numerous other publications produced on a one off basis.

EU Sugar Regime

Ms Keeble: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what account is being taken of the needs of the African, Caribbean and Pacific countries in relation to the reform of the EU sugar regime. [94135]

Ms Quin: My Department has consulted the full range of UK sugar interests, including the ACP-London Group, for views on the forthcoming reform of the EU sugar regime. Responses to this exercise will help the Government formulate their line in time for next year's negotiations. Meanwhile we would strongly encourage the

ACP to make their views known in Brussels to enable the Commission to take them into account as it draws up its reform proposals.

Ms Keeble: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food when he expects to make a submission to the European Commission on the EU sugar regime; and if he will make a statement. [94136]

Ms Quin: The EU sugar regime is due for review next year. We have consulted UK sugar interests on their views in preparation for the forthcoming negotiations. At this stage we have no plans to make a submission to the European Commission. We expect them to come forward with proposals for sugar reform early in the new year.

Badgers

Mr. Nigel Jones: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if it is the Government's intention to remove all badgers in the proactive areas of the badger culling trials. [93740]

Ms Quin: The Government neither intend nor expect to remove all badgers in the proactive areas of the badger culling trial. Given the operational constraints deliberately imposed on welfare grounds—principally restricting the method of capture to cage trapping, and limiting the capture period—the Independent Scientific Group established that around 80 per cent. of the badgers in an area could be captured. In other words, one fifth of the badger population would be expected to remain in place. The statistical experts in the Scientific Group have designed the trial specifically to take account of such factors, and are satisfied that the results it yields will be robust.

Export Promotion

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (1) how many of his Department's staff have been dedicated to export promotion in each of the past five financial years; what were his Department's budgets for export promotion for each of the past five financial years; and if he will make a statement; [94607]

(2) what further measures he proposes to take to promote food and agricultural exports; and if he will make a statement. [94608]

Ms Quin: Over the past five financial years my department has directly deployed 35 staff on dedicated export promotion related activity. The overall budget for each of these years (including the MAFF contribution to Food From Britain) was:

Year	*£ million*
1994–95	6
1995–96	7.1
1996–97	6.7
1997–98	6.3
1998–99	6.9

The Ministry will continue to play its full role in government export promotion activities in conjunction with the overall aims and strategies of British Trade International. This will be undertaken both by staff within the Ministry and by other bodies such as Food From Britain, Meat and Livestock Commission, and Home Grown Cereals Authority.

Potatoes

Mr. Baker: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what volume of imports from the United States, for the latest year for which figures are available, came in the form of *(a)* raw potatoes, *(b)* processed potatoes, including powder and *(c)* potatoes present in finished products destined for human consumption. [94466]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 19 October 1999]:* Imports of processed potatoes from the United States are given in the following table. There were no recorded imports of raw potatoes and imports of potatoes present in finished products are not separately identifiable.

Imports of potatoes from the USA in 1998

	Processed potatoes [1]
Thousand tonnes	6.1
Raw equivalent (thousand tonnes)	9.6

[1] Includes prepared, frozen, canned, crisped and dehydrated.

Equal Opportunities

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if an action plan for increasing the representation of women in public life has been *(a)* prepared by his Department and *(b)* published since November 1998. [94856]

Mr. Morley: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given by my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Cabinet Office on 25 October 1999, *Official Report,* column *682.*

Fisheries (Grant Aid)

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what assessment he has made of the effect of his decision to cut fisheries grant aid on inbound fisheries with particular reference to *(a)* salmon in the Test and Itchen and *(b)* sea trout in rivers in the south. [94897]

Mr. Morley: The planned reduction in grant-in-aid to the Environment Agency to fund its work on salmon and freshwater fisheries in England will come into effect in 2001–02. It will be for the Environment Agency to determine its spending priorities for that year in the light of the fall in grant-in-aid. Until it has done this it is not possible to assess the impact of the reduction on individual rivers.

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will review his decision to cut fisheries grant aid; and if he will make a statement. [94896]

Mr. Morley: The planned reduction in grant-in-aid to the Environment Agency to fund its work on salmon and freshwater fisheries in England is one of a number of economies made to keep MAFF's expenditure within the limits set by the Comprehensive Spending Review. The reduction will come into effect in 2001–02, and will be reviewed as part of the forthcoming review of Government spending that will determine expenditure plans for the period starting in 2002–03.

Morocco (Fisheries)

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what is his position regarding the renegotiation of a fisheries agreement with Morocco; what is the estimated cost of the deal; how many *(a)* United Kingdom and *(b)* other EU vessels will be affected; and if he will make a statement. [95294]

Mr. Morley: The UK will be aiming to ensure that any new agreement that can be negotiated with Morocco offers value for money, contains costs, promotes sustainable stock management and is coherent with developmental policies for Morocco. We would not expect the cost to be more than the cost of the existing agreement (125m euros p.a.).

Around 500 vessels from Spain, Portugal, France and Greece fish in Moroccan waters under the current agreement. No UK vessels are affected.

Ragwort Infestation

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what steps he is taking to counteract ragwort infestation. [95317]

Mr. Morley: MAFF has policy responsibility for control of injurious weeds, of which ragwort is one, under the Weeds Act 1959. Under its provisions, MAFF may investigate complaints from any occupiers of agricultural land who consider that their land is threatened by ragwort spreading from land nearby. It seeks to resolve disputes between neighbours about control of injurious weeds primarily through persuasion and good advice.

However, where such approaches are ineffective, the Weeds Act empowers MAFF to give occupiers of land formal written notice requiring them to take control measures. If they fail to do so MAFF may enter onto the land with an accompanying agricultural contractor, carry out the controls, and then recover the costs of the work, as a debt due to the Department.

In the case of any persistent offenders, MAFF will continue to give careful consideration to bringing a prosecution under the Act. However, past experience has been that use of the powers of entry and recovery of reasonable costs incurred in taking direct weeds control action is sufficiently effective.

There has been some doubt about the policy for enforcement of the Weeds Act where land is used to graze horses and is threatened by ragwort growing nearby. Each complaint about injurious weeds will be dealt with on its own merits. However, MAFF has policy responsibility for farmland and for farmed animals, rather than animals kept for non-agricultural businesses or for recreation. MAFF will not normally investigate complaints about weeds threatening land used for horses, ponies or donkeys. Higher priority will be given to protecting farm livestock.

MAFF supported the Country Landowners Association national awareness campaign to help eradicate ragwort, which came to an end during August. That campaign helped horse owners understand what they can do to protect their own animals, as well as their neighbours' from this poisonous weed.

GM Crops

Joan Ruddock: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (1) what advice he has received concerning the Dutch permission for sale in the Netherlands of genetically modified raddicio rosso, containing an antibiotic marker gene; [94866]

(2) what steps he is taking to prevent the importation to the United Kingdom of genetically modified raddicio rosso recently licensed in the Netherlands. [94867]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 21 October 1999]:* The Dutch authorities have confirmed that, contrary to recent reports, they have not granted permission for the sale of genetically modified raddicio rosso in the Netherlands. Applications for approval for the commercial planting and food use of this crop within the Community are still being scrutinised by the EC Commission and member states and no conclusions have yet been reached.

Pollution Prevention and Control

Mr. Robertson: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what discussions he has had with farmers about the likely cost to them of the Integrated Pollution Prevention and Control Measure; what representations he has made to the EU about the potential impact on British farmers of this measure; and if he will make a statement. [95714]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 26 October 1999]:* The National Pig Association raised this issue with the Minister when he and I met them on 5 October; we have also received representations from farming organisations in the context of the Review of Regulatory Burdens on Agriculture announced on 9 September. The Integrated Pollution Prevention and Control Directive was adopted by the Environment Council in 1996. Its implementation is a matter for my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister, who is also responsible for approving charges set by the Environment Agency to meet its costs in enforcing the relevant regulations. My officials are in contact with him about these charges which will be consistent with the Government's better regulation principles and take full account of the circumstances of industries which have not previously been subject to Integrated Pollution Control regulations.

Live Animal Transport

Mr. Robertson: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what representations he is making to the EU regarding the review of the EU Transport Initiative with respect to the transportation of live animals; what representations he has made to the French Government over the Eid-el-nabin festival; and if he will make a statement. [95576]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 26 October 1999]:* The Commission is obliged, under the terms of Directive 91/628 on the protection of animals during transit, to bring forward a report during 1999 to enable the Council of Ministers to review the terms of the Directive. We consider it regrettable that there is as yet no sign of this happening, as we consider that the review will be an important opportunity to press for improvements to the rules in this area.

We deplore the flagrant infringements of EU animal welfare rules and appalling acts of cruelty which take place when sheep are slaughtered at the annual festival outside Paris and which—commendably—have been highlighted by animal welfare organisations. We look to the French government to enforce the law and to the Commission to fulfil its responsibility to make sure that this is done.

We have pressed the Commission and the French government on both these matters, and will continue to do so until suitable action is forthcoming.

Fisheries Council

Mr. Hood: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what was the outcome of the Fisheries Council held in Luxembourg on 26 October; and if he will make a statement. [96192]

Mr. Morley: The Fisheries Council met in Luxembourg on 26 October. I represented the UK together with John Home Robertson, Deputy Minister for Rural Affairs in the Scottish Executive.

The Council had extensive discussions on two draft regulations. The first, revising the market regime for fish and aquaculture products, and the second, reforming the structural funds in the fisheries sector in the context of Agenda 2000. I stressed that the fishing sector needed to be economically, as well as biologically, sustainable and that this needed to be reflected in the market and structural measures to be applied. It did not make sense to sustain excessive capacity in relation to the available fish stocks; and import arrangements needed to be adjusted to meet the actual market circumstances. The Council will resume discussion on both proposals at its next meeting on 22 November.

The Commission reported that it hoped to take up contacts with Morocco shortly to begin negotiations on a successor agreement to the current EC-Morocco Agreement which expires on 30 November. The Commission also introduced the findings of an independent study it had commissioned on the costs and benefits of third country fisheries agreements which will now be examined in detail. There was an initial discussion of a draft Council regulation on improving the dialogue with the industry. This was remitted for further examination.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Stipendiary Magistrates

Mr. Malins: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what plans he has to increase the number of stipendiary magistrates. [95471]

Jane Kennedy: My noble and learned Friend the Lord Chancellor recently consulted on a proposal to increase the present ceiling of 50 provincial stipendiary magistrates. After considering the responses received to the consultation, the Lord Chancellor proposes to seek parliamentary approval to an increase in the ceiling to 56.

Mr. Malins: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what plans he has to increase the jurisdiction of the stipendiary bench. [95473]

Jane Kennedy: I have no plans to increase the jurisdiction of the stipendiary bench.

Derbyshire Magistrates Courts

Mr. Todd: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what the annual estimated manning costs of Derbyshire's magistrates courts will be in the three years immediately after the completion of the Private Finance Initiative for the county's courts; and what were their running costs on the same basis in 1996, 1997 and 1998. [95482]

Jane Kennedy: Cleaning and care-taking costs for the three years mentioned are 1996–97—£114,461; 1997–98—£116,656; 1998–99—£123,572. The cost of providing security cover is separately provided by the private sector: 1996–97—£86,500; 1997–98—£92,595; 1998–99—£105,037. These costs include cash carrying duties that cannot be separated from guard duties. No information on the likely costs under the PFI project will be available until bids in response to the Invitation to Tender are received and evaluated during December. Any decision to transfer staff to the private sector will be made on a value for money basis.

Mr. Todd: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what is the latest estimated cost of the investigation and preparation of the Private Finance Initiative for property connected with Derbyshire magistrates courts. [95527]

Jane Kennedy: The latest estimated cost of advisers and the local authority management fees for the investigation and preparation of the Private Finance Initiative project involving Derbyshire magistrates courts is £673,582. Costs have increased because work has been undertaken to establish the feasibility of bringing back in to use a listed building as a magistrates court.

Office for the Supervision of Solicitors

Mr. Flight: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if he will make a statement on the operation of the Office for the Supervision of Solicitors. [95451]

Mr. Lock: The Lord Chancellor wrote to the President of the Law Society on 23 July. The letter set targets for the Law Society to achieve; these are that the number of unresolved cases on the Office's books should be down to 6,000 by 31 December 2000; and following this, 90 per cent. of cases should be dealt with within three months of receipt and 100 per cent. within five months. For the three months to date the backlog has been reduced by 1,700 cases ahead of target. I am encouraged with the progress that the Office has made towards reducing the backlog of complaints. I do recognise, however, that there is a long way to go for the Office to reach the targets set by the Lord Chancellor.

Hague Convention on Child Abduction

Sir John Stanley: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what response the Government have made to the recent request from the Secretariat for the Hague Convention on Child Abduction for an increase in funding from states who are parties to the Convention. [95479]

Jane Kennedy: The Lord Chancellor met the Secretary General of the Hague Conference on Private International Law in The Hague on 22 October. This issue was not raised. As and when a request of this nature is made it will receive due consideration.

Equal Opportunities

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if he *(a)* has established and *(b)* published a baseline for policy appraisal against which to measure progress on equal treatment. [94864]

Jane Kennedy: The Government are committed to ensuring their policies are fair and inclusive, and focus on public service users, not providers. This aim is contained in guidance (published in 1998) which helps Departments consider the impact of their policies on gender, ethnicity and disability. In addition to considering impact the guidance encourages consultation with women's groups and others where appropriate and action to deal with any differential impact if this appears appropriate. My Department applies the principles enshrined in the guidance in developing its policies. For example in developing the Community Legal Service (CLS), a wide variety of views is being canvassed. For the CLS website we are investigating how access can be facilitated for people with disabilities or who do not use English as a first language. In developing the Quality Mark for services to be provided by CLS members, we have consulted bodies representative of the interests of ethnic minority groups and of people with disabilities. Indeed bodies such as the Commission for Racial Equality and DIAL UK are members of the Task Force charged with progressing this development.

Witness Summons Fee

Mr. Field: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what the intended use is for the funds raised from new witness summons fee of £30. [95531]

Jane Kennedy: The fee is intended to recover the cost associated with the service for which the fee is paid. This includes not only the work involved with the issue of the witness summons but also the extra time at the trial likely to result from the witness giving evidence.

Mentally Incapacitated Adults

Dr. Moonie: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department when the Government will publish its proposals for making decisions on behalf of mentally incapacitated adults. [96525]

Jane Kennedy: The Lord Chancellor has today issued a Policy Statement, "Making Decisions" which sets out the Government's proposals. Copies have been placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

Written Answers to Questions

Thursday 28 October 1999

PRESIDENT OF THE COUNCIL

Equal Opportunities

Jackie Ballard: To ask the President of the Council if she *(a)* has established and *(b)* published a baseline for policy appraisal against which to measure progress on equal treatment. [94861]

Mrs. Beckett: The major Privy Council Office activity that involves the need to ensure equal treatment is the making of appointments to public bodies. The practice of my Department in relation to the representation of women on public bodies was explained in my answer of 25 October 1999, *Official Report*, column *707*. The same practice is adopted in relation to the representation of people from ethnic minorities on such bodies.

Millennium Compliance

Ms Keeble: To ask the President of the Council what steps she has taken to ensure the House is informed of progress in tackling the millennium bug during the summer recess. [94882]

Mrs. Beckett: During the recess, my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Secretary and I wrote to all Members summarising the progress for Government Departments and their agencies maintained in the monthly and quarterly questionnaire returns. I placed the full, completed questionnaires in the Libraries of the House and on the internet.

I also wrote to MEPs in October to inform them of the EU's initiative, set up at the UK's suggestion, to set up a high level group to consider cross border issues such as ports and shipping, custom and immigration and some energy supplies.

I have placed in the Libraries of the House summaries of the reports of the June, July and August tracking research on public awareness of and attitudes towards the millennium bug.

Mr. David Atkinson: To ask the President of the Council if she will list the members of her departmental Committee whose work involves the rebuttal of misinformed allegations in the media in relation to millennium date change issues, together with the Committee's terms of reference and mission statement. [95675]

Mrs. Beckett: The Year 2000 Communications' Committee supervises the Government's overall millennium bug presentation strategy and its intrinsic parts, including keeping the public informed.
Its membership comprises:

President of the Council (Chair)

Minister of State, Department of Trade and Industry

Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for the Home Department

Parliamentary Secretary, Privy Council Office.

Its terms of reference are:

"To ensure that all communications initiatives relating to the Millennium (Millennium Bug, 'celebrations', and contingency and emergency planning), including paid publicity, are brought together in a coherent way so that they remain focused on the core message and underlying key points agreed by Ministers; that Millennium Bug and Y2K civil contingency communication planning is integrated and tested; and that departments play their full part in responding to issues arising or likely to arise".

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

National Lottery

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will publish *(a)* actual visitor numbers to date and *(b)* visitor numbers forecast at the time of lottery awards, for each of the completed major capital projects funded by the National Lottery. [95116]

Mr. Chris Smith *[holding answer 25 October 1999]:* According to the information received from Lottery distributors, the actual visitor numbers and the numbers forecast at the time of application for completed projects funded by the National Lottery, with awards of £15 million or more, are as follows:

Distributing body	*Recipient*	*(a) Actual visitor numbers*	*(b) Numbers forecast at time of application (per annum)*
Arts Council of England	Imax	134,115 (1 May to 31 August 1999)	204,754
	New Sadler's Wells	317,800 since October 1998	440,000
	Milton Keynes Theatre and Gallery	Theatre: 39,000 (2 week period)	Theatre: 235,751
		Gallery: 10,476 (10 day period)	Gallery: 54,000
	Royal Exchange, Manchester	172,840 (Projected for December 1998-December 1999)	174,037
	Royal National Theatre	651,000, 55,000 foyer visitors (approx) in last 12 months	602,000 50,000 foyer
Millennium Commission	Dynamic Earth	250,000 since 3 July 1999	430,000
	Earth Centre	87,000 since 4 April 1999	500,000
	Wales Millennium Stadium	488,500 spectators since 26 June 1999	Events: 800,000 Tours: 250,000 Functions and conferences: 100,000
	Hampden Park	Not available	Capacity: 53,000

Departmental Twinning

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how many requests there have been to his Department for placement of officials from Central, East European and CIS states as twins of his officials; how many such officials have been accepted as twins; and from which countries *(a)* those who were accepted and *(b)* those who were not accepted came. [94003]

Mr. Chris Smith *[holding answer 25 October 1999]:* I refer my hon. Friend to the reply given by the Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester, East (Mr. Vaz) on 25 October 1999, *Official Report*, columns *739–40*.

Royal Armouries, Leeds

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will make a statement on the present financial circumstances of the Royal Armouries in Leeds. [95115]

Mr. Chris Smith *[holding answer 25 October 1999]:* I refer the hon. Member to the reply my hon. Friend the Minister for the Arts gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Mr. Mackinlay) on 19 October 1999, *Official Report*, column *428*.

[illegible] Libraries

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will list, by local authority, those public libraries which *(a)* have closed within the last 12 months and *(b)* are currently scheduled for closure. [95129]

Mr. Chris Smith *[holding answer 25 October 1999]:* Annual Library Plans and the data collected by the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy enable me and my officials to monitor the public library service, including the number and opening hours of the libraries operated by each authority. However, we do not keep a definitive list of actual or potential building closures, since many are due to the reorganisation of services or the replacement of old facilities with new ones.

NORTHERN IRELAND

Occupational Therapists (Recruitment)

Mr. McGrady: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what steps he is taking to ensure that the Down Lisburn Trust, Newry and Mourne Trust and Banbridge and Craigavon Trust recruit and train additional occupational therapists. [94460]

Mr. George Howarth: None. The levels of staff employed by HSS trusts in any professional discipline in Northern Ireland are directly related to the activity levels required by the commissioners of services. Unless commissioners deploy additional resources, HSS trusts are unable to pay for the services of additional staff.

So far as I am aware, there are presently no difficulties in recruiting Occupational Therapists in any of the trusts mentioned, and the number of training places at the University of Ulster has been increased from 36 places to 50 places per year since 1992.

Police Ombudsman

Mr. William Ross: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland when the post of Police Ombudsman was created; when the post was first advertised and how many applications were received; what qualifications were required and in what ways all of the first applicants failed to meet those requirements; how many applications were received as a consequence of the second advertisement; how many of those applicants met the criteria set out; and if there were differences in the qualifications required by the two advertisements. [94778]

Mr. Ingram: The post of Police Ombudsman was created by the Police (Northern Ireland) Act 1998. It is expected that the Police Ombudsman will assume her full statutory powers next Summer. In the meantime, Mrs. O'Loan will act in a designate capacity.

The post was first advertised both locally and nationally between 30 November and 3 December 1998. There were 18 applicants.

Applicants were asked to describe how they met the competencies for the post. These were: leadership and teamwork; organisational awareness/knowledge; developing and maintaining networks; managing financial and physical resources; and customer service.

Of the applications received, five candidates were subsequently shortlisted for interview by a panel which included a person independent of Government. From this group two candidates were selected for subsequent interview by the Secretary of State and the Minister of State. In the event, while Ministers acknowledged the quality of the candidates, they were not satisfied that either candidate fully met the requirements of the post.

The post was readvertised both locally and nationally and in local legal journals between the 20–25 May 1999. Forty-seven applications were subsequently received. The range of competencies for the post were identified as: legal skills; leadership/strategic planning; developing and maintaining networks; public relations and decision making. From the applications received, nine candidates were shortlisted for interview by a panel which included a person who was independent of Government. The two leading candidates were subsequently interviewed by the Secretary of State and myself.

It would not be appropriate to discuss the merits or otherwise of individual candidates. The selection process followed the guidelines of the Commissioner for Public Appointments. The underlining principle of this guidance is appointment on merit.

Inward Investment

Mr. William Ross: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many Irish Development Board sponsored visits of prospective incoming *(a)* foreign and *(b)* United Kingdom investors there have been to each council area in each of the last five financial years and the current year to date; and how many were carried forward to investment. [94833]

Mr. McFall: Visits arranged by IDB to Northern Ireland District Council areas for potential investors in the four years to 31 March 1998 are detailed in the following table. The details for 1998–99 will be made available with the publication of the IDB Annual Report in mid-November. Separate figures for prospective foreign and United Kingdom investors are not available for 1994–95 and would involve disproportionate costs to extract.

IDB sponsored inward investment visits

	1994–95	*1995–96*		*1996–97*		*1997–98*	
	Total	*Overseas*	*UK*	*Overseas*	*UK*	*Overseas*	*UK*
Antrim	26	13	5	26	8	18	3
Ards	5	3	0	10	0	1	0
Armagh	1	1	0	4	0	2	0
Ballymore	13	3	0	0	0	5	0
Ballymoney	3	1	0	3	0	2	0
Banbridge	2	2	1	1	0	1	0
Belfast	65	38	17	48	14	65	17
Carrickfergus	13	6	1	21	1	15	0
Castlemagh	1	8	0	6	0	2	0
Coleraine	5	3	0	7	0	7	0
Cookstown	4	15	2	9	1	9	0
Craigavon	12	16	0	15	0	15	1
Derry	18	29	1	27	5	14	0
Down	10	2	0	3	0	4	0
Dungannon	13	9	0	4	0	3	0
Fermanagh	3	11	0	10	5	3	2
Larne	6	4	0	1	0	9	0
Limavady	3	2	0	7	0	2	0
Lisburn	19	36	5	30	1	23	0
Magherafelt	3	4	0	0	0	1	0
Moyla	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Newry and Mourne	15	12	4	9	0	4	1
Newtownabbey	17	18	1	21	1	20	0
North Down	4	9	0	3	0	3	1
Omagh	2	6	0	8	0	5	0
Strabane	2	9	0	9	1	2	0
Total	265	260	37	282	37	235	25

Notes:
1 Via elements for other than inward investment purposes, such as visits to tourists attractions, are excluded.
2 General visits to Northern Ireland not involving a specific area are excluded.
3 Total District Council visits may exceed total visits to Northern Ireland as companies may visit more than one District Council area.

Companies investing in Northern Ireland may have visited more than once and in relation to different projects before making the decision to invest, Information relating investment to specific visits is not available and would involve disproportionate costs to extract. The number of inward investments promoted by IDB for each of the last five years is detailed in the table:

IDB promoted inward investment projects

	New	*Expansion*
1994–95	7	29
1995–96	10	25
1996–97	11	24
1997–98	12	29
1998–99	21	16
Total	61	123

Equality Commission

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what assessment he has made of the effect of *(a)* the retirement of senior officials in the Disability Directorate and *(b)* the delay in forming the Equality Commission on the Commission's ability to enforce rights by April 2000 under the Disability Discrimination Act 1995. [95179]

Mr. George Howarth: None. A number of members of the former Disability Council have been appointed to the Equality Commission and several others have agreed to act in a consulting capacity to the Commission. It is intended that a draft Order-in-Council to confer the necessary disability rights enforcement powers on the Equality Commission will be laid before Parliament shortly. The Commission is making preparations to recruit and train staff to ensure that these powers are given effect from April 2000.

Patten Commission

Mr. Barnes: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what was the total cost of the production of the report of the Independent Commission on Policing for Northern Ireland. [95896]

Mr. Ingram: The Independent Commission on Policing (the Patten Commission) issued its report, "A New Beginning: Policing in Northern Ireland", on 9 September 1999. The Commission arranged for 30,000 copies of the report to be printed at a cost of £90,000—£3 per copy.

Mr. Barnes: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many copies of the report of the Independent Commission on Policing for Northern Ireland have been requested by members of the public. [95888]

Mr. Ingram: It is difficult to put a precise figure on the number of copies requested by members of the public as the initial distribution was handled by the Patten Commission before it disbanded. In addition to the 21,000 copies distributed to libraries and each of the district councils, and each police officer and civilian members of PANI, approximately 5,000 copies were issued by the Commission to members of the public. Since 30 September there have been 404 requests from members of the public to the freephone number announced by the Secretary of State on 9 September 1999. The whole report is also available on the internet.

RUC

Mr. Barnes: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many armoured landrovers the RUC has. [95890]

Mr. Ingram: The RUC currently have 434 armoured landrovers.

Plastic Batons

Mr. Barnes: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what research, and at what cost, is currently being carried out in Northern Ireland into less potentially lethal alternatives to the plastic baton round. [95893]

Mr. Ingram: There is currently no formal research programme into alternatives to plastic baton rounds in Northern Ireland. The report of the Independent Commission on Policing recommended such a programme should be established and this will be addressed in the Government response to the report.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Recruitment Industry

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what assessment he has made of the impact of proposals for the regulation of the private recruitment industry (URN: 99/774) published by the Department of Trade and Industry on those buying care privately. [96060]

Mr. Alan Johnson: The consultation document published on 31 May on revised regulations to govern the conduct of the private recruitment industry contains a regulatory impact assessment covering possible cost consequences to those hiring staff through bureaux, including those buying care privately.

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if his officials have contacted Mrs. Gifford of Able Community Care Norwich, concerning the costs attributed by her to the VAT charges arising from the introduction of regulations for the private recruitment industry (URN: 99/774); and on what basis those calculations were made. [96062]

Mr. Alan Johnson: My officials wrote to Mrs. Gifford on 22 July and 12 August 1999. A meeting was held on 19 August and officials also spoke to her at a conference on 13 October. We do not accept that the costs which she calculates would in fact result from the proposed amendments to private recruitment industry regulation.

Minimum Wage

Mr. Fabricant: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what assessment he has made of the working of the national minimum wage in the United States. [94273]

Mr. Alan Johnson: The independent Low Pay Commission in its First Report on the national minimum wage examined the operation of the minimum wage systems in a number of countries, including the United States.

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what further measures are proposed to ensure compliance with the minimum wage legislation. [94285]

Mr. Byers: Enforcement powers are set out in the National Minimum Wage Act 1998. National minimum wage inspectors (comprising officials from the Inland Revenue and the Agriculture Departments) follow up complaints from workers and third parties. Since August, inspectors have also been carrying out targeted inspections throughout the United Kingdom based on risk assessments, which identify where underpayments are most likely to occur.

Bananas

Dr. Godman: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what recent discussions he has held with representatives of the ACP banana-producing countries concerning matters relating to the European Union's banana regime and the Lomé commitment; and if he will make a statement. [95821]

Mrs. Liddell: The Government had a number of discussions with ACP banana producers and others about further reform of the EU's banana regime in the course of this year. It is however for the European Commission to come forward with a formal proposal for changing the EU's banana regime consistent with the rules of the World Trade Organisation and with Lomé commitments. The UK has made clear that we would like to see a proposal as soon as possible which will end this dispute and address the needs of the vulnerable banana producers.

Small Business Service

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement about the local boundaries for the Small Business Service. [96729]

Ms Hewitt: In July, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Employment and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry asked for the advice of the Regional Development Agencies and the London Development Partnership on the boundaries for local delivery of services on behalf of the Small Business Service and the proposed Learning and Skills Council. After widespread consultation in each region, the RDAs and LDP have provided that advice to us and we have given it very careful consideration.

I can now announce that the boundaries for the 45 Small Business Service local areas are as follows:

Region	*Areas*
North West	7
Cumbria	
Merseyside/Halton	
East Lancashire	
West and North Lancashire	
Cheshire/Warrington	
Greater Manchester (2)	
North East	4
Tyne and Wear	
County Durham	
Tees Valley	
Northumberland	
West Midlands	6
Birmingham and Solihull	
Staffordshire	
Shropshire	
Herefordshire and Worcestershire	
The Black Country	
Coventry and Warwickshire	
Yorkshire and The Humber	4
North Yorkshire	
South Yorkshire	
West Yorkshire	
Humberside	
East Midlands	5
Lincolnshire (including Rutland)	
Northamptonshire	
Leicestershire	
Derbyshire	
Nottinghamshire	
East of England	6
Bedfordshire	
Essex	
Cambridgeshire	
Hertfordshire	
Norfolk	
Suffolk	
London	1
(with 5 local delivery operations)	
South East	6
Surrey	
East Sussex/West Sussex/Brighton and Hove	
Oxfordshire/Buckinghamshire/Milton Keynes	
Kent/Medway	
Hampshire/Isle of Wight/Portsmouth/Southampton	
Bracknell Forest/West Berkshire/Reading/Slough/ Windsor/Maidenhead/Workingham	
South West	6
Devon and Cornwall	
Somerset	
Gloucestershire	
Bournemouth/Dorset/Poole	
Wiltshire/Swindon	
The Former Avon	

A copy has been placed in the Library of the House. The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Lifelong Learning and I will be writing to hon. Members with full information about the new areas.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Employment are grateful to the RDAs and LDP for their advice.

Lufthansa (Dismissals)

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what representations his Department has received concerning Lufthansa's dismissal of workers following a strike. [96244]

Mr. Alan Johnson: The Department has received a number of letters urging the Government to give its support to the strikers in the Skychefs dispute. However, it is not the Government's policy to intervene in industrial disputes or be seen to take sides by commenting on the conduct of one side or the other. Disputes are a matter for the parties concerned to resolve with the assistance of the independent Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service (ACAS) where both parties agree.

We intend to bring Section 16 and Schedule 5 of the Employment Relations Act 1999 into force by Easter next year. These provisions will extend the right of protection for those dismissed for taking lawfully organised industrial action to complain to a tribunal of unfair dismissal. They are designed to stop precipitate dismissals and to place an onus on both employers and unions to settle disputes by negotiation.

HOUSE OF COMMONS

Easter Adjournment

Mr. David Atkinson: To ask the President of the Council when she expects the next Easter adjournment to take place. [95941]

Mrs. Beckett: I am not yet able, before the start of the new Session, to forecast when the House will not be sitting, but I hope to give further information nearer the time.

Staff Pensions

Mr. Burden: To ask the President of the Council how many hon. Members use the Fees Office facility to contribute to pension provision for their staff; and how many staff are covered by the facility. [95654]

Mrs. Beckett: The information requested is as follows (and was current at 22 October 1999).

625 hon. Members use the Fees Office facility to contribute to pension provision for their staff; and 1,276 staff are covered by this facility.

Archival Paper

Mr. Gordon: To ask the Chairman of the Administration Committee if she will make available to hon. Members samples of the archival paper which the Committee recommends should replace vellum as the means of preserving record copies of Acts. [96313]

Mrs. Roe: Yes; I am please to advise the hon. Lady that I have arranged for samples of the archival paper, which it is proposed should replace vellum, to be placed in the Library.

Private Security Services

Mr. Flynn: To ask the hon. Member for Roxburgh and Berwickshire, representing the House of Commons Commission, what plans he has to use private security services in the Palace of Westminster. [95819]

Mr. Kirkwood: There are no current plans to use private security services in the Palace of Westminster. A new contract for security services came into force with the Metropolitan Police on 1 September this year. It is for two years with the option for annual extensions thereafter.

Harmon CFEM Facades (UK) Ltd.

Mrs. Roe: To ask the hon. Member for Roxburgh and Berwickshire, representing the House of Commons Commission, if he will make a statement on the matter of Harmon CFEM Facades (UK) Ltd. *v.* The Corporate Officer of the House of Commons. [95880]

Mr. Kirkwood: A Judge of the Technology and Construction Court has found the Corporate Officer of the House of Commons liable for damages in relation to its decision to award the external cladding package for the New Parliamentary Building to an Austrian/British company, Seele Alvis.

The Commission is concerned by the Judge's finding that the project team unlawfully promoted a "Buy British" policy. Given the liquidation of Harmon in March 1998, the House would have been put in a disastrous situation if the contract had gone to them. Another contractor would have to have been found which would have caused delay to the project and would have meant major financial loss, estimated to be an additional £12 million, on a project which is on time and under budget.

The Judge has held that Harmon is entitled to recover its tender costs (claimed at not more than £438,000) and any profit it can prove it would have earned. These are to be determined at a later hearing. The Judge has said that the fact that Harmon went into insolvent liquidation during the period it would have carried out the contract, cannot be ignored.

Advice on the grounds for appeal is being sought.

TREASURY

Tax Havens

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what assessment he has made of the OECD's list of tax havens and its recommendations pertaining to them; and if he will make a statement. [94805]

Dawn Primarolo: The OECD has not yet completed its evaluation of tax havens.

Fiscal Harmonisation

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will list those elements of fiscal harmonisation currently being discussed at EU level to which he *(a)* has and *(b)* has not raised objections; and if he will make a statement. [95225]

Dawn Primarolo: As the joint statement made by the Prime Minister and the German Chancellor last December makes clear, the UK Government will not support proposals leading to a higher tax burden and jeopardising competitiveness and jobs in the EU. We fully support enhanced co-operation in the fight against tax abuse and evasion, and to combat unfair tax competition.

EU Tax Ministers Meeting

Mr. Maude: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will publish the *(a)* conclusions, *(b)* minutes and *(c)* agenda of the meeting of EU Tax Ministers held on 13 and 14 October at Fiuggi near Rome. [95093]

Dawn Primarolo: I refer the right hon. Member to the answer I gave to him on 13 July 1999, *Official Report*, column *182*.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Optical Services

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what progress has been made in providing self-correcting spectacles in countries with limited optical services; and if she will make a statement. [94804]

Clare Short: We are providing a grant of £250,000 to "Adaptive Eye Care Ltd.", to assist in funding a 12 month programme in Africa and Asia, to further develop the adaptive spectacles. The programme covers market research, product field trials and local staff training.

Aid Criteria

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what criteria her Department employs in determining whether to suspend aid to a foreign Government. [96223]

Clare Short: In our White Paper on Eliminating World Poverty we lay out a number of criteria for partnership in development. These include a commitment to the elimination of poverty, to good governance and to human rights. In some cases the behaviour of a government so offends against the interests and rights of their people that we can no longer work with the offending regime. Instead we will focus on those within civil society who are working for change. Our primary concern must be to continue to deliver support to the poor and to help them realise their rights.

Serbia

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what humanitarian aid her Department is currently providing for Serbia. [96220]

Clare Short: Since May 1999, European Community Humanitarian Office (ECHO) has allocated 26.5 million euros for assistance to the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY), of which the UK attribution is about 15 per cent. This consists of food and hygiene assistance to up to 770,000 vulnerable people, repairs to accommodation for displaced people, psycho-social support, small-scale emergency water and sanitation projects, and support to

social institutions. Programmes are being implemented through major agencies such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNHCR).

Export Credit Guarantees

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what representations her Department has made to the DTI in the past three months regarding the cancellation of export credit guarantee debt. [96217]

Clare Short: Debt is primarily the responsibility of my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer. I work closely with the Chancellor on debt and our combined efforts have enabled the Government to deliver their objectives on the revision to the heavily indebted poor countries (HIPC) initiative. The new HIPC framework will deliver twice as much debt relief, and the link to poverty reduction has been greatly strengthened with the introduction of poverty reduction strategies. This provides an opportunity to make much greater progress on eliminating poverty and achieving the international development targets. My officials work closely with those from Treasury, Export Credits Guarantee Department (ECGD) and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO), on HIPC and other aspects of the Government's debt policy, including the assistance provided on the UK's export credit debt in the context of the Paris Club of bilateral creditors.

World Trade Organisation

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement on her Department's policy towards the World Trade Organisation discussions in Seattle. [96222]

Clare Short: The WTO Ministerial meeting in Seattle, 30 November to 3 December, will consider the scope, modalities and structure of a new round of multilateral trade negotiations. I have called for the next WTO round to be a "development round", with a comprehensive agenda which offers all countries the chance to make solid and substantial gains. A comprehensive Round would offer important development opportunities, through increased market access and improved rules. My Department has been working closely with the Department of Trade and Industry and other Departments to give a clear development focus to the EU position in advance of Seattle, and is working hard to win support for a wide ranging round.

NGOs

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement about the revised funding arrangements entered into between her Department and non-governmental organisations. [96221]

Clare Short: I refer to the answer which I gave to the hon. Member on 26 July 1999, *Official Report*, columns *12–13*.

The Guidelines for the operation of the Civil Society Challenge Fund have been widely distributed and the first application round began on 1 October. The Fund will operate on a 50:50 matched funding basis. In recognition that non-governmental organisations currently in receipt of 100 per cent. funding for reproductive health activities would find it helpful to have time to adjust to the revised arrangements, I have agreed that they should receive 85 per cent. funding in the first year of the new Fund, 70 per cent. funding in the second year, reaching 50 per cent. in the third year.

Departmental Staff

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development how many staff were employed directly by her Department on 30 September. [96219]

Clare Short: Figures are not yet available for 30 September but as at 1 July, my Department directly employed a total of 1,728 staff including casual staff and staff on contract not classified as civil servants. In addition the Department employed a further 320 staff who are appointed in-country through its overseas offices.

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

Penalty Fare Scheme

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what recent representations he has made to London Transport concerning the operation of their penalty fare scheme. [95232]

Mr. Hill: In July this year LT presented Ministers with a copy of the LT/LRPC report on their review of the Underground Penalty Fares Scheme. Ministers have made no representations to London Transport on this matter since then.

Farm Plastics

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when his Department will respond to the consultation on the disposal and recovery of farm plastics issued by his Department 12 months ago. [95879]

Mr. Mullin: The consultation paper received a fairly limited response and subsequently we have been reassessing the proposals for a new industry initiative based on the Government's commitment to apply waste management controls to agricultural waste which is not excluded under Article 2 of the amended Framework Directive on waste. This means that most agricultural waste will be subject to the controls which apply to "controlled waste". The commitment was most recently confirmed in the waste strategy "A Way With Waste" which was published on 30 June. We will make a further statement in the light of this work.

Flooding (Newcastle)

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he plans to require the Environment Agency to eliminate the risk of flooding, contamination and storm sewer overflow in the Ouse Burn/Jesmond Dene Stream, Newcastle; and if the effects of climate change have been assessed in calculating these risks. [95910]

Mr. Mullin: The Environment Agency is aware of the risk of flooding within the Ouse Burn catchment. The Agency's records identify the majority of properties which have been affected previously. In addition, a hydraulic study, carried out under section 105 of the Water Resources Act 1991, has identified the properties at risk from a 1 in 100 year flood event.

The Agency considers that it is not possible to eliminate flood risk completely. However, the risk can be minimised by appropriate management of the river channel and appropriate development in the flood plain.

The Environment Agency is working closely with Northumbrian Water to agree prioritisation of a continuing programme of work to improve unsatisfactory storm sewer overflows. The Government have pressed for this programme to be accelerated under the current Periodic Review of water industry price limits.

Since 1991 estimates of rising sea levels arising from geological movements of the British mainland and from climate change effects have been built into the appraisal of options for flood defence.

Health and Safety

Ms Jenny Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he has received from the Health and Safety Executive their proposals for the Health and Safety (Miscellaneous Modifications) Regulations 1999; what response to the proposed Regulation 6(8) he plans; and if he will make a statement. [95800]

Mr. Meacher: I have not yet received proposals from the Health and Safety Commission for the Health and Safety (Miscellaneous Modifications) Regulations 1999. I understand the proposals will be submitted to me by the Commission shortly.

Rating Valuations

Mr. Sanders: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will publish the latest average capital values of dwellings by tenure and region for which figures are available; and if he will make a statement. [95767]

Mr. Mullin: The latest information on capital values for all housing tenures is from the English House Condition Survey 1996. Average values by tenure and region for April 1996 are provided in the table.

	Owner occupied	*Private rented*	*Local authority*	*RSL*
North East	53,282	43,602	26,697	25,949
Yorkshire and the Humber	54,767	36,976	25,025	31,107
North West	59,435	42,795	25,636	26,085
East Midlands	59,818	41,411	28,298	29,432
West Midlands	62,965	53,363	32,127	33,597
South West	70,286	59,036	35,325	42,923
Eastern	77,541	54,055	44,485	43,905
South East	92,617	67,101	44,924	43,687
London	102,143	79,280	48,848	58,354

The English House Condition Survey is based on a sample of dwellings throughout England and is carried out every five years. It provides values for all housing types and tenures at one point in time, and not just recent transactions. Therefore, in the private sector, values will differ from other sources of information on house prices.

Railway Stations

Miss Geraldine Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the public funding available to improve the condition of run down railway stations. [95762]

Mr. Hill: Investment in station facilities may be eligible for funding under the Rail Passenger Partnership scheme, set up to help provide new or enhanced local and regional rail services which contribute to the Government's wider objectives for rail. The shadow Strategic Rail Authority (SSRA) has issued guidance on bidding for funds for this purpose and is evaluating proposals already received.

A decision on the first group of bids for Rail Passenger Partnership funding is likely to be announced by the SSRA towards the end of 1999 or early in the new year.

Radio Frequency Field Exposure

Mr. Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he expects that the study into occupational exposure to radio frequency fields will be completed; and if he will make a statement. [95717]

Mr. Meacher *[holding answer 26 October 1999]:* The Institute of Occupational Health at the University of Birmingham, in collaboration with the National Radiological Protection Board, is undertaking the study of occupational exposure to radio frequency fields. I am advised the current intention is that the study, which is funded by the industry together with a contribution from the Ministry of Defence, will be completed by the end of 2001.

Negative Housing Subsidy Regime

Mr. Woodward: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what representations he has received concerning the impact of his changes to the negative housing subsidy regime. [95976]

Mr. Mullin: I met a delegation of representatives from the "Negative Subsidy" authorities on 14 September to discuss the potential impact on local authorities of our proposals to change the accounting arrangements for the Housing Revenue Account (HRA).

I have since written to the leader of that delegation indicating that the Government are prepared to agree in principle to provide some form of transitional measures when Rent Rebates are removed from the HRA. These will be primarily for those authorities where the transfer represents a significant proportion of their General Fund expenditure, and is long standing. The transitional measures will allow time for "Negative Subsidy" authorities to make necessary financial and procedural adjustments in preparation for the new arrangements. It is too early to say what form these transitional arrangements

might take since there are many factors which may potentially affect the level of transfers before the new arrangements are implemented.

Train Services (Cancellations)

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will publish weekly and monthly material available to the Rail Regulator on the numbers of cancelled train services, broken down by rail operator. [96038]

Mr. Hill: Cancellation data, broken down by rail operator and also, in some cases further sub-divided by route group, are published in the Franchising Director's quarterly Bulletin (Copies are in the House Library). There are no immediate plans to publish this data on a more frequent basis. The recent "Instructions and Guidance to the Franchising Director" (copies are in the House Library) would allow him to change the present quarterly interval between Bulletins subject to consultation with Ministers.

GM Products

Joan Ruddock: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what his Department's policy will be in the negotiations at the EU in relation to commercial growing of *(a)* GM beet produced by Monsanto and *(b)* GM oil seed rape produced by AgrEvo. [96231]

Mr. Meacher: The UK vote at the EU negotiations will be based solely on the scientific assessment of the information provided in the applications by Monsanto and AgrEvo. In order to vote in favour of granting consents, we would need to be satisfied that the information provided by the companies was accurate and complete. We would also need to be confident that the information showed clearly that there were no significant risks to the environment from the products covered in the consents. This assessment of the risk would be in accordance with the requirements of the Directive at the time the applications were made. However, since the applications were made I, and my colleagues in other Member States, have decided that future applications must include an assessment of a wider range of risks to the environment, including indirect effects and impacts on bio-diversity. We are seeking assurances and commitments from industry that they will provide such assessments through post-market monitoring before any general cultivation in the UK is permitted. Our vote will therefore also be conditional on receiving these commitments.

Joan Ruddock: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what is the earliest date by which biotechnology companies could proceed to commercial planting of any GM crops in the UK. [96230]

Mr. Meacher: Before any genetically modified (GM) crop can proceed to commercial planting in the UK, up to four statutory approvals are required. These are: Part C (marketing) consent under European Directive 90/220/EEC, food safety approval under EU Novel Foods and Novel Food Ingredients Regulation (258/97), National List of approved seeds, and pesticide approval to cover, where necessary, the use of a pesticide in different circumstances on the new GM crops.

The crops nearest to gaining all the necessary approvals for commercial planting in the UK are GM herbicide tolerant oilseed rape and GM herbicide tolerant maize. These crops are currently being assessed in the Government's programme of farm-scale evaluations to determine whether or not commercial cultivation would harm farmland bio-diversity. These evaluations are due to be completed in 2003.

Leylandii Trees

Miss Geraldine Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what progress his Department has made regarding measures to control the planting of leylandii trees around boundaries. [96210]

Mr. Mullin: The voluntary code of practice on the information to be provided on the sale of hedging plants, drawn up by the Leylandii Working Group, was launched to the horticultural and landscape industry on 15 June. Otherwise, the position remains as set out in the reply given to the hon. Member for Colchester (Mr. Russell) on 17 November 1998, *Official Report*, column *473*.

Blackwall Tunnel

Mr. Woodward: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has for the creation of high-occupancy vehicle lanes on the approaches to the Blackwall Tunnel. [96000]

Mr. Hill: No final decision has been made on whether to proceed with a trial scheme for a high occupancy vehicle (car sharing) lane on the approaches to the Blackwall Tunnel. We will consider the traffic effects of the extensions to the Jubilee Line and Docklands Light Railway before deciding on whether to introduce a scheme.

London Underground Services

Mr. Woodward: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the London Underground line closures and service reductions planned for *(a)* October 1999 to March 2000 and *(b)* April to September 2000. [96001]

Mr. Hill: This is an operational matter for London Transport. However, I understand that the following line closures and service reductions are planned:

(a) Between October 1999 and March 2000:

Date

23–31 October

Location

Queen's Park—Harrow and Wealdstone (Bakerloo Line)

Purpose

Railtrack track replacement works on Silverlink and Bakerloo shared lines

(b) Between April 2000 and September 2000:

Date

April 2000 (provisional)

Location

Victoria—Brixton (Victoria Line)

Purpose

Track works to replace life-expired cross-over at Brixton

Date

May—August 2000 (provisional)

Location

High St Kensington—Earl's Court (District Line)

Possible re-routing of Wimbledon-Edgware Rd service via Gloucester Rd, and no Olympia service.

Purpose

Strengthening covered way.

These works are still provisional as London Transport is finalising the details of its work programme and of specific projects. In doing this they will seek to minimise disruption to passengers.

Fuel Source Development

Angela Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he intends to publish revised planning guidance for on-shore oil, gas and coalbed methane development. [96523]

Mr. Raynsford: We have today issued draft guidance on on-shore oil, gas and coalbed methane development for public consultation. The consultation period will run until 7 January 2000. While the guidance on oil and gas updates that previously contained in Circular 2/85, the proposed guidance on coalbed methane is the first that has been prepared in respect of this potentially important new energy source. Copies of the consultation draft are available in the Library.

Rail Safety

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) which body is responsible for determining which signals are to be fitted with train protection warning system devices; [95954]

(2) what percentage of all signals are to be fitted with train protection warning system devices; [95955]

(3) what plans he has to fit train protection warning system devices to freight train loop lines; [95956]

(4) if signal SN109 outside Paddington railway station was scheduled for the fitting of a train protection warning system device within existing plans. [95958]

Mr. Hill *[holding answer 27 October 1999]:* The Railway Safety Regulations 1999 require a train protection warning system to be fitted at all signals on a railway where a train could collide with another oncoming, converging or crossing train. These are estimated to account for 30–40 per cent. of all signals. As required by the Regulations, Railtrack is developing a train protection installation programme which must be approved by the Health and Safety Executive. Signal SN109 outside Paddington station falls within that programme.

Parts of a railway which are normally used only for the carriage of freight are excluded from the scope of the Regulations.

Mr. Woodward: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many signals passed at danger there have been in each of the last five years on tracks between *(a)* London Paddington and Oxford and *(b)* Oxford and Evesham. [95988]

Mr. Hill *[holding answer 27 October 1999]:* Information is not held in the form requested. I have asked the initial Capital Chair of the Health and Safety Commission to write to the hon. Member.

Mr. Woodward: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what advice on railway safety he received before announcing the phasing-out of slam-door trains. [95986]

Mr. Hill *[holding answer 27 October 1999]:* The announcement of the phasing out of slam-door carriages without central locking was made after careful consideration of the Health and Safety Commission's formal recommendations.

Mr. Woodward: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many recorded incidents of diesel fuel tanks becoming separated from trains there have been in each of the last five years. [95990]

Mr. Hill *[holding answer 27 October 1999]:* The Health and Safety Executive does not record this type of information and is therefore unable to supply any data.

Mr. Woodward: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the reporting stages for signals passed at danger from trackside to Secretary of State; and if he will make a statement. [95987]

Mr. Hill *[holding answer 27 October 1999]:* Incidents of signals passed at danger (SPADs) are required to be reported monthly under the Reporting of Injuries, Diseases and Dangerous Occurrences Regulations 1995 to the Health and Safety Executive (Her Majesty's Railway Inspectorate). They are reported monthly by the Safety Managers for the individual Railtrack zones and then submitted by Railtrack to HMRI. This information is published in HMRI's Annual Report on Rail Safety.

Following the tragic accident at Ladbroke Grove on 5 October, my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister asked the Health and Safety Commission to arrange for him to be sent a weekly report on the number of signals that had been passed at danger (SPADs) in the previous week. The information is collated and tabulated by HMRI and submitted to the Deputy Prime Minister every Friday. He has received two of these reports so far.

The Deputy Prime Minister has also requested the monthly analysis of SPADs. This report is due at the beginning of November and will be published.

Mr. Woodward: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the safety record of *(a)* diesel multiple unit trains and *(b)* trains hauled by a diesel locomotive. [95993]

Mr. Hill *[holding answer 27 October 1999]:* The Health and Safety Commission, with the operational assistance of the Health and Safety Executive (HSE), monitor and review the safety performance of all types of rolling stock including that of diesel multiple units and trains hauled by diesel locomotives. Details of train

accidents caused by technical defects affecting all types of locomotives and multiple units are published in HSE's Annual Report on Railway Safety.

Mr. Woodward: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions on how many occasions since September 1998 *(a)* Ministers and *(b)* officials have (i) met and (ii) corresponded with (1) train operating companies and (2) Railtrack plc regarding signals passed at danger incidents; and if he will place the resulting minutes and letters in the Library. [95982]

Mr. Hill *[holding answer 27 October 1999]:* The lead responsibility for dealing with signals passed at danger rests with the Health and Safety Commission and Executive.

Mr. Woodward: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many *(a)* signal failures and *(b)* signals passed at danger there have been since the accident at Ladbroke Grove. [95991]

Mr. Hill *[holding answer 27 October 1999]:* The information requested on signal failures is not yet available. Railtrack is required by law to report on a monthly basis incidents of signals passed without authority (commonly known as a 'SPAD') and failures in the signalling system where they endanger or have the potential to endanger the safe passage of trains. In addition my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister has asked for weekly reports of SPADs which will be collated and publicised monthly. The first report will be available in early November.

The relevant report for signal failures following the accident at Ladbroke Grove will not be available until mid November.

Mr. Woodward: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when random testing for alcohol and drugs was introduced for train drivers. [95989]

Mr. Hill *[holding answer 27 October 1999]:* Random testing for frontline railway staff, including train drivers, was introduced by regulation made under the Transport and Works Act 1992. The regulation came into force in December 1992.

DEFENCE

School of Electrical and Mechanical Engineers

Maria Eagle: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence which contractor is responsible for the training of Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers at the School of Electrical and Mechanical Engineers, Borden; what penalty clauses are contained in the contract; and if they have been invoked. [95672]

Mr. Spellar: The contractor responsible for the majority of training at the School of Electrical and Mechanical Engineering is Vosper Thorneycroft. Contract performance is regularly monitored and there is an annual review of the contract price, which can vary depending on the number of courses run or the number of students trained during the year. There are no specific penalty clauses in the contract, but full payment depends on the contractor meeting the required performance standards. To date there has been no reason to consider reducing payment on these grounds.

Helicopter Command

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many defence service personnel are serving with Joint Helicopter Command Headquarters; from which service areas they are drawn; and if he will make a statement. [95794]

Mr. Spellar: The Joint Helicopter Command Headquarters is established for 84 Service personnel. The actual strength as at 25 October 1999 is 82. The Service areas from which they are drawn are as follows:

Service	*Established strength*	*Actual strength*
Royal Navy	12	12
Army	48	48
Royal Air Force	24	22
Total	84	82

RAF Honington

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is the cost of converting the east hangar at RAF Honington for use by the new NBC regiment. [95802]

Mr. Spellar: The cost of refurbishing 'E' Hangar at RAF Honington for use by the Joint NBC Regiment would be £1.33 million plus VAT. However, no financial decision will be made on the requirement for this refurbishment until the long term location of the Joint NBC Regiment is known.

Executive Agencies

Mrs. Ewing: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many staff are employed in Scotland by executive agencies responsible to his Department in total; and where those staff are located. [95278]

Mr. Kilfoyle *[holding answer 26 October 1999]:* As at 1 July 1998, there were 8,448 staff employed in Scotland by executive agencies responsible to the Secretary of State for Defence, as detailed in the table. This is the last year for which figures are available. The MOD has since restructured and a number of the Agencies mentioned in the table have ceased to exist and other new Agencies have been created.

Scotland

	Total	*Service*	*Civilian*
Total	8,448	2,288	6,160
Meteorological Office	165	—	165
RAF Maintenance Group Defence Agency	3	—	3
Queen Victoria School	67	—	67
Defence Postal and Courier Service	6	—	6
Army Base Repair Organisation	147	—	147
Defence Secondary Care Agency	1	1	—
Ministry of Defence Police	860	—	860
Naval Recruiting and Training Agency	156	143	13
RAF Training Group Defence Agency	81	42	39
Army Training and Recruiting Agency	1,023	912	111
Defence Communications Services Agency	75	55	20

Scotland

	Total	*Service*	*Civilian*
Defence Estates Organisation	71	—	71
Naval Bases and Supply Agency	4,016	840	3,176
RAF Logistics Support Services	5	5	—
RAF Signals Engineering Establishment	59	—	59
Disposal Sales Agency	3	—	3
Defence Clothing and Textile Agency	2	—	2
Army Base Storage and Distribution Agency	34	—	34
Defence Dental Agency	55	48	7
Medical Supply Agency	7	—	7
Defence Codification Agency	107	—	107
Army Personnel Centre	1,256	227	1,029
Ships Support Agency	171	15	156
Defence Vetting Agency	7	—	7
Specialist Procurement Services	71	—	71

Notes:

1. The data cover UK regular forces and UK based permanent civilian personnel counted in official Ministry of Defence civil service figures. Civilian figures are full-time equivalents, where part time staff are counted in proportion to the hours worked.
2. The data exclude all Defence Evaluation and Research Agency Staff and the UK Hydrographic Office, on whom reliable data is not available on the same basis.

It would not be possible to give the location of each member of staff without disproportionate cost. However the locations of the Agencies which employ the majority of staff in Scotland are as follows:

Queen Victoria School—Dunblane, Perthshire;

Army Base Repair Organisation—Forthside, Stirling;

Defence Codification Agency—Glasgow;

Army Personnel Centre—Glasgow;

Army Training and Recruiting Agency—Glencourse;

Ship Support Agency—Rosyth;

Naval Recruiting and Training Agency—Rosyth and Greenock;

Naval Bases and Supplies Agency—approximately 2,800 of the 4,016 staff employed in Scotland by the Naval Bases and Supplies Agency are based at Faslane, with the remainder located at a number of different sites throughout Scotland;

Staff employed by the Meterological Office and the MOD Police are located in a number of different sites throughout Scotland.

Mrs. Ewing: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will state for each of the executive agencies responsible to his Department, the *(a)* total number of staff employed and *(b)* wage costs in (i) England and (ii) Scotland in the last year for which figures are available. [95279]

Mr. Kilfoyle *[holding answer 26 October 1999]:* The table gives details of the number of staff employed by each of the agencies responsible to the Secretary of State for Defence, in England and Scotland as of 1 July 1998, which is the last year for which figures are available. However, the MOD has since restructured and a number of the Agencies mentioned have ceased to exist, while other new Agencies have been created.

	England	*Scotland*
Total	73,297	8,448
Meteorological Office	1,771	165
Military Survey	1,001	—
RAF Maintenance Group Defence Agency	1,563	3
Service Childrens Education	10	—
Duke of Yorks Royal Military School	99	—
Queen Victoria School	—	67
Defence Analytical Services Agency	115	—
Defence Postal and Courier Service	507	6
Army Base Repair Organisation	2,427	147
Defence Animal Centre	171	—
Defence Secondary Care Agency	2,118	1
Ministry of Defence Police	2,666	860
Joint Air Reconnaissance Intelligence Centre	472	—
Naval Recruiting and Training Agency	4,288	156
RAF Training Group Defence Agency	8,683	81
Army Training and Recruiting Agency	24,236	1,023
Logistic Information Systems Agency	225	—
Defence Communications Services Agency	1,237	75
Defence Estates Organisation	969	71
Naval Bases and Supply Agency	5,688	4,016
RAF Logistics Support Services	888	5
RAF Signals Engineering Establishment	841	59
Disposal Sales Agency	27	3
Defence Clothing and Textile Agency	377	2
Army Base Storage and Distribution Agency	3,620	34
Defence Transport and Movements Executive	182	—
Army Technical Support Agency	1,066	—
Defence Dental Agency	644	55
Medical Supply Agency	250	7
Pay and Personnel Agency	811	—
Defence Bills Agency	668	—
Defence Codification Agency	1	107
Naval Manning Agency	275	—
Defence Intelligence and Security Centre	522	—
Army Personnel Centre	25	1,256
Ships Support Agency	2,510	171
RAF Personnel Management Agency	437	—
Armed Forces Personnel Administration Agency	285	—
Defence Vetting Agency	324	7
Medical Training Organisation	575	—
Specialist Procurement Services	723	71

Notes:

1. The data cover UK regular forces and UK based permanent civilian personnel counted in official Ministry of Defence civil service figures. Civilian figures are full-time equivalents where part-time staff are counted in proportion to the hours worked.
2. The data exclude all Defence Evaluation and Research Agency staff and the UK Hydrographic Office staff, for whom reliable data are not available on the same basis.

It would not be possible to give the wage costs for each Agency without disproportionate cost.

UN Peacekeeping Operations

Mr. Duncan Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what plans he has to contribute to UN peacekeeping operations in *(a)* East Timor, *(b)* Sierra Leone and *(c)* Congo. [96229]

Mr. Spellar: The UK already contributes two military liaison officers to the UN Mission in East Timor; 15 Service personnel to the UN Observer Mission in Sierra Leone; and six military observers to the UN in the Congo. We will consider any UN requests for further contributions to these operations in the light of other commitments.

Procurement

Mr. Duncan Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what proportion of the procurement budget is to be spent through European joint procurement structures. [96226]

Mr. Hoon: I will write to the hon. Member and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

Belize

Mr. Peter Bradley: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence which Ministers in his Department visited Belize in each year between 1990 and 1997; and what support his Department gave Belize in each year. [96212]

Mr. Spellar: As far as available records show, Belize received official visits from the following Defence Ministers between 1990 and 1997.

January 1990:

Archie Hamilton (Minister of State for the Armed Forces).

October 1990:

Lord Arran (Under Secretary of State for the Armed Forces).

September 1993:

Jeremy Hanley (Minister of State for the Armed Forces).

May 1994:

Malcolm Rifkind (Secretary of State for Defence).

The MOD maintained a small garrison in Belize until September 1994, and has provided support to the Belize Defence Force through the Defence Policy and Military Assistance Funds. The amounts provided in support of the Belize Defence Force in each Financial Year between 1990 and 1997 are set out in the table:

Year	*£*
1990–91	787,195
1991–92	721,808
1992–93	670,000
1993–94	792,775
1994–95	806,120
1995–96	834,927
1996–97	502,105
1997–98	283,967

PRIME MINISTER

Foreign Affairs Committee

Mr. Bill O'Brien: To ask the Prime Minister if the Government have responded to the Eighth report of the House of Commons Select Committee on Standards and Privileges on the premature disclosure of reports of the Foreign Affairs Committee. [96614]

The Prime Minister: I wrote to my right hon. Friend the Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Mr. Sheldon), the Chairman of the Committee, on 14 September 1999 to indicate the Government's intention to abide fully by the Committee's recommendations. Copies of my letter and its attachments have been placed in the Libraries of the House.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Income Support

Mr. O'Hara: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will estimate the total number of people aged *(a)* 60 to 74, *(b)* 75 to 79 and *(c)* over 80 years living in (i) England, (ii) Scotland, (iii) Northern Ireland and (iv) Wales whose weekly income is £10 above the income support level. [94198]

Mr. Rooker: The information requested is not available in the format requested. Such information as is available is in the table.

Couples and single persons with income between the income support level and £10 above the income support level in April 1999 in the United Kingdom

Thousand

Age of eldest partner	*Single person*	*Couple*	*All single persons and couples*
60 to 74	60	20	80
75 to 79	140	40	180
80 and over	90	10	100
All 60 and over	290	70	360

Notes:

1. Due to small sample sizes, separate estimates for England, Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales are not available.
2. Income is defined as net income before housing costs.
3. Incomes are derived from the 1996–97 Family Expenditure Survey, uprated to April 1999 using the retail prices index. Therefore this analysis assumes that the real value of pensioners' incomes is the same in April 1999 as in 1996–97.
4. The levels of income support are based on April 1999 rates for singles and couples, taking account of age-related increases in rates. The analysis does not take account of other increases in rates, such as disability-related premia. Therefore some people identified in the analysis may be eligible for income support at a higher rate.
5. Estimates should be treated with caution since they are based on small sample sizes.
6. Figures are rounded to the nearest 10,000 but are not necessarily accurate to that degree.

Source:

Family Expenditure Survey

Mr. Michael J. Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) what was the number of claimants receiving Income Support at the end of August 1996 in each local authority area in England; [95738]

(2) what was the number of dependent children of claimants receiving Income Support at the end of August 1996 in each local authority area in England. [95736]

Mr. Bayley: The information has been placed in the Library.

Housing Benefit

Mr. Austin: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what estimate he has made of the additional expenditure by his Department on housing benefit subsidy in respect of rent allowances paid to local authorities in each of the years from 1989–90 to 1998–99 in respect of tenants of registered social landlords created as a result of large scale voluntary transfers. [94345]

Angela Eagle: The only estimates made are projections for transfers of funds from the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions to this Department for the three years following each tranche of large scale voluntary transfers. The Rent Allowance expenditure relating to transferred properties cannot be identified beyond this three year period because the

Housing Benefit data does not distinguish between Registered Social Landlord tenants in transferred properties, and those in other Registered Social Landlord properties. The estimates for each three year period from 1992–93 are set out in the table. Our records do not extend back to cover transfers before this date.

Projected increases to rent allowance subsidy at the time of transfer

£ million

	1992–93	*1993–94*	*1994–95*	*1995–96*	*1996–97*	*1997–98*	*1998–99*	*1999–2000*	*2000–01*	*2001–02*
Year of transfer										
1991–92	3.9	4.5	5.1	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
1992–93	—	28.9	42.7	47.2	—	—	—	—	—	—
1993–94	—	—	29.1	30.4	27.6	—	—	—	—	—
1994–95	—	—	—	42.5	52.7	58.6	—	—	—	—
1995–96	—	—	—	—	42.9	45.9	47.8	—	—	—
1996–97	—	—	—	—	—	23.6	25.3	26.9	—	—
1997–98	—	—	—	—	—	—	49.1	50.6	51.8	—
1998–99	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	66.7	69.6	72.4

Pensioners (Benefits)

Mr. O'Hara: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what percentage and number of pensioners are entitled to but not receiving one or more of *(a)* Income Support, *(b)* Housing Benefit and *(c)* Council Tax Benefit. [95632]

Mr. Rooker: The information is as follows:

Take-up of income related benefits by pensioner benefit units 1997–98

	Income Support	*Housing Benefit*	*Council Tax Benefit*	*Total*
Average number of recipients (Thousand)	1,470	1,830	2,600	5,870
Numbers entitled but not receiving benefit (Thousand)	530 to 870	0 to 250	640 to 1,190	1,170 to 2,310
Percentage non take-up rate	27 to 37	0 to 12	20 to 31	17 to 28

Notes:

1. Estimates are based on the 1997–98 Family Resources Survey.
2. Estimated numbers entitled to, but not receiving benefit have been rounded to the nearest 10,000 cases. The sum of the components (the individual benefits) may not add up to the total due to rounding.
3. A pensioner benefit unit is defined as a single person aged 60 or over or a couple (not necessarily married) at least one of whom is aged 60 or over.
4. The estimates under "total" in the table refer to the total of Income Support, Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit. They should be regarded as rough estimates only because they count recipients of more than one benefit more than once and count those entitled to but not receiving more than one benefit more than once.

SERPS

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what was the basis on which the estimate of the cost of SERPS changes was made by the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Social Security, reported in the *House of Lords Official Report* of 11 October 1991, column 31. [95532]

Mr. Rooker: I refer my right hon. Friend to the Written Answer my hon. Friend, the then Minister of State, gave the hon. Member for Newbury (Mr. Rendel) on 22 March 1999, *Official Report*, column *103*.

Chief Child Support Officer Report

Mr. Miller: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will publish the Chief Child Support Officer's annual report for 1998–99. [96728]

Angela Eagle: The annual report of the Chief Child Support Officer for the year 1998–99 is published today. This report provides information, based on monitoring of decision making in the Child Support Agency during 1998–99, on standards of decision making and levels of accuracy in the assessment of child support liability. The report indicates that, although substantial progress has been made there is still cause for concern about standards of decision making in child support. The Chief Child Support Officer's analysis of the causes of the inaccuracy in the scheme is a valuable contribution to the process of reform. In particular the report highlights the damaging effect the excessive complexity of the current maintenance formula.

The report shows that, of the assessments examined in 1998–99, fewer than one in five were definitely wrong in cash terms. In a further 22 per cent. there was insufficient evidence to tell whether the assessment was right or not. Overall, 60 per cent. were definitely correct in money terms, a slight rise from the 59 per cent. achieved in the previous year.

We expect to see continuing progress both as the result of continued efforts by Child Support Agency staff and as the provisions in the Social Security Act 1998 are implemented. It is clear that radical reform is the only real solution and the White Paper "A new contract for Welfare: Children's Rights and Parents' Responsibilities" sets out our proposals for a simple straightforward and transparent child support scheme.

Parental Leave

Mr. Miller: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what help will be available from the benefits system for people exercising the right to parental leave. [96730]

Mr. Bayley: New rights to unpaid parental leave will be introduced from 15 December 1999. Under existing benefit rules a lone parent who is working will be able to qualify for Income Support while taking parental leave from their employer provided that they meet the normal qualifying conditions. This will also be the case for parents who are able to qualify for Income Support on sickness or other grounds. Some parents may be able to qualify for other benefits such as Housing Benefit or Jobseekers Allowance if they can meet the normal conditions. Precise numbers of people who claim in these circumstances will depend upon how many people decide to exercise their right to take up parental leave. We estimate there could be around 8,000 people per year who will claim under existing benefit rules, at an additional cost of some £10 million.

We also propose to change Income Support rules to make Income Support available for couples who would not otherwise qualify while on parental leave. The change will apply to couples on a low income who are exercising the new rights to statutory unpaid parental leave to care for a child who lives with them. Income Support will be available when the only earner is taking unpaid parental leave and the family is in receipt of either Working Families Tax Credit, Disabled Persons Tax Credit, Housing Benefit or Council Tax Benefit on the day before the parental leave is taken. (Where both members of the couple work, Income Support will be available if both take statutory unpaid parental leave at the same time). Our latest estimate is that about 1,000 people per year will claim Income Support under these new provisions, at a cost of £1.5 million.

We are committed to helping families achieve a balance between their home and work lives. This measure will support the new parental leave entitlements in the Employment Rights Act and help low income families take up their statutory entitlement.

Child Support Agency

Mr. Brady: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security, pursuant to his oral answer on 25 October 1999, *Official Report*, column *698*, how many parents with care his Department anticipates will have their entitlement to maintenance reduced under the proposed changes to the CSA; and by what amount. [96057]

Angela Eagle: The purpose of the reforms is to get maintenance flowing more regularly to more children. Overall more than 1 million children will be better off as the changes take effect.

If all existing cases moved to the new scheme today, average maintenance liability for non-resident parents in work would fall from around £38 now to an estimated £30.50. On this basis about 350,000 parents with care, whose non-resident parent is in paid work, would have a lower maintenance assessment as a result of the new child support rates. The average reduction would be about £17 a week. 190,000 parents with care would have a higher assessment, with average increases of around £11.50 a week[1]. Changes will be phased in for existing cases.

But assessments bear little relationship to amounts paid. Fewer than half of those using the CSA's collection service are paying everything that is due. Overall only around 66 per cent. of maintenance due is collected. We expect this to rise to 80 per cent. or more.

In addition all parents with care who are on Income Support, for whom maintenance is being paid, will benefit from the child maintenance premium. Over time, we expect the number in this position at least to double as a result of the new simpler scheme. Parents with care receiving Working Families Tax Credit will have any maintenance payments fully ignored.

Taking these factors into account the effect of the reform will be to make around 85 per cent. of parents with care better off at the point they first come to the CSA than they would have been under the previous arrangements.

[1]New scheme maintenance modelled on August 1998 five per cent. scan of Child Support Computer System. Caseloads calibrated to forecast 'A' day levels, and rounded to the nearest 10,000. The average change in maintenance entitlement is rounded to the nearest 50 pence.

WALES

Comprehensive Spending Review

Mr. Ron Davies: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what additions were made to the Welsh Block in respect of 1999–2000 after the announcement of the last CSR settlement; and to which expenditure heads within the Welsh Block such additions were allocated. [94790]

Mr. Paul Murphy: I refer my right hon. Friend to the answer given by my predecessor on 14 December 1998, *Official Report*, column *391*.

Match Funding

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what requests he has received in relation to match funding for EU Structural Funds from the First Secretary. [96554]

Mr. Paul Murphy: I hold regular meetings with the First Secretary of the National Assembly for Wales. We have discussed a range of issues, including Structural Funds support in Wales, and I am aware of the importance of the issue.

SOLICITOR-GENERAL

Equal Opportunities

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Solicitor-General if he *(a)* has established and *(b)* published a baseline for policy appraisal against which to measure progress on equal treatment. [94863]

The Solicitor-General: The Government are committed to ensuring its policies are fair and inclusive, and focus on public service users, not providers. This aim is contained in guidance (published in 1998) which helps Departments consider the impact of their policies on gender, ethnicity and disability. In addition to considering impact, the guidance encourages consultation with women's groups and others where appropriate and action

to deal with any differential impact if this appears appropriate. The CPS applies the principles enshrined in the guidance in developing its policies. For example responsibility for providing a co-ordinated service to witnesses is shared by all agencies in the Criminal Justice System.

The Crown Prosecution Service works together with others in the Criminal Justice System to implement the Trial Issues Group National Standards of Witness Care in the Criminal Justice System via Local Service Level Agreements to ensure the special needs of witnesses are catered for.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Leave to Remain

Mr. Allan: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what is the current average processing time for applications for indefinite leave to remain by people seeking settlement in the United Kingdom. [95549]

Mrs. Roche: The information requested is not available.

The time taken to process an application for indefinite leave to remain in the United Kingdom is affected by a number of factors, including the complexity of individual cases. About half the applications for variation of leave, which includes applications for indefinite leave to remain, can be dealt with as "fast track" cases. Such cases are at present being determined within six weeks, but applications where further inquiries are needed may take considerably longer. Streamlined procedures are, however, being introduced throughout the Integrated Casework Directorate to speed up the consideration of all applications.

Asylum Applications

Mr. Coleman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) how many asylum applications made prior to 1 January are outstanding from citizens of *(a)* Somalia, *(b)* Afghanistan, *(c)* Iraq and *(d)* Kosovo; and if he will make a statement; [95688]

(2) how many asylum applications were processed in the months of (i) July, (ii) August and (iii) September from citizens of *(a)* Somalia, *(b)* Afghanistan, *(c)* Iraq and *(d)* Kosovo; and how many were (1) agreed and (2) refused. [95689]

Mrs. Roche: The available information for July to September is given in the table and relates to the general breakdown of decisions that have been taken. A breakdown of asylum decisions and the number of cases awaiting an initial decision by nationality is not currently available.

Decisions[1] on applications received for asylum in the United Kingdom, excluding dependants, July to September, 1999

Number of principal applicants

	July	*August*	*September*	*Total*
Decisions	2,940	3,075	2,680	8,695
Recognised as a refugee and granted asylum	610	245	245	1,100
Not recognised as a refugee but granted exceptional leave to remain	105	200	205	510
Total refusals	865	990	915	2,770
Backlog clearance exercise[2]				
Granted under the backlog criteria	1,275	1,380	910	3,565
Refused under the backlog criteria	85	265	405	750

[1] Provisional figures rounded to the nearest 5
[2] Cases decided under pragmatic measures aimed at reducing the pre 1996 asylum backlog

Mr. Coleman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list *(a)* the total number of outstanding asylum applications and *(b)* the targets of his Department for clearing the current backlog. [95686]

Mrs. Roche: The number of asylum applications outstanding at the end of September was 90,685. We are committed to meeting the targets set out in the White Paper "Fairer, Faster and Firmer—A Modern Approach to Immigration and Asylum" of deciding asylum applications within an average of two months, by April 2001. To do this we must eliminate the backlog. We are developing new procedures to speed up the consideration of both new cases and those in the current backlog. We are also recruiting around 250 new staff to deal purely with asylum applications, and training more of our existing staff in asylum skills.

Mr. Malins: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what estimate he has made of the backlog of asylum claims which will be awaiting initial decision at 31 December. [95443]

Mrs. Roche: The current figure for the backlog of asylum claims which were awaiting an initial decision at 30 September 1999 was 90,685. The backlog at 31 December will depend on a number of factors including the levels of new asylum applications and asylum initial decisions over the next three months.

Mr. Malins: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many asylum applications were awaiting initial determination at the end of each of the last five years for which figures are available. [95442]

Mrs. Roche: The available information covering the period 1994 to 1998 is given in the table.

Asylum Applications[1] awaiting initial determination, excluding dependants

Year	*Number*
1994	55,255
1995	69,650
1996	57,405
1997	51,795
1998	64,770

[1] Figures rounded to the nearest five

Persons [1] removed or departed voluntarily under port or enforcement procedures, 1996 to 1998

	1996	1997	1998
Total number of persons removed or departed voluntarily from the United Kingdom	26,840	31,150	34,900
Of whom asylum[2,3] applicants	4,840	7,160	6,890
Total number of persons removed or made a voluntary departure as a result of deportation action being taken against them	2,000	2,070	1,710
Of whom asylum[2,3] applicants	400	450	350

[1] Does not include persons who may leave the United Kingdom without informing the Immigration and Nationality Directorate
[2] Asylum removals and voluntary departures excludes dependants
[3] 1998 figures are provisional
Note:
All figures are rounded to 10

Mr. Malins: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will estimate the number of persons whose asylum applications are awaiting initial determination with whom the authorities have lost contact. [95441]

Mrs. Roche: Figures are not collected centrally on this basis.

Mr. Malins: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many applications for asylum have been made in each of the last 12 months for which figures are available. [95440]

Mrs. Roche: The available information covering the period October 1998 to September 1999 is given in the table. Information on the number of asylum applications received in 1999 can be found on the Home Office internet site at http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/index.htm.

Asylum applications [1] received in the United Kingdom, excluding dependants

	Number
1998	
October	5,010
November	4,620
December	4,770
1999	
January	4,700
February	4,185
March	5,060
April	4,905
May	5,370
June	6,130
July	6,440
August	7,120
September	7,355

[1] Figures rounded to the nearest 5

Immigration and Asylum Appeals

Mr. Malins: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) what steps he proposes to take to re-establish contact with *(a)* failed appellants under immigration law and *(b)* asylum seekers who are awaiting an initial determination; [95445]

(2) what mechanisms exist whereby *(a)* his Department and *(b)* other authorities maintain contact with (i) failed appellants under immigration law and (ii) asylum seekers who are waiting an initial determination. [95478]

Mrs. Roche: The onus is on applicants and their representatives to keep the Home Office informed of their whereabouts. In general, asylum seekers bring themselves to the notice of the Home Office and it is in their interest to maintain contact so as to be aware of the outcome of their applications. Asylum seekers will usually be issued with a Standard Acknowledgement Letter (SAL) which demonstrates their immigration status for the purpose of claiming benefits. If an asylum applicant is claiming benefits, the Benefits Agency would be able to provide information about their whereabouts. Immigration offenders who seek asylum will often be required to report to the police or the Immigration Service.

Exceptional Leave to Remain

Mr. Malins: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department in how many cases he granted exceptional leave to remain within the past 12 months for which figures are available. [95447]

Mrs. Roche: Data for the period from September 1998 to August 1999 are given in the table.

Grants of exceptional leave to remain in the United Kingdom [1]

	Number
Asylum applicants	
Refused asylum but granted exceptional leave to remain	2,570
Granted exceptional leave to remain[2] under backlog criteria	7,030
Non-asylum applicants	
Granted exceptional leave to remain in view of the internal situation in country of origin	1,670
Other grants of exceptional leave to remain	570

[1] Excluding dependants
[2] Includes persons granted exceptional indefinite leave to remain or exceptional limited leave to remain under measures aimed at reducing the pre-1996 backlog, as announced in the White Paper 'Fairer, Faster and Firmer—A Modern Approach to Immigration and Asylum' published in July 1998

Overseas Electors

Mr. Fearn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list, by parliamentary constituency, the number of overseas electors included in the 1998–99 electoral register, together with totals for each constituent part of the United Kingdom. [95437]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The number of overseas electors included in the 1998 register was 17,315 and in the 1999 register 13,677. A table showing a breakdown by parliamentary constituencies and constituent parts of the United Kingdom has been placed in the Library.

Police Numbers

Mr. Dobbin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to allocate the £35 million for extra police officers to each police authority. [95753]

Mr. Straw: The money will be allocated through the Crime Fighting Fund. Forces in England and Wales will be invited to bid for the money. Bidding guidance is being prepared and will go out shortly.

Deportations

Mr. Malins: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what steps he proposes to take to deport from the United Kingdom those whose *(a)* immigration appeals and *(b)* asylum applications have failed. [95446]

Mrs. Roche: The Government have made clear their commitment to remove from the United Kingdom those persons who have no lawful basis of stay; this includes people whose immigration appeals have failed and who do not otherwise qualify to remain.

In order to effect a person's removal or deportation, it is often necessary to overcome a number of barriers such as a lack of documentation, further representations, absconding or the refusal of the person's home country to accept them back. The Immigration Service has instituted a range of measures aimed at addressing these difficulties and streamlining the process as a whole. Among the steps already taken are the establishment of a specialist documentation unit to liaise with issuing authorities, the tasking of a dedicated absconder tracing team and bilateral discussions with source countries.

In addition, the Immigration and Asylum Bill currently before Parliament contains a range of measures to tackle delays in the removal of failed asylum seekers and others whose appeals have been dismissed. These include provisions to create a new combined appeal process that will limit the scope for failed applicants to make successive appeals aimed solely at frustrating removal, a simplified administrative procedure to replace deportation in routine cases and procedures to restrict the activities of bogus representatives. Immigration officers involved in enforcement activity are also to be given enhanced powers to assist them in tracing absconders and others liable to removal and a new offence of using deception to avoid, postpone or revoke enforcement action will be created.

Mr. Malins: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department in each of the last three years, how many deportation orders have been *(a)* made and *(b)* carried out. [95449]

Mrs. Roche: The information requested is given in the table. It should be noted that some deportation orders cannot be enforced immediately, either for legal reasons or because of other barriers to removal such as absconding. There are also cases where a deportation order has been signed, but it is later decided that deportation is no longer appropriate.

Deportation action 1996 to 1998 [1]

	Deportation orders signed	*Deportation orders enforced* [2]
1996	1,890	900
1997	1,210	820
1998	1,000	700

[1] 1998 figures are provisional

[2] A deportation order enforced in one year may have been signed in an earlier year

Note:

All figures are rounded to the nearest ten

Immigration and Nationality Directorate

Mr. Malins: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to improve the efficiency of the Immigration and Nationality Directorate Headquarters in Croydon. [95681]

Mrs. Roche: In March, my hon. Friend, the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Office (Mr. O'Brien), established a recovery project to identify and implement measures to bring the output of the Integrated Casework Directorate (ICD) back to acceptable levels. We are now seeing the effect of these measures. Since mid-September, overall weekly output has exceeded the average weekly level prior to reorganisation. ICD is taking forward a range of initiatives to improve productivity further so it can meet the targets set out in the Government's White Paper and to reduce the backlogs. Around 340 staff have already been recruited for Croydon and there are plans to recruit a further 200. A detailed business plan is being developed to enable the Directorate to deploy its resources to maximum effect.

Mr. Malins: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what is the average time taken by *(a)* the Immigration and Nationality Directorate and *(b)* himself to respond to hon. Members' letters on immigration matters. [95448]

Mrs. Roche: I refer the hon. Member to the reply I gave to the hon. Member for Aylesbury (Mr. Lidington), on 25 October 1999, *Official Report,* column 687.

Jill Dando

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department on how many occasions he has discussed the Jill Dando murder inquiry with the Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis; and if he will make a statement. [96269]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Ministers have no involvement in the conduct of this inquiry; it is an operational matter for the Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police.

State Visits (Policing)

Mr. Wilkinson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) what guidelines are issued to the Metropolitan Police on the screening of protestors from the sight of invited members of Governments during state visits to the UK; [96045]

(2) what guidelines are issued to the Metropolitan Police on the removal of placards and flags from peaceful demonstrators during state visits to the UK. [96046]

Mr. Charles Clarke: None.

Mr. Wilkinson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will require the Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis to report to his Department the number of occasions and the circumstances in which police vehicles have been used to screen peaceful demonstrators from the sight of state visitors to the UK during his term of office as Commissioner. [96047]

Mr. Charles Clarke: I am advised by the Metropolitan Police that the deployment of vehicles in front of demonstrators is a tactic which would only be used when the proximity of demonstrators to Her Majesty the Queen or other protected persons, or the behaviour of demonstrators, was such that it was felt necessary to employ the tactic to ensure the security of the protected persons.

As far as can be ascertained, the only occasion during Sir Paul Condon's term of office on which it was felt necessary to employ this tactic during a State Visit was during the recent visit by the President of China. On one occasion, demonstrators had taken up a position without prior arrangement with police; on a second, missiles were thrown; and on a third, demonstrators broke through crowd control barriers.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what representations his Department has made to Cambridgeshire Constabulary about the policing of the state visit of the President of China. [96233]

Mr. Robathan: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what instructions he gave to the Metropolitan Police regarding the prohibition of peaceful protests during the state visit of the President of China. [96042]

Mr. Charles Clarke: None.

Plastic Baton Rounds

Mr. Barnes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what research, and at what cost, is currently being carried out into less potentially lethal alternatives to the plastic baton round. [95894]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Home Office's Police Scientific Development Branch keeps a watching brief on "less-than-lethal" weapons which may be in use or under development in other parts of the world and keeps the police service informed of what it learns, but neither the Branch nor the police service have identified any alternatives to plastic baton rounds (other than CS, which remains available) which appear to merit extensive evaluation. A new design of plastic baton round which offers increased accuracy of aim is currently being developed under the auspices of the Ministry of Defence, the Home Office, and the Northern Ireland Office.

Mandatory Drug Tests

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what evidence he has assessed of the effects of mandatory drug tests in reducing crime rates. [95816]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The options for introducing drug testing at various points in the criminal justice system are currently being assessed. This will include consideration of the evidence base for the contribution the testing can make to reducing drug related crime.

Passport Agency

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to revise the level of fees charged by the Passport Agency. [96055]

Mrs. Roche: No decision has been taken on any passport fee increase. Fees are currently being reviewed, and various options are under consideration.

Illegal Entrants

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many clandestine entrants were detected at each port of entry into the United Kingdom in each month since 30 April 1997. [96051]

Mrs. Roche: The available information on the number of clandestine entrants detected each month from May 1997 to September 1999 is given in the table. The recording arrangements were changed at the start of 1999 and the two sets of figures may not be directly comparable. I regret that details of numbers of attempted entrants who are detected at port are not recorded separately.

Number of clandestine entrants detected each month, May 1997 to September 1999

	1997	*1998* [1]	*1999* [1]
January	—	560	700
February	—	460	750
March	—	620	750
April	—	600	750
May	320	640	930
June	260	720	1,090
July	280	870	1,440
August	290	1,010	1,960
September	410	950	2,150
October	360	1,110	—
November	470	980	—
December	450	810	—

[1] Figures are provisional

Note:
All figures are rounded to the nearest ten

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will state in respect of each month since 30 April 1997 the number of illegal entrants detected at United Kingdom ports who have been *(a)* granted temporary admission to the United Kingdom, *(b)* detained and *(c)* removed from the United Kingdom; and if he will make a statement. [96052]

Mrs. Roche: Information on the number of illegal entrants detected at United Kingdom ports where temporary admission has been granted or where they have been detained or removed is not stored centrally. However, the total number of persons removed or who

made a voluntary departure as an illegal entrant from the United Kingdom by month, from May 1997 to September 1999, is shown in the table.

Total number of persons removed or who made a voluntary departure as an illegal entrant from the United Kingdom by month, from May 1997 to September 1999

	1997	1998 [1]	1999 [1]
January	—	420	400
February	—	370	470
March	—	470	440
April	—	440	340
May	340	330	350
June	340	410	400
July	400	480	380
August	400	590	420
September	400	490	480
October	430	490	—
November	370	560	—
December	360	540	—

[1] Figures are provisional

Note:
All figures are rounded to the nearest 10

Unmarried Partners Concession

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many people have been granted leave *(a)* to enter and *(b)* to remain in the United Kingdom under the provisions of the unmarried partners concession. [96048]

Mrs. Roche: Data for the period October 1997 to June 1999 are given in the table.

Grants of leave to enter or remain to unmarried partners

	Number
Granted leave to enter	140
Granted after-entry leave to remain [1]	330
Granted indefinite leave to remain [2]	150

[1] Excluding persons granted leave to enter in that category
[2] Including persons previously granted leave to enter or remain under the common-law spouse concession

Asylum Absconders

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many asylum absconders are currently recorded on the Immigration and Nationality Directorate's port and enforcement databases. [96050]

Mrs. Roche: The latest available information dates from the end of 1998. At that time, there were approximately 20,000 asylum absconders recorded on the Immigration and Nationality Directorate (IND) enforcement and port databases comprising around 12,000 in-country enforcement and 8,000 port absconders. This information was taken from a snapshot of the IND port and enforcement databases of those persons (excluding dependants) who have applied for asylum at some stage and who have breached conditions of temporary admission, temporary release or restriction order, or are otherwise found to be out of contact with IND.

Immigration (Carriers' Liability) Act 1987

Dr. Palmer: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what decision he has made on changes in the administration of the Immigration (Carriers' Liability) Act 1987 in order to offer further incentives to carriers. [96829]

Mrs. Roche: I have agreed a proposed extension to the concessions contained in the Approved Gate Check (AGC) scheme. AGC status is an administrative concession which benefits carriers who are responsible towards their obligations under the Immigration (Carriers' Liability) Act 1987 and who operate a sufficiently high standard of checking procedures abroad for their services to the United Kingdom. Where a passenger arrives in the United Kingdom without documents from a station that has been granted AGC status, the carrier will normally be given the benefit of the doubt. In such a case, because of the high standard of checking, it is assumed that apparently genuine documents must have been produced at the time of embarkation and must have been subsequently disposed of. Charges are normally waived accordingly. I have agreed that the concession will now be extended to include certain circumstances where passengers arrive with mutilated documents. Provided that the inadequately documented passenger/arrival with a mutilated document:

arrives from an AGC station; and

there is no evidence of:

(i) a reasonably apparent and material falsity;

(ii) a reasonably apparent impersonation; and/or

(iii) use of a fantasy or other unacceptable travel document;

then the charge will normally be waived unless, in the case of a visa national, it is clear from the mutilated document that (because, for example, every visa page is intact) the passenger, at the point of check-in, did not hold a requisite United Kingdom visa, or exemption from the visa requirement. Mutilated documents include documents which have been partly destroyed usually by the removal of pages and/or photographs.

HEALTH

Intensive Care

Mr. Blizzard: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to use resources from the modernisation fund to improve intensive care units. [95693]

Ms Stuart: Within the additional £18 billion made available for the National Health Service in England over the remainder of this Parliament, health authorities and NHS trusts are finalising plans for more adult intensive care and high-dependency beds for this year than last, particularly over the crucial winter period. In addition, a further £15 million has been specifically targeted at improving paediatric intensive care in 1999–2000 (including £5 million from the modernisation fund).

Accident and Emergency

Mr. Blizzard: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what proposals he has to cope with future increases in the numbers of people requiring accident and emergency treatment. [95692]

Ms Stuart: Our plans to improve access to National Health Service services are well under way. Earlier this year the Government announced a £115 million

programme to modernise, expand and update accident and emergency departments. This significant sum will ensure that all accident and emergency departments in England which need it are being upgraded: in all, over three-quarters of accident and emergency departments in England are benefiting from the programme.

Other initiatives which will be beneficial in coping with any future increases include NHS Direct, which enables patients to obtain advice by telephone without delay. By the end of next year, there will be complete coverage of NHS Direct in England.

NHS walk-in centres, currently being introduced, are part of our wider plan to modernise and to improve access to and convenience of NHS services. 36 centres across the country will open in 1999–2000, providing quick access to a range of NHS services, including free consultation and treatment of minor injuries, to some 10 million people.

Small Injury Units

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what criteria have been employed in the two rounds of additional funding allocations to small injury units in NHS hospitals; and what number and proportion of applicant hospitals have so far won bids. [95709]

Ms Stuart: The two rounds of additional funding were £30 million and £85 million to modernise, expand and upgrade hospital accident and emergency departments. 242 schemes have been approved for 182 hospitals. Over three-quarters of accident and emergency departments are benefiting from the programme.

The primary criterion against which schemes were assessed was whether the scheme met our commitment to upgrade and modernise accident and emergency departments. Schemes cover a wide range of improvements, for example creating dedicated areas for children, enlarging resuscitation areas, and improving security for patients and staff.

Work on most of the schemes is now under way, and the majority of schemes are scheduled for completion by next summer.

Community Health Councils

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the level of funding for community health councils in each of the past three years and the real terms increase between each year and the proposed real terms increase for 2000–01 broken down by *(a)* NHS region, *(b)* health authority and *(c)* CHC. [95806]

Ms Stuart *[holding answer 26 October 1999]:* Information for individual community health councils is given in the table. National Health Service regional boundaries changed on 1 January 1999. Also, community health councils are not always co-terminous with health authorities. It is not therefore possible to provide this information by NHS region or by health authority. Decisions on funding for 2000–01 have not been made yet.

Community Health Councils	*1997–98*	*1998–99*	*Real terms change (%)*	*1999–2000*	*Real terms change (%)*
Airedale	76,304	83,185	+6.5	88,260	+3.6
Aylesbury Vale	'—	'—	'—	85,150	'—
Barking, Dagenham and Havering	'—	'—	'—	114,174	'—
Barnet	'—	'—	'—	112,279	'—
Barnsley	103,474	113,634	+7.3	116,851	+0.3
Basildon	'—	'—	'—	132,404	'—
Basingstoke and N. Hampshire	85,506	82,139	−6.5	86,746	+3.1
Bassetlaw	79,091	83,469	+3.0	90,158	+5.5
Bath	92,482	99,403	+5.0	99,800	−2.1
Bexley	89,857	103,235	+12.3	103,529	−2.2
Blackburn	81,586	82,121	−1.9	80,364	−4.6
Blackpool	79,653	79,083	−3.3	86,072	+6.3
Bolton	82,987	88,033	+3.5	87,989	−2.6
Bradford	114,293	119,504	+2.1	122,772	+0.2
Brent	'—	'—	'—	121,981	'—
Brighton, Lewes and Hove	112,212	115,308	+0.2	111,361	−5.9
Bristol and West	231,437	227,229	−4.4	233,000	0
Bromley	138,253	140,239	−1.1	142,371	−0.8
Bromsgrove and Redditch	85,663	88,071	+0.3	90,163	−0.1
Burnley	74,006	73,349	−3.4	71,306	−5.3
Bury	83,056	79,524	−6.8	75,977	−7.0
Calderdale	87,967	97,314	+8.1	101,525	+1.8
Cambridge	127,404	130,798	+0.1	132,639	−1.1
Camden	'—	'—	'—	137,434	'—
Canterbury and Thanet	117,884	131,576	+9.1	122,500	−9.4
Central Cheshire	73,204	76,194	+1.5	73,038	−6.6
Central Lincolnshire	102,431	105,335	+0.3	108,437	+0.4
Central Nottinghamshire	92,209	93,567	−1.1	114,988	+20.4
Chester	85,638	91,074	+3.8	88,406	−5.4
Chichester	109,804	115,733	+2.9	111,961	−5.8
Chorley	79,031	82,122	+1.4	80,477	−4.5
City and Hackney	'—	'—	'—	106,294	'—
Cornwall	125,136	127,060	−1.0	130,794	+0.4
Coventry	87,813	94,377	+4.9	98,136	+1.5

Community Health Councils	1997–98	1998–99	Real terms change (%)	1999–2000	Real terms change (%)
Croydon	117,733	121,037	+0.3	129,408	+4.4
Darlington and Teeside	82,840	91,440	+7.8	92,695	−1.1
Dartford, Gravesham and Swanley	94,654	104,662	+8.0	103,419	−3.7
Dewsbury	88,507	90,515	−0.3	89,627	−3.5
Doncaster	102,969	107,946	+2.3	110,819	+0.2
Dudley	87,676	86,858	−3.4	99,889	+12.5
East Berkshire	'—	'—	'—	116,958	'—
East Birmingham	87,024	91,263	+2.3	98,970	+5.9
East Cumbria	97,775	100,089	−0.2	101,093	−1.5
East Dorset	90,209	102,817	+11.4	119,895	+14.1
East Hertfordshire	'—	'—	'—	129,851	'—
East Suffolk	78,968	81,072	+0.1	82,501	−0.7
East Surrey	99,260	108,647	+6.9	115,791	+4.1
East Yorkshire	96,429	103,089	+4.4	105,324	−0.3
Ealing	'—	'—	'—	95,059	'—
Enfield	'—	'—	'—	114,424	'—
Eastbourne	96,943	96,778	−2.7	125,292	+27.0
Exeter and District	114,840	115,922	−1.6	108,468	−8.9
Gateshead	73,062	88,976	+19.2	92,906	+1.9
Gloucestershire	131,795	137,127	+1.5	139,674	−0.6
Great Yarmouth and Waveney	93,561	96,053	+0.1	97,615	−0.9
Greenwich	106,736	115,235	+5.4	112,758	−4.6
Halton	79,031	83,772	+3.5	82,501	−4.0
Hammersmith and Fulham	'—	'—	'—	125,649	'—
Haringey	'—	'—	'—	84,377	'—
Harrogate	90,385	95,528	+3.2	105,569	+8.0
Harrow	'—	'—	'—	120,009	'—
Hartlepool	79,291	84,084	+3.5	87,594	+1.7
Hastings and Rother	100,692	114,493	+11.2	105,384	+10.5
Hereford	93,252	99,379	+4.0	109,524	+7.7
Hillingdon	'—	'—	'—	132,389	'—
Hounslow	'—	'—	'—	107,777	'—
Huddersfield	78,555	85,316	+6.1	89,167	+2.0
Hull	80,553	88,813	+7.7	91,443	+0.5
Huntingdon	80,248	82,386	+0.1	83,793	−0.8
Isle of Wight	71,396	75,277	+2.9	76,212	+1.3
Isles of Scilly	24,083	27,363	+11.1	33,844	+21.2
Islington	'—	'—	'—	108,609	'—
Kensington, Chelsea and Westminster	'—	'—	'—	153,778	'—
Kidderminster	86,126	90,945	+3.1	94,543	+1.5
Kingston and Esher	107,338	112,072	+1.9	114,174	−0.6
Lambeth	139,298	128,752	−10.1	129,045	−2.3
Lancaster	76,159	80,395	+3.0	77,589	−6.0
Leeds	150,054	153,095	−0.5	163,346	+4.2
Leicester	140,125	147,728	+2.9	149,996	−1.0
Lewisham	136,202	142,650	+2.2	140,626	−3.9
Liverpool Central	99,775	91,888	−10.4	86,277	−8.6
Liverpool Eastern	80,081	100,219	+22.6	98,402	−4.3
Macclesfield	78,258	81,276	+1.3	79,881	−4.2
Maidstone	94,540	105,730	+9.3	128,475	+19.0
Manchester Central	88,046	91,838	+1.8	92,229	−2.1
Manchester North	88,047	92,079	+2.0	91,898	−2.7
Manchester South	88,047	95,832	+6.3	96,077	−2.2
Medway	138,469	132,502	−6.8	133,003	−2.1
Merton and Sutton	120,249	126,182	+2.4	117,865	−9.1
Mid Downs	110,916	123,406	+8.7	117,302	−7.4
Mid Essex	'—	'—	'—	121,098	'—
Mid Staffordshire	86,809	90,112	+1.3	96,496	+4.6
Mid Surrey	109,949	117,096	+4.0	110,641	−8.0
Milton Keynes	'—	'—	'—	83,817	'—
Newcastle	83,076	92,883	+9.3	109,397	+15.3
Newham	'—	'—	'—	121,273	'—
North Bedfordshire	114,662	117,717	+0.1	119,420	−1.1
North Birmingham	93,611	99,194	+3.4	100,965	−0.7
North Derbyshire	101,780	104,236	−0.1	102,715	−4.0
North Devon	71,526	76,285	+4.1	83,513	+7.0
North Durham	91,967	96,075	+1.9	99,867	1.4
North East Essex	'—	'—	'—	101,258	'—
North East Lincolnshire	101,158	102,854	−0.9	104,079	−1.3
North East Warwickshire	111,273	114,679	+0.5	117,894	+0.3

Community Health Councils	1997–98	1998–99	Real terms change (%)	1999–2000	Real terms change (%)
North Hertfordshire	'—	'—	'—	120,147	'—
North Northamptonshire	'—	'—	'—	84,702	'—
North Staffordshire	103,573	106,720	+0.5	109,456	+0.1
North Tees	77,069	98,990	+25.9	103,334	+1.9
North Tyneside	76,700	89,676	+14.4	92,022	+0.1
North West Hertfordshire	'—	'—	'—	111,666	'—
North West Lincolnshire	90,712	92,341	−0.7	100,843	+6.7
North West Surrey	156,280	148,315	−7.6	146,421	−3.8
Northallerton	75,465	75,511	−2.5	91,773	+19.0
Norwich	113,920	116,955	+0.1	118,605	−1.1
Nottingham	120,365	127,406	+3.3	130,827	+0.2
Northumberland	100,385	104,792	+1.9	108,869	+1.4
Oldham	84,506	93,402	+8.0	89,338	−6.9
Oxford	'—	'—	'—	152,022	'—
Plymouth and District	95,739	97,536	−0.7	108,156	+8.4
Pontefract	105,694	113,086	+4.5	114,404	−1.3
Portsmouth and SE Hampshire	95,700	109,485	+11.9	110,485	−1.6
Preston	83,531	86,955	+1.6	82,709	−7.4
Redbridge	'—	'—	'—	81,740	'—
Richmond and Twickenham	100,312	104,924	+2.1	105,258	−2.2
Rochdale	79,840	86,863	+6.3	88,082	−1.1
Rotherham	88,334	97,815	+8.2	100,289	0
Salford	75,631	73,279	−5.7	73,370	−2.4
Salisbury	95,263	99,058	+1.4	105,002	+3.5
Sandwell	95,162	98,110	+0.6	104,527	+4.0
Scarborough	77,474	76,524	−3.8	88,456	+13.1
Sheffield	142,590	148,855	+1.9	156,339	+2.5
Shropshire	110,831	119,323	+5.1	123,479	+1.0
Solihull	98,414	95,408	−5.6	105,460	+8.0
Somerset	125,318	128,419	−0.1	133,451	+1.4
South Bedfordshire	107,225	110,081	+0.1	111,880	−0.9
South Birmingham	127,999	138,767	+5.9	137,352	−3.5
South Bucks	'—	'—	'—	91,470	'—
South Cumbria	70,430	73,215	+1.4	80,694	+7.7
South Derbyshire	116,195	118,282	−0.7	118,853	−2.0
South Durham and Weardale	87,144	95,451	+7.0	99,966	+2.2
South East Kent	127,598	142,769	+9.3	133,968	−8.7
South East Staffordshire	90,822	90,931	−2.4	92,169	−1.1
South Lincolnshire	110,957	113,658	−0.1	108,014	−7.5
South Northamptonshire	'—	'—	'—	100,575	'—
South Sefton	86,081	86,752	−1.8	84,965	−4.6
South Tees	97,061	105,271	+5.9	109,431	+1.5
South Tyneside	67,528	93,279	+35.6	95,879	+0.3
South Warwickshire	87,250	88,392	−1.2	92,663	+2.3
South West Hertfordshire	'—	'—	'—	130,556	'—
South West Surrey	113,510	117,384	+0.9	116,764	−3.0
Southampton and SW Hampshire	102,042	109,369	+4.6	125,677	+12.4
Southend	'—	'—	'—	119,459	'—
Southport	87,031	92,223	+3.4	92,220	−2.5
Southwark	115,709	123,282	+4.0	116,625	−7.9
St. Helens and Knowsley	79,415	81,640	+0.3	80,920	−3.4
Stockport	89,081	96,093	+5.3	94,156	−4.5
Sunderland	85,838	92,159	+4.8	95,730	+1.4
Swindon and District	98,298	102,873	+2.1	106,549	+1.1
Tameside and Glossop	87,179	88,052	−1.5	89,131	−1.3
Torbay and District	80,668	86,177	+4.3	89,203	+1.0
Tower Hamlets	'—	'—	'—	102,041	'—
Trafford	66,956	84,040	+23.0	81,664	−5.3
Tunbridge Wells	116,134	126,761	+6.6	124,923	−3.9
Wakefield	100,522	117,133	+14.0	120,214	+0.1
Walsall	92,033	94,122	−0.3	105,373	+9.5
Waltham Forest	'—	'—	'—	96,510	'—
Wandsworth	137,390	147,724	+5.0	149,454	−1.3
Warrington	79,081	81,554	+0.6	80,396	−3.9
West Anglia	185,073	190,003	+0.1	192,671	−1.1
West Berkshire	'—	'—	'—	103,349	'—
West Birmingham	98,857	95,167	−3.7	97,244	−0.3
West Dorset	84,878	86,136	−1.1	90,046	+2.0
West Essex	'—	'—	'—	129,672	'—
West Lancashire	78,740	81,608	+1.1	80,213	−4.2

Community Health Councils	1997–98	1998–99	Real terms change (%)	1999–2000	Real terms change (%)
West Suffolk	81,409	83,578	+0.1	84,939	−0.9
West Surrey and NE Hampshire	117,646	113,889	−5.7	113,564	−2.8
West Cumbria	81,979	80,080	−4.9	84,280	+2.7
Wigan and Leigh	86,081	89,639	+1.6	87,401	−5.0
Winchester	80,513	83,029	+0.6	86,750	+2.0
Wirral	83,612	84,303	−1.7	78,150	−9.8
Wolverhampton	81,073	82,393	−0.9	87,465	+3.7
Worcester	96,321	96,700	−2.1	99,420	+0.3
Worthing	120,341	121,823	−1.3	123,145	−1.4
York	105,198	98,776	−8.6	110,686	+9.6

[1] Information not readily available

Note:

For consistency the figures shown are Community Health Councils allocations at the start of each year. Allocations may change during the year and the final allocations for 1999–2000 are not yet known.

Inflation factors used to calculate real terms change are 2.54 per cent. for 1998–99 and 2.5 per cent. for 1999–2000.

Generic Medicinal Drugs

Mrs. Ellman: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he expects to reply the question tabled for answer on 12 July 1999 by the hon. Member for Liverpool, Riverside regarding the introduction of price controls for NHS purchases of generic medicinal drugs (ref. 91509). [96120]

Mr. Denham: I shall write to my hon. Friend about her previous question as soon as possible.

Autism

Mr. Oaten: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what records his Department collates on autism; and how many new cases of people diagnosed as autistic have been notified for each of the last five years. [96109]

Mr. Hutton: The information requested is not available. It is for the local statutory agencies to determine the needs of people with autism in their area and work together effectively to ensure that these needs are met.

Podiatric Services

Angela Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what research his Department has *(a)* commissioned and *(b)* evaluated regarding (i) the cost effectiveness, (ii) the popularity among patients and (iii) the health benefits of dedicated podiatric surgical services units. [96207]

Mr. Hutton: The King's Fund undertook a study of the cost-effectiveness of podiatric surgery services in response to podiatric surgery being identified as one of nine research priorities in "Feet First", which was funded by the National Health Service. The King's Fund report set out to answer the question, Do specialists in podiatry surgery represent a clinically and cost-effective way of providing for foot surgery? The report stated that there was not enough information to allow a satisfactory answer to be given to the question.

Following the review of "Feet First", the Department's research and development division have undertaken a review of the literature of general practice podiatry, which was completed in September 1999. The review investigated the then current nature of research publications. The review has not yet been published but will demonstrate the need for better quality research in this area.

Angela Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what is the cost per episode of care treatment for *(a)* outpatients and *(b)* inpatients by (i) orthopaedic surgeons and (ii) podiatric surgeons. [96206]

Mr. Hutton: There are no comparable figures available because information regarding podiatric surgery is not collected centrally. However, figures for the speciality of orthopaedic surgery are:

Cost per episode of patients using a bed (including day cases) is £1,491.07;

Cost per attendance of outpatients (including nurse clinic and ward attenders) is £56.26.

Source:

National Health Service Trust Financial Returns 1997–98

Hormone Replacement Therapy

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what estimate he has made of the cost of discontinuing the levying of a prescription charge for each item when more than one hormone is prescribed in hormone replacement therapy. [96044]

Mr. Hutton: It is estimated that around £8.3 million in charge income would be lost if a single prescription charge was paid when more than one hormone in hormone replacement therapy was supplied by community pharmacists in England.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Stipendiary Magistrates

Mr. Malins: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department (1) what studies have *(a)* been carried out by and *(b)* been received by the Home Office concerning the relative (i) efficiency and (ii) speed of decision making of the Stipendiary Bench and the Lay Bench; [95472]

(2) what studies he has *(a)* commissioned and *(b)* evaluated on the potential savings to the criminal justice system of increasing the jurisdiction of the Stipendiary Bench; and if he will make a statement. [95439]

Mr. Stinchcombe: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what estimate he has made of the comparative cost of like cases being dealt with

by *(a)* panels of lay justices and *(b)* stipendiary magistrates in the magistrates' courts; and if he will make a statement. [95793]

Jane Kennedy *[holding answer 27 October 1999]:* No such studies have been carried out by the Home Office.

The Government are committed to the principle that the lay magistracy will continue to play a significant part in our system of justice. The Government's overriding concern is to have in place a system of criminal justice in which the public has confidence. The Government have commissioned research to assess the relative costs, effectiveness and other benefits/disadvantages of Stipendiary and lay magistrates, taking into account all related costs including those of other agencies. The research will be used to assess whether the current balance between the use of lay magistrates and Stipendiaries is satisfactory; whether each set of magistrates is deployed in the most effective way; and the weight of the arguments that are heard for an against the use of lay or Stipendiary magistrates in particular circumstances.

The research will be conducted during 2000.

Commonhold

Mr. Waterson: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department when he expects to announce plans for commonhold; and if he will make a statement. [95913]

Mr. Lock: This Government are committed to introducing commonhold. Many of the issues that are included in the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions' recent consultation on leasehold reform will affect how we proceed with commonhold. My Department is working with DETR in planning the way ahead and I hope to announce shortly how we will take commonhold forward.

Judicial Appointments

Mr. Watts: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what action he proposes to take to provide further information about the system for judicial appointments in England and Wales. [96615]

Mr. Lock: The first ever Judicial Appointments Annual Report, covering the period 1 April 1998 to 31 March 1999, is published today. The Report includes a detailed account, with relevant statistics, of the competitions for each judicial office during that year as well as information about how the judicial appointments system works and details of the changes the Lord Chancellor has made, and plans to make, to that system. Copies of the Report have been placed in both Libraries. The Report is also available on the internet.

Asylum Appeals

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department how many *(a)* asylum and *(b)* immigration appeals are waiting to be heard at the (i) adjudicator and (ii) tribunal tier. [96054]

Jane Kennedy: As at 30 September 1999, there were 2,666 asylum and 2,077 immigration appeals waiting to be heard by adjudicators. A further 2,310 asylum and 757 immigration appeals were waiting to be heard by the tribunal.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department how many *(a)* full-time and *(b)* part-time adjudicators are employed to deal with immigration and asylum appeals. [96053]

Jane Kennedy: There are currently 50 full-time and 197 part-time adjudicators employed to hear immigration and asylum appeals. A further 50 part-time adjudicators have been appointed, and will begin to hear appeals from February 2000.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department how many decisions on *(a)* immigration and *(b)* asylum appeals have been made by (i) adjudicators and (ii) tribunals in each month since 30 April 1997. [96049]

Jane Kennedy: The information is as follows:

	Adjudicator		*Tribunal*	
	Asylum	*Immigration*	*Asylum*	*Immigration*
1997–98				
April	1,955	1,123	106	126
May	1,645	775	97	82
June	1,797	1,356	222	186
July	1,942	1,278	261	48
August	1,676	1,240	46	76
September	2,021	1,136	44	32
October	2,273	1,1[illegible]	88	291
November	1,921	969	88	32
December	1,595	1,302	133	43
January	1,746	953	94	22
February	1,617	1,179	86	1
March	1,996	748	50	181
Total	22,184	13,173	1,315	1,120
1998–99				
April	1,603	1,276	34	52
May	1,600	1,198	105	79
June	2,076	1,088	87	50
July	2,021	1,112	92	24
August	1,886	936	109	67
September	2,687	1,105	132	93
October	3,139	1,175	115	64
November	2,574	1,084	77	61
December	2,377	941	108	58
January	2,497	1,040	88	36
February	1,479	800	93	33
March	2,841	1,208	156	87
Total	26,780	12,963	1,196	704
1999–2000				
April	1,784	970	74	20
May	1,516	779	116	82
June	1,648	716	180	50
July	1,502	661	216	52
August	1,445	472	150	80
September	1,406	701	200	111
Total	9,301	4,299	936	395

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

School Science Laboratories

13. **Dr. Gibson:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has to review the guidance on the design of science laboratories in schools. [94262]

Jacqui Smith: The Department has reviewed the guidance on the design of science laboratories in secondary schools. A revised Building Bulletin updating "Science Accommodation in Secondary Schools: A Design Guide" will be published shortly. General guidance on the design and layout of school science rooms for primary schools is offered in Building Bulletin 82, "Area Guidelines for Schools".

Secondary Education (Gloucestershire)

16. **Mr. Webb:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what discussions his Department has had with South Gloucestershire local education authority about the provision of secondary education in Bradley Stoke. [94265]

Ms Estelle Morris: Officials from the Department have met with South Gloucestershire LEA on several occasions and the provision of places was discussed.

It is the LEA's responsibility to ensure that there are sufficient secondary school places within its area.

The Department has supported capital bids from South Gloucestershire which met the published criteria for basic need.

Flexible Working

18. **Jane Griffiths:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what discussions he has held with employers about promoting flexible working arrangements for employees with family commitments. [94269]

Ms Hodge: We have had discussions with a number of leading employers about how we might work together to promote flexible working arrangements which both benefit the business and enable employees to balance work and home better. We are publishing today a research study showing how such arrangements have helped small and medium enterprises.

Student Transport (Lancashire)

19. **Mr. Borrow:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on the provision of post-16 student transport in Lancashire. [94272]

Mr. Wicks: Decisions on support for transport for post-16 pupils is a matter for local discretion. Lancashire local education authority has withdrawn transport support for all new students except those who meet very strict criteria for "extenuating circumstances".

Nursery Education

20. **Mr. Chaytor:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what progress has been made in providing pre-school places for three-year-olds. [94274]

Ms Hodge: We are well on the way to achieving our aim of doubling the number of free places for three-year-olds by 190,000 by 2002. £40 million has been allocated this year to 57 local education authorities with the greatest social need and 80 per cent. of the places provided are in the private and voluntary sector. This will be followed by £100 million for all local education authorities next year and £250 million in 2001–02. This is the first time government has specifically targeted funding on the provision of nursery places for three-year-olds.

School Exclusions

21. **Mr. Burns:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what assessment he has made of the educational arrangements for pupils excluded from schools. [94276]

Jacqui Smith: Excluded pupils are likely to be educated in either a pupil referral unit (PRU) or through home tuition by the LEA. Ofsted has a rolling inspection programme of PRUs. LEAs are inspected over the full range of their education responsibilities.

School Transport

22. **Mr. David Heath:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has to review the operation of home to school transport. [94277]

Jacqui Smith: We will be considering carefully the recommendations of the School Travel Advisory Group which will report later in the autumn.

New Deal (Over 50s)

23. **Mr. Pound:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what arrangements have been put in place for piloting the new deal for people aged 50 years and over. [94279]

Ms Hodge: The New Deal 50plus is an important new package of practical help for people aged 50 and over who are looking for work. It offers: a tax free employment credit of £60 per week paid for up to a year to an individual entering full-time work (£40 for part-time work, 16–30 hours per week); an in-work training grant of up to £750; a personal advice service for the individual to provide help with looking for work.

Pupil Funding (Northumberland)

24. **Mr. Beith:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what representations he has received about differences in funding per school pupil between Northumberland and other areas. [94280]

Ms Estelle Morris: My right hon. Friend has received a number of representations from Northumberland expressing concern at differences in the Standard Spending Assessment (SSA) per pupil between Northumberland and other local education authorities. We have already acknowledged that there are valid objections to the current SSA formula. The Government, in partnership with local government, have set up a three year programme of research to investigate thoroughly whether there is a better way of determining the distribution of funds which is simpler, more stable, more robust and fairer than the present arrangements.

Grammar Schools

25. **Mr. Lidington:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what represenations he has received about proposed changes to the admissions criteria for grammar schools. [94281]

Ms Estelle Morris: Since June 1997, the Department has received some 200 letters from Members of this House on the subject of grammar schools, and some 2,000 letters and e-mails from other interested parties. There have also been 60 parliamentary questions tabled.

26. **Mr. Brady:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on the future of grammar schools. [94282]

Ms Estelle Morris: Mechanisms allowing local parents to petition and ballot on the future of grammar schools are now in place. It will be for eligible parents to decide if grammar schools should continue as such.

Careers Education

27. **Mr. Willis:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has to establish nationally validated quality standards for careers education and guidance. [94283]

Mr. Wicks: We have no plans to introduce standards for careers education and guidance provision. However, on 19 October, we launched the national occupational standards for careers teachers and others who deliver careers education and guidance in schools and colleges. These enable teachers to evaluate their skills and knowledge against recognised national standards and develop careers education and guidance provision.

University Access

28. **Mr. Grogan:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what discussions his Department has had with the Sutton Trust regarding improving access to Oxford and Cambridge universities for students from state schools. [94284]

Mr. Wicks: Ministers and officials meet Mr. Peter Lampl and Sutton Trust employees frequently to discuss issues of mutual concern, including improving access to universities for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State will be meeting Mr. Lampl on 11 November to discuss summer schools at universities for state school pupils.

"Learning to Succeed"

29. **Mr. Quinn:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has to implement the proposals contained in the White Paper, "Learning to Succeed". [94286]

Mr. Wicks: The White Paper contains a broad timetable for the implementation of our proposals. It also sets out a number of issues on which we have asked views by 15 October 1999. Once we have had time to consider those views, we will be publishing detailed proposals for implementation.

Mrs. Ann Cryer: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what contribution business will make to the arrangements set out in the White Paper, "Learning to Succeed". [96828]

Mr. Blunkett: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply I gave today to the hon. Member for Vale of York (Miss McIntosh), *Official Report*, column 1079.

New Deal (Yorkshire)

30. **Helen Jackson:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many new deal places have been started in Yorkshire and Humberside this year. [94287]

Ms Jowell: In Yorkshire and Humberside, from the beginning of the year to the end of July, 15,230 young people have started New Deal. In the same period there have been 10,590 starts on New Deal for Long Term Unemployed people aged 25+.

Class Sizes

Miss Kirkbride: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on the average size of secondary school classes. [94264]

Ms Estelle Morris: The average size of a secondary class was 21.8 in January 1999. January 1999 saw the first fall in overall average class size for 10 years from 24.9 in January 1998 to 24.8.

National Curriculum

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment when the consultation period on the national curriculum will end. [94268]

Jacqui Smith: Consultation on my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State's proposals for revisions to the National Curriculum for the year 2000 ended on 23 July 1999. On 9 September my right hon. Friend announced his decisions on a revised National Curriculum, which will raise educational achievement, while safeguarding every child's entitlement to a broad and balanced education. We also consulted between 15 September and 18 October on the draft statutory Orders which give effect to these provisions. Revised National Curriculum documents will be sent to all schools in November.

Area Inspectors (Young Adult Provision)

Mrs. Heal: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has to undertake area inspections of 16 to 19 years provision. [96731]

Mr. Wicks: In its White Paper "Learning to Succeed—a New Framework for post-16 Learning" the Government looked to Ofsted to lead area-wide inspections of 16–19 education and training, encompassing all providers. From 2001 these inspections will be partnership with the proposed new adult inspectorate; prior to that the work will be done jointly with the FEFC Inspectorate and the Training Standards Council.

The programme of inspections will commence in autumn 1999 and will focus in some cases on areas where the challenge to raise achievement and participation is particularly acute. For inspection purposes, areas will usually be single LEAs, but they may comprise more than one LEA, or part of a large LEA.

Most school sixth forms, colleges and major training providers in the area will be visited in the course of the inspection, but the emphasis will be on provision in the area as a whole, rather than on individual organisations. Inspectors may draw on evidence from other recent or

current inspections of individual institutions or providers, in complementing, rather than duplicating inspection activity.

The inspections will be in two stages. In the first, the focus will be on visits to institutions and providers to gather and interpret evidence on performance, curriculum and programmes, and cost/resource issues, and to meet staff and students or trainees. In the second stage, usually several weeks later, inspectors will visit a sample of lessons/sessions to assess the quality of what is provided and students' and trainees' responses to it. In addition, certain themes, such as guidance, will be addressed across the different sectors. Inspectors will also consider the contribution of the LEA(s), the local TEC(s) and the Careers Service to 16–19 provision in the area, and will take account of available information on the local market and skills needs.

Each inspection will result in a published report which will include judgments on:

the standards achieved and quality of provision in the area;

the range and coherence of provision available;

the value for money provided.

By commenting on the match of provision to local demand, the inspection programme will provide a basis for future planning of 16–19 education and training.

Public Libraries (Computer Network)

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on the Government's latest policy towards introducing a new computer network for public libraries, as outlined in his publication, "New Library—People's Network". [95322]

Mr. Alan Howarth: I have been asked to reply.

Responsibility within Government for the People's Network rests with the Department for Culture, Media and Sport.

We are making £70 million available through the New Opportunities Fund to create content for the Public Libraries ICT Network and to train library staff in ICT skills. In addition, up to £200 million is available through the New Opportunities Fund's Community Access to Lifelong Learning programme to support the development of the network infrastructure. Libraries also stand to benefit from a range of other educational programmes including the £252 million set aside for the development of learning centres under the Capital Modernisation Fund.

Local Learning and Skills Councils

Mr. Woodward: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment for what reason the regional development agencies have been tasked to determine the boundaries of local Learning and Skills Councils. [96002]

Mr. Wicks: Regional Development Agencies are well placed to advise on local Learning and Skills Councils boundaries in their regions because of their leading role in developing economic strategies for the English regions. In reaching their recommendations they have consulted widely with business and wider communities in their regions.

Associate Degrees

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has to develop the concept of associate and pass degrees for those unable to take a full degree; and at what national level of attainment they would be scored. [96118]

Mr. Wicks: All qualifications in higher education should represent positive achievement at specified levels and should offer scope for further progression in lifelong learning. The independent Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education is consulting on proposals for a qualifications framework based on these principles. The framework will include provision for existing qualifications below honours degree level and is intended to be flexible enough to accommodate new qualifications that may be developed. The Government believe that there is an important place for high quality qualifications below honours degree level that are valued by employers.

Post Code Discrimination

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will issue guidance to higher education institutions concerning post code discrimination in admissions policies. [96119]

Mr. Wicks: Entry to higher education institutions should be based on merit and the ability to benefit from the courses they offer, not on social background. New information services from the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service will help institutions assess whether they are reaching all the potential students who could meet their entry requirements. The Department does not intend to issue guidance.

Student Loans

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment at what point of annual income a graduate with an income-contingent student loan will start to repay less in the current year than a graduate with an old-style mortgage loan. [96110]

Mr. Wicks: Assuming a borrower was repaying an old-style mortgage loan at £1,000 a year (reflecting a loan of £5,000 being repaid over a five year period), someone with an income-contingent loan of the same size would repay less until they earned over £21,111 a year.

The repayment of income contingent loans will be fairer than mortgage-style because it will be tied closely to income. Repayments will be based on 9 per cent. of income over £10,000 a year so that repayments will increase or decrease in line with changes in income. £21,111 would be quite a high salary for a new graduate, so most new graduates will initially be repaying small amounts each year in line with their income.

The repayment of mortgage style loans above a threshold—currently £18,192—is not income contingent. A fixed proportion of the loan has to be repaid each year: someone earning £20,000 a year will repay at the same rate as someone earning £40,000.

Graduate Apprenticeships

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on the

numbers of *(a)* industrial sectors which have developed programmes of graduate apprenticeships and *(b)* students currently involved in such programmes. [95782]

Mr. Wicks: Seven sectors of industry and business are currently developing Graduate Apprenticeships in a series of pilot projects: chemical manufacturing and processing; electronics and software services; engineering (aerospace sub-sector); management and enterprise; rail; steel; and sport and recreation. A total of 34 Graduate Apprentices are involved in the pilot projects.

Level 3 Curriculum

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on implementation of the revised level 3 curriculum for 2000–01 as it affects teaching and staffing at further education and sixth form colleges and school sixth forms, respectively. [96111]

Mr. Wicks: The 16–19 qualification reforms arising from the Government's 1997 "Qualifying for Success" consultation document will be introduced for teaching in further education and sixth form colleges and school sixth forms from September 2000. The Qualifications and Curriculum Authority has already issued detailed guidance on how different types of institution might introduce the broader, more demanding post-16 curriculum which the reforms are designed to encourage, in the light of their own circumstances and the resources—including staffing levels—available to them. In addition, the Government have made available substantial additional resources specifically for staff development and training in support of the introduction of the new qualifications next year. Many schools and colleges have already indicated that they will be responding positively and constructively to the opportunities which the revised advanced level curriculum will create.

Assisted Places Scheme

Mr. Martin Bell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what action he will take to help those children who were to have moved from primary to secondary education under the assisted places scheme. [94789]

Ms Estelle Morris: The Education (Schools) Act 1997 contains a discretionary power to allow children in receipt of primary education to continue to hold their assisted places for a further period in which they receive secondary education. Any application for such an extension is considered on its individual merits and discretion is exercised where it is reasonable to do so in view of the particular circumstances relating to the child. Of the 356 applications we have received to date, 205 have been approved.

School Web Pages

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what steps he is taking to encourage schools to design and maintain their own web pages. [94270]

Mr. Wills: We have set a target for all schools to be connected to the Internet by 2002. Through the National Grid for Learning programme we are providing over £700 million to equip schools. Alongside that, £230 million of New Opportunities Funding is available to train serving teachers in the curriculum use of ICT. The NGfL provides the framework for public and private providers to offer additional services. For example, Tesco has set up SchoolNet 2000, which has involved more than 80,000 pupils in creating school websites. We would expect that an increasing number of schools will take the opportunity afforded by these measures to set up their own websites. DfEE has published advice, guidance and further information on setting up and maintaining websites in its Superhighway Safety pack. Schools are also encouraged to seek advice from the British Educational and Communications Technology agency (BECTa) as well as their Local Education Authority's ICT advisers.

Mill Hill County High School

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many objections the adjudicator has received to the admissions policy operated by Mill Hill County High School. [94267]

Ms Estelle Morris: The Office of the Schools Adjudicator received objections to Mill Hill County High School admissions policy from Barnet Local Education Authority and from a total of 127 parents.

A decision on these objections was issued to all parties concerned on 3 September 1999.

Homework Targets

Dr. Palmer: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what progress has been made in setting homework targets as a feature of parent-teacher co-operation. [94266]

Jacqui Smith: National homework guidelines for primary and secondary schools were published in November last year. They include flexible guidance on how much homework and what sort of activities should be set for pupils of different ages. For schools to develop successful homework policies it is clearly important that there is good liaison between teachers and parents, and that parents are given guidance about how to help their children.

Further Education and Training

Mr. McWalter: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has to ensure that businesses have an effective role in the new framework for further education and training. [94275]

Mr. Wicks: Businesses make an essential contribution to the framework for Further Education and Training through their involvement with Colleges, Training and Enterprise Councils and local learning partnerships. The new arrangements set out in the White Paper "Learning to Succeed" provide an enhanced role for business through the establishment of the LSC. Employers will be the largest single group on the national and local LSCs, and will be able to use their expertise and knowledge to influence more effectively the type and nature of learning provision.

In addition to their involvement of members of the national and local LSCs, the wider business community will also be able to play an important role through the local learning partnerships.

CABINET OFFICE

Oral Statements

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office if she will list *(a)* the reports published by her Department and its associated bodies, *(b)* the reports received from bodies set up by her Department, *(c)* the decisions her Department has taken and *(d)* events in the UK and elsewhere, since 27 July, which satisfied the criteria she uses for deciding whether to apply to make oral statements to the House when the House is sitting. [93971]

Marjorie Mowlam: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply given by my right hon. Friend the President of the Council on 19 October 1999, *Official Report*, columns *429–30*.

Regulatory Impact Unit

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office if she will make a statement on the *(a)* budget, *(b)* size and *(c)* function of the Regulatory Impact Unit. [95305]

Marjorie Mowlam: For the financial year 1999–2000 the Regulatory Impact Unit has a budget of £1,950,000. Fifty-three staff are currently employed in the Unit, of whom two are part-time and four are seconded from outside the civil service.

On the function of the Regulatory Impact Unit, I refer the hon. Member to the answer I have to my hon. Friend the Member for Crosby (Mrs. Curtis-Thomas) on 21 October 1999, *Official Report*, columns *649–50*.

Deregulation and Contracting Out Act 1994

Mr. Edwards: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what plans have been made to reform section 5 of the Deregulation and Contracting Out Act 1994, dealing with enforcement of regulations. [96831]

Marjorie Mowlam: On 28 September, a consultative document was published on the proposed amendments to Section 5 of the Deregulation and Contracting Out Act 1994, dealing with enforcement of regulations. Copies of the document have been placed in the Libraries of the House. The proposal is intended to act as an incentive to spread best practice in enforcement policies and procedures and to reduce the regulatory burden on business. Subject to the responses to the consultation exercise, I will be seeking to amend the Act as soon as parliamentary time allows.

Next Steps Agencies

Mr. Swinney: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office if she will list the Next Steps agencies currently in operation, indicating the number of civil servants employed in each. [95280]

Mr. Ian McCartney: The Next Steps Agencies currently in operation and the number of civil servants employed in each is set out in the following table:

Total civil servants working in agencies and on Next Steps lines (including Northern Ireland and Forest Enterprise)

Agency	*Staff*[1]
Armed Forces Personnel Administration Agency	[2]275
Army Base Repair Organisation	[2]2,550
Army Personnel Centre	[2]1,200
Army Technical Support Agency	[2]1,045
Army Training and Recruiting Agency	[2]23,650
Business Development Service	[2]225
Cadw: Welsh Historic Monuments	170
CCTA	190
Central Office of Information	[4]345
Central Science Laboratory	545
Centre for Environment, Fisheries and Aquaculture Science	420
Civil Service College	220
Companies House	[4]845
Compensation Agency	[2]125
Construction Service	[2]550
Court Service	8,605
Debt Management Office	25
Defence Analytical Services Agency	110
Defence Aviation Repair Agency[4]	[2]5,125
Defence Bills Agency	[2]650
Defence Clothing and Textiles Agency	[2]535
Defence Communications Agency	[2]900
Defence Dental Agency	[2]850
Defence Estates Agency	[2]1,165
Defence Evaluation and Research Agency	[2, 4]11,020
Defence Housing Executive[3]	980
Defence Intelligence and Security Centre	[2]495
Defence Medical Training Organisation	[2]435
Defence Postal and Courier Services Agency	[2]550
Defence Procurement Agency[4]	[2]5,380
Defence Secondary Care Agency	[2]2,335
Defence Storage and Distributions Agency[4]	[2, 3]3,330
Defence Transport and Movements Agency[4]	[2]320
Defence Vetting Agency	[2]345
Disposal Sales Agency	[2, 3]65
Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency	4,120
Driver and Vehicle Licensing (Northern Ireland)	[2]255
Driver and Vehicle Testing Agency	[2]295
Driving Standards Agency	[4]1,630
Duke of York's Royal Military School	[2]100
Employment Service	29,310
Employment Tribunals Service	560
Environment and Heritage Service	[2]330
Farming and Rural Conservation Agency	525
Fire Service College	[4]185
Fisheries Research Services	250
Forensic Science Service	1,445
Forensic Science Service of Northern Ireland	[2]115
Forest Enterprise	[2]2,310
Forest Service	395
Forest Research	[4]270
Government Car and Despatch Agency	230
Government Purchasing Agency	[2]90
Health Estates	[2]125
Highways Agency	1,535
Historic Scotland	645
HM Land Registry	[4]7,750
HM Prison Service	40,275
Industrial Research and Technology Unit	[2]140
Insolvency Service	1,315
Intervention Board	1,170
Joint Air Reconnaissance Intelligence Centre	[2]445
Land Registers of Northern Ireland	[2]195
Logistic Information Systems Agency	[2]235
Maritime and Coastguard Agency	940
Meat Hygiene Service	1,335
Medical Devices Agency	135
Medical Supplies Agency	275
Medicines Control Agency	[4]440
Meteorological Office	[2]2,030
Military Survey	[2]1,055
Ministry of Defence Police	[2]3,545
National Savings	4,060
National Weights and Measures Laboratory	55
Naval Bases and Supply Agency	[2]10,030

Total civil servants working in agencies and on Next Steps lines (including Northern Ireland and Forest Enterprise)

Agency	*Staff*[1]
Naval Manning Agency	[2]275
Naval Recruiting and Training Agency	[2]4,350
NHS Estates	230
NHS Pensions Agency	440
Northern Ireland Child Support Agency	[3]1,010
Northern Ireland Prison Service	[3]3,140
Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency	[3]215
Office for National Statistics	2,925
Ordnance Survey	1,850
Ordnance Survey of Northern Ireland	[3]175
Patent Office	[4]820
Pay and Personnel Agency	[2]730
Pesticides Safety Directorate	195
Planning Inspectorate	625
Planning Service	[3]390
Property Advisers to the Civil Estate	185
Public Record Office	430
Public Record Office of Northern Ireland	[3]60
Public Trust Office	535
Queen Elizabeth II Conference Centre	[4]55
Queen Victoria School	[2]70
Radiocommunications Agency	495
RAF Logistics Support Services	[2]955
RAF Personnel Management Agency	[2]490
RAF Signals Engineering Establishment	[2]1,045
RAF Training Group Defence Agency	[2]5,895
Rate Collection Agency	[3]245
Registers of Scotland	[4]1,100
Rivers Agency	[3]415
Roads Service	[5]2,010
Royal Mint	[4]965
Royal Parks Agency	235
Scottish Agricultural Science Agency	115
Scottish Court Service	815
Scottish Fisheries Protection Agency	275
Scottish Office Pensions Agency	150
Scottish Prison Service	4,805
Scottish Record Office	110
Service Children's Education	[2, 5]720
Ships Support Agency	2,795
Social Security Agency (Northern Ireland)	[3]4,955
Social Security Benefits Agency	67,080[7]
Social Security Child Support Agency	7,380
Social Security Information Technology Services Agency	1,930
Social Security War Pensions Agency	855
Student Awards Agency for Scotland	130
The Buying Agency	[4]135
Training and Employment Agency (Northern Ireland)	[3]1,330
Treasury Solicitor's Department	380
UK Hydrographic Office	[2, 4]750
United Kingdom Passport Agency	1,205
Valuation and Lands Agency	[3]215
Valuation Office	3,945
Vehicle Certification Agency	90
Vehicle Inspectorate	[4]1,550
Veterinary Laboratories Agency	1,015
Veterinary Medicines Directorate	105
Water Service	[3]2,110
Wilton Park	40
Crown Prosecution	[7]5,370
HM Customs and Excise	[7]22,960
Inland Revenue	[7]57,501
Serious Fraud Office	[7]150

1. January figures for civil servants on the basis of full-time equivalents. Casuals are excluded.
2. Figures include military personnel.
3. Northern Ireland Civil Service.
4. Trading Fund.
5. Figures include full-time equivalent locally employed civilians.
6. Forest Enterprise and Forest Research are staffed by Forestry Commission civil servants.
7. Departments operating on Next Steps lines. Staffing figure for the Inland Revenue excludes the Valuation Office which is a free standing Agency.
8. Agency launched on 1 April 1998.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Kosovo

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what measures his Department is taking to encourage the curtailment in Kosovo of the activities of the Sherbimi Informativ I Kosaves; and if he will make a statement. [95295]

Mr. Vaz: The Sherbimi Informativ I Kosaves was affiliated to the now disbanded Kosovo Liberation Army, acting as its intelligence and security service. As part of the demilitarisation process, the KLA has undertaken to disengage in conflict and re-integrate into civilian society, an undertaking which is under constant scrutiny by KFOR and UNMIK.

KFOR and UNMIK take a wholly even-handed approach to law and order. They will act against any report of illegal activity from whatever source.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of whether the Kosovo Liberation Army has fully disarmed; and if he will make a statement on the KLA's reserves of military equipment. [95227]

Mr. Vaz: On 20 September KFOR reported that the KLA was broadly in compliance with the undertaking to demilitarise which was given to NATO on 21 June.

The then commander of KFOR, General Sir Mike Jackson, said on 13 October that over 10,000 weapons and 5 million rounds of ammunition had been handed in by the KLA. Any weapons now found on ex-KLA members are unlawfully held and are subject to seizure and destruction.

Mr. Gardiner: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the export of military equipment for the use of the international civil and security presences in Kosovo since 26 July. [96830]

Mr. Vaz: UN Security Council resolution 1160 imposed an arms embargo against the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY). The only exception to this embargo is that in UNSCR 1244, which provides that prohibitions imposed by UNSCR 1160 shall not apply to the sale or supply of arms and related material for the use of the international civil and security presences in Kosovo. The Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (United Nations Sanctions) Order 1998 sets out the licensing requirements in relation to this embargo.

Since 26 July 1999, the Government have licensed the export of the following equipment on the Military List to organisations involved in demining activities in Kosovo on behalf of the United Nations Interim Administration Mission In Kosovo (UNMIK). The United Nations FRY Sanctions Committee has approved the export of all of these goods.

60 helmet and visor assemblies

60 mine search jackets

4 de-armers/disruptors

2 rocket wrench

2 box of 66, .05 cartridges for de-armers/disruptors

20 RBR fragmentation vests

5 high energy mini shrikes (used for mine destruction)

10 LBA armoured protective helmets

50 RBR warrior helmets

50 protective vests

35 protective trousers

50 spare advanced fragmentation visors

12 Beethoven Mk 19 exploders.

The Government have also licensed the export of the following equipment on the Military List to the international KFOR contingent in Kosovo.

demining explosives

4 armoured Land Rovers 110s.

Indonesia

Ann Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs in relation to the most recent delivery of three Hawk aircraft to Indonesia, if he will give *(a)* the date on which the aircraft left the United Kingdom, *(b)* the reason for the temporary grounding of the aircraft in Bangkok, *(c)* the nationality of the pilots flying the aircraft from the United Kingdom to Indonesia, *(d)* by whom the pilots were employed and *(e)* the date on which the aircraft became legally the property of the Indonesian Government. [95339]

Mr. Battle: The aircraft referred to left the UK on 31 August. Once the aircraft left UK shores, the details of the export became a matter for the company concerned.

Ms Oona King: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will ask the Indonesian Government for a full and independent investigation into the death of the Balibo five during the Indonesian invasion of East Timor in 1975. [96024]

Mr. Battle: We have no plans to do so. The Australian Government, who have led on the issue (the five journalists killed were based in Australia and worked for Australian TV stations), commissioned a comprehensive investigation by a former Solicitor General of Australia, Tom Sherman, in 1995. The Sherman Report remains our benchmark. New information about the incident which came to light last year was referred by the Australian Government to Mr. Sherman. Mr. Sherman's second report contained no major new revelations or conclusions.

Chevening Scholarships

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many additional Chevening scholarships for overseas students are being provided; and what is the cost to *(a)* private and *(b)* public funds. [96112]

Mr. Hain: At present about 2,200 Chevening Scholarships are awarded each year. On 18 June my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister announced that the scheme would be expanded by up to 1,000 additional scholarships each year through Government and private funding. The cost of 1,000 extra scholarships is likely to be about £15 million each year. Discussions are continuing between Government, higher education institutions and the private sector with the aim of building up to the target set by the Prime Minister.

Belize

Mr. Peter Bradley: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs which Ministers in his Department visited Belize in each year between 1990 and 1997; and what support his Department gave Belize in each year. [96213]

Mr. Battle: The following Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) Ministers visited Belize in the years 1990–97: Mr. Tristan Garel-Jones (1991), the right hon. David Heathcoat-Amory MP (March 1994) and Sir Nicholas Bonsor (June 1996).

The total Overseas Development Administration programmes for Belize were as follows:

Year	*£*
1989–90	2,905,000
1990–91	2,678,000
1991–92	2,970,000
1992–93	4,273,000
1993–94	5,693,000
1994–95	5,395,000
1995–96	3,499,000
1996–97	1,995,000
1997–98	2,300,000

The 1997–98 figure includes the period during which the Department for International Development was established. A breakdown of these statistics is available in "British Aid Statistics/Statistics on International Development" which is available in the Library of the House. The Commonwealth Development Corporation also invested in Belize during this period. In addition to the above funding from its ODA wing, the FCO provided Belize with other support in a variety of forms including sponsored visits, scholarships and military training and equipment. Figures for the total value of this support are not readily available.

UNSCOM

Mr. Colman: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if the use of the procedures contained in the Additional Protocol of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty has formed part of the current UN negotiations for the reintroduction of UNSCOM into Iraq. [96421]

Mr. Hain: The Additional Protocol does not form part of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). It is an extension to the safeguards agreement negotiated between the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and NPT member states. Iraq has not agreed an Additional Protocol with the IAEA, hence this subject has no direct bearing on current discussion in the UN on re-establishing IAEA and UNSCOM operations in Iraq under UN Security Council resolution 687.

Consular Procedure (Islamabad)

Mr. Hilary Benn: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a

statement on the operation of the interim appointment system in Islamabad for applicants seeking entry clearance. [95657]

Mr. Vaz: In an attempt to reduce waiting times for interviews, our High Commission in Islamabad has set up a system aimed at processing some straightforward applications for settlement visas more quickly. Applications which are judged to fall into this category may be submitted to the High Commission on any Tuesday for consideration.

Chinese State Visit

Ann Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many meetings concerning the security and policing arrangements for the visit of President Jiang Zemin were held between his Department and the Metropolitan Police; who attended those meetings; what advice and guidance on security arrangements and the policing of possible demonstrations his Department offered at those meetings; and if he will publish the minutes of the meetings. [96113]

Mr. Battle: Officials of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and representatives of the Police discussed the security and policing arrangements for the Chinese State Visit on a number of occasions between July and October. Minutes were not taken. Such discussions and meetings are a standard part of preparation for State Visits, to take the police through the proposed programme to enable them to make their operational decisions. These meetings involved officials from the Foreign Office and representatives of the police services concerned. Officials from Buckingham Palace, representatives of the Chinese Embassy and organisers of individual events attended as appropriate.

Foreign and Commonwealth Office officials and the Metropolitan Police discussed the proposed programme for the State Visit and the concerns of the Chinese authorities about the possible impact of demonstrations on the visit. Foreign and Commonwealth Office officials reported to the police that they had told the Chinese authorities that demonstrations should be expected and that the Chinese should accept that the policing of the visit was a matter for the police's operational judgment. Ministers were consulted only on the arrangements for the welcoming ceremony on Horse Guards Parade and they expressed the view that it should take the same form as on previous State Visits.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs which members of his Department's staff were present outside the Cambridge University Library for the arrival of the President of China; and what representations these staff made to the police about their handling of public demonstrations. [96234]

Mr. Battle: In accordance with standard practice for State Visits, Foreign and Commonwealth Office officials from the China Hong Kong Department, Protocol Division and Conference and Visits Group were present at Cambridge University Library to liaise between the Chinese authorities and Cambridgeshire Constabulary on the basis of the discussions referred to in my answer of today to my hon. Friend the Member for Cynon Valley (Ann Clwyd).

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations his Department made to Cambridgeshire Constabulary about the policing of the state visit by the President of China. [96232]

Mr. Battle: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given today to my hon. Friend the Member for Cynon Valley (Ann Clwyd) at column *993*.

There were routine meetings to go through the programme during the preparations for the State Visit, so that Cambridgeshire Constabulary could make their operational decisions.

Mr. Maples: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs on what occasions *(a)* Ministers and *(b)* officials in his Department (i) met and (ii) communicated with Commander Mick Messenger in connection with the Chinese President's visit to London. [96117]

Mr. Battle: There were no meetings or discussions with Commander Mick Messenger.

Mr. Maples: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what involvement *(a)* Ministers, *(b)* officials from his Department had in the dialogue between the Home Office and the Metropolitan Police in connection with policing of the Chinese President's visit to London. [96116]

Mr. Battle: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given to the hon. Member for Aylesbury (Mr. Lidington) on 25 October 1999, *Official Report*, column *685–86*.

Mr. Maples: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations were made by Ministers or officials in his Department to *(a)* Ministers or officials in the Home Office and *(b)* the Metropolitan Police regarding policing of the Chinese President's visit to London. [96115]

Mr. Battle: *(a)* None. *(b)* I refer the hon. Member to the answer given to my hon. Friend the Member for Cynon Valley (Ann Clwyd) today.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Hunting

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make it his policy to withhold all grants and subsidies to landowners and occupiers of land who allow hunting with hounds on their land. [95653]

Mr. Morley: The Government's position on hunting was set out in the reply by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister to my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Mr. Mackinlay) on 25 October 1999, *Official Report*, column *715*. For so long as hunting remains legal, there would be no grounds for withholding grants and subsidies in the manner suggested.

Written Answers to Questions

Friday 29 October 1999

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

A1 Western Bypass

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions on what date the Highways Agency agreed to postpone the widening of the A1 Western Bypass between North Gosforth and Ponteland Road interchanges consequent upon the development of the Northern Development Area, Newcastle; who were the parties to this agreement; and what size of development will be permitted prior to widening. [95862]

Mr. Hill: I have asked the Chief Executive of the Highways Agency, Mr. Lawrie Haynes to write to my hon. Friend.

Letter from Lawrie Haynes to Mr. Jim Cousins, dated 29 October 1999:

The Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions has asked me to reply to your recent Parliamentary Question. You asked "on what date the Highways Agency agreed to postpone the widening of the A1 Western Bypass between North Gosforth and Ponteland Road interchanges consequent upon the development of the Northern Development Area; who were the parties to this agreement; and what size of development will now be permitted prior to widening".

The only widening of the A1 between North Gosforth and Ponteland Road that the Highways Agency has considered is as a consequence of the development proposals for the Northern Development Area. If the development had been granted planning permission, the timing of the widening would have depended on the implementation of the development. No decision has been made on this; it would have been the subject of discussion and agreement with the developer had planning permission been granted.

The application for the Northern Development Area was withdrawn on 3 September 1999. A new application was submitted on the same day for Newcastle Great Park that proposes similar improvements to the A1 Trunk Road.

A new traffic impact assessment has been produced and is currently with the Agency for consideration. As part of those considerations, the size of the development that will be permitted prior to widening will be discussed.

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what were the traffic flows along the A1 Western Bypass of Newcastle and Gateshead at *(a)* the Metrocentre interchange, *(b)* the Tyne River crossing, *(c)* the Ponteland Road interchange and *(d)* the North Gosforth interchange in (i) 1995, (ii) 1997, (iii) 1998 and (iv) 1999; and what flows are projected for (1) 2002, (2) 2005 and (3) 2010 (x) with and (y) without, the development of the Northern Development Area, Newcastle. [95876]

Mr. Hill: I have asked the Chief Executive of the Highways Agency, Mr. Lawrie Haynes, to write to my hon. Friend.

Letter from Lawrie Haynes to Mr. Jim Cousins, dated 29 October 1999:

The Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions has asked me to reply to your recent Parliamentary Question. You asked for the traffic flows along the A1 Western Bypass of Newcastle and Gateshead from the Metro Centre to North Gosforth, including the Tyne Crossing.

The attached table, Annex A, sets out the information you requested at the locations where we have traffic counters for the years 1995, 1997, 1998 and 1999 together with projected flows for the years 2002, 2005 and 2010 without the development of Northern Development Area, Newcastle.

A copy of the traffic flows with and without the development for Northern Development Area at assessment year 2013 at Annex B has been placed in the library. In considering planning applications, developers are only required to assess traffic flows for 15 years after the development is brought into use (the assessment year). We do not therefore have the figures for intermediate years. You will note that these are peak hour flows as these are the flows we have used in making our assessment.

As you may be aware, the application for Northern Development Area was withdrawn on 3 September 1999 and a new application submitted on the same day for Newcastle Great Park that proposes similar improvements to the A1 Trunk Road.

A new traffic impact assessment has been produced and is currently with the Highways Agency for consideration. We have asked for more traffic-forecast information from the developer with a revised date of opening of 2000 with the assessment year of 2015. Our initial impression is that the traffic impact will be different from the Northern Development Area application, but until we have this further information and have studied it, we cannot be sure. I am sorry therefore that we do not yet have the information that you have requested in relation to the Newcastle Great Park development.

Traffic data for the A1 around Newcastle

						Projected figures		
Road	*Location*	*AADT 1995*	*AADT 1997 (%)*	*AADT 1998 (%)*	*AADT 1999*	*AADT 2002*	*AADT 2005*	*AADT 2010*
A1	Bowes PH, W of A1M Bifurcation	89,600	93,000(9)	93,600(10)	95,200	100,100	105,100	113,200
A1	North of Smithy Lane Overbridge	80,100	83,800(–)	84,600(9)	86,100	90,400	95,000	102,300
A1	Northwest of Lady Park	79,700	82,100(10)	82,600(9)	84,000	88,300	92,800	99,900
A1	Northwest of Lobley Hill I/C	97,700	101,500(9)	103,400(10)	105,200	110,500	116,100	125,000
A1	Northwest of Consett Route I/C	92,400	94,500(9)	94,600	96,200	101,100	106,200	114,400
A1	Metro Centre, East of I/C	79,800	80,800(10)	81,200	82,600	86,800	91,200	98,200
A1	North of Blaydon Bridge	75,600	81,700(9)	83,000(9)	84,400	88,700	93,200	100,300
A1	North of A69 Interchange	72,900	79,200(8)	81,000(8)	82,400	86,600	91,000	97,900
A1	South of Ponteland Road Interchange	68,100	73,400(9)	76,000	77,300	81,300	85,300	91,900
A1	South of Brunton Lane Overbridge	52,800	57,000(8)	59,100(8)	60,100	63,200	66,400	71,500
A1	North of Ponteland Road Interchange	57,800	61,200(–)	63,300(6)	64,400	67,700	71,100	76,500

Traffic data for the A1 around Newcastle

Road	Location	AADT 1995	AADT 1997 (%)	AADT 1998 (%)	AADT 1999	Projected figures AADT 2002	AADT 2005	AADT 2010
A1	South of A19 Interchange, Hazelrigg	41,900	40,500(8)	47,700	48,500	51,000	53,600	57,700
A1	North of Seaton Burn Interchange	26,900	28,400(6)	27,800(10)	28,300	29,700	31,200	33,600
A1	North of A197, Morpeth	17,000	18,600(11)	18,800(15)	19,100	20,100	21,100	22,700

Key:
AADT—Annual Average Daily Traffic
Source of Percentage Increases:
The COBA Manual Table 10/1 September 1996—LGNRTF

Schoolchildren (Transport)

Miss Geraldine Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what steps the Government are taking to encourage the use of public transport by children travelling to and from school. [95766]

Mr. Hill: In December 1998 we established the School Travel Advisory Group (STAG) to promote best practice and develop a more coherent approach to school travel issues.

STAG oversees a programme of research which includes a project, due for completion in Summer 2000, to identify good practice in increasing bus use for journeys to and from school. This will lead to the publication of a guide for local authorities and operators.

STAG has also overseen the preparation of two guides published in June, one for local authorities and one for parents, teachers and school governors, which include guidance on increasing the use of public transport by children travelling to and from school. Both guides also include guidance on increasing levels of walking and cycling.

I have arranged for a copy of both guides to be placed in the Library.

Regional Planning

Mr. Green: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what guidance he has given the panels inspecting draft regional planning guidance reports about consulting local authorities in the relevant areas. [96108]

Ms Beverley Hughes: Draft Regional Planning Guidance (RPG) is prepared by regional planning bodies made up of the local authorities in the region, working with other stakeholders. A Panel, appointed by the Secretary of State, then holds a Public Examination into the draft guidance. Draft Planning Policy Guidance note 11: *Regional Planning* advises the Panel to consult local planning authorities, through the regional planning body, in drawing up the list of participants and matters selected for examination by the Panel. The Guidance also advises that the regional planning body should be represented at the public examination. Individual local authorities may also participate at the examination (as they have done at the recent examinations into draft RPG for East Anglia and the South East). Once he has considered the Panel report, the Secretary of State will publish draft changes to the regional guidance for a further short public consultation.

National Speed Policy Review

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he intends *(a)* to publish the findings of the National Speed Policy Review and *(b)* to begin wider public consultation on national speed policy; what representations he has already had with regard to the national speed policy; and if he will make a statement. [96037]

Mr. Hill: The Review of Speed Policy is nearing completion and the conclusions and recommendations will be published shortly. Recommendations requiring changes to legislation will be developed into proposals, and consultation on these will take place. A large number of representations covering wide ranging interests and views has been made about the review, including more than 100 replies in response to the discussion document which was circulated by my Department during the summer.

Roads (Priority Lanes)

Mr. Woodward: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the introduction of bus and other priority lanes on *(a)* motorways and *(b)* trunk roads. [95999]

Mr. Hill *[holding answer 27 October 1999]:* There are no immediate plans for further bus or priority lanes on national motorways: on all purpose trunk roads they will continue to be considered as an option to address transport problems.

Fuel Duty Rebate

Mr. Hilary Benn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what would be the estimated cost of extending the current rebate on fuel duty to community transport schemes. [96170]

Mr. Hill: The term "community transport" covers a wide range of different services and organisations. The cost of extending the scope of the Fuel Duty Rebate scheme would depend on the precise definition of eligibility adopted.

Changes to the scope of the scheme will shortly be considered by the Commission for Integrated Transport as part of its study of value for money for public support for bus services.

South East of England Development Agency

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what was the cost to public funds of publishing the October 1999 issue of the

South East of England Development Agency's newsletter SEView; and how many copies were *(a)* published and *(b)* distributed. [96264]

Ms Beverley Hughes *[holding answer 28 October 1999]:* The first eight page edition of SEEDA—*South East View* was published on Friday 15 October 1999, and was bound into the centre of South East Business Magazine which had a print run of 13,650 copies. Despatch to readers was by First Class post, the cost of which was met by the South East Business Magazine. An additional 3,000 copies of *South East View* were delivered to SEEDA of which 1,100 have been distributed so far. The total cost was £8,206.22 plus VAT.

Correspondence

Sir Brian Mawhinney: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when the right hon. Member for North-West Cambridgeshire can expect a reply to his letter of 13 September on behalf of his constituent, Ms Pendray. [96291]

Mr. Meacher: My noble Friend the Minister for Transport replied to the right hon. Member on 26 October.

Sir Teddy Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when his Department plans to respond to the letter sent to him on 29 June by the hon. Member for Rochford and Southend, East addressed to the then Minister for the Regions on the subject of regional development agencies. [96485]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The then Minister for the Regions, Regeneration and Planning, my right hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Central (Mr. Caborn), replied to the hon. Member on the 13 July.

Ministerial Duties

Mr. Redwood: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many hours per week the hon. Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Mr. Raynsford) spent on ministerial duties in *(a)* September, *(b)* October and *(c)* will spend in November. [96493]

Mr. Raynsford: I spend, and will continue to spend, as much time as required to fulfil my Ministerial responsibilities.

Public Transport Expenditure

Mrs. Spelman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how much was spent per inhabitant on public transport *(a)* in the West Midlands and *(b)* in Greater London in each of the last seven years; and if he will make a statement. [96292]

Mr. Hill: The information is not available in the form requested.

The latest figures available for DETR historic and planned expenditure, and planned spending, on all elements of Transport can be found in the Departmental Annual Report 1999. Expenditure by DETR on public transport over the last seven years is as follows:

Description	*1992–93*	*1993–94*	*1994–95*	*1995–96*	*1996–97*	*1997–98*	*[1]1998–99*
Local Transport[2]	1,031	1,242	1,140	1,088	914	842	778
Railways	2,161	1,547	−351	−1,269	−928	352	568
Office of Passenger Rail Franchising	—	2	1,799	1,703	1,847	1,438	1,255
London Transport	883	693	784	903	942	629	391
Other Transport	197	103	221	130	76	104	94
Total	4,272	3,587	3,593	2,555	2,851	3,365	3,086

[1] Estimated outturn
[2] Figures provided for Local Transport may include expenditure on elements other than public transport
Note:
All figures exclude departmental running costs
Sources:
Year 92–93—DETR Annual Report 1998, Years 93–94 to 98–99—DETR Annual Report 1999

The expenditure figures are for direct DETR spending in support of public transport, and do not include expenditure by local authorities (other than that financed by the Transport Supplementary Grant) or private sector finance. DETR does not analyse expenditure by region, or keep records of population by region.

Local Government Finance

Mr. Spring: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what was the amount of funding provided by local authorities *(a)* to the arts, *(b)* to museums and galleries and *(c)* supporting the upkeep of listed buildings in the last year for which figures are available. [95491]

Ms Beverley Hughes: English local authorities incurred a total net current expenditure of £137.7 million on museums and art galleries in 1997–98. Expenditure on art activities and facilities and conservation of the historic environment was separately identified for the first time on the 1998–99 returns, and this information is not yet complete. However, budget information for the total net current expenditure on culture and heritage is available for 1999–2000, the figure for English local authorities being £278.5 million. This includes museums and galleries, art activities and facilities, conservation of the historic environment, and archives and records.

Regional Development Agencies

Mr. Woodward: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) if he will list by political party, the number of councillors who sit as board members of each of the Regional Development Agencies; [96012]

(2) what is the total number of Regional Development Agency board members in England; and of those, how many are councillors. [96007]

Ms Armstrong: The eight Regional Development Agencies currently have 102 board members in all, including the Chairmen, and four vacant board positions. Four councillors were appointed to each board, affiliated as follows:

Regional Development Agency	*Labour*	*Liberal Democrat*	*Conservative*	*Independent*
Advantage West Midlands	3	0	1	0
East of England	2	1	1	0
East Midlands	3	1	0	0
North West	3	1	0	0
One NorthEast	3	0	0	1
South East	2	1	1	0
South West	2	1	1	0
Yorkshire Forward	[1]3	1	0	0

[1] Includes one former councillor who was not re-elected at the last election

Mr. Woodward: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what proportion of his Department's non-departmental public body *(a)* employees and *(b)* expenditure is represented by the eight regional development agencies. [96003]

Ms Armstrong: *(a)* Approximately 5 per cent. (using available figures of RDAs' staffing on 1 April 1999 compared with NDPBs' staffing on 1 April 1998); and

(b) 24 per cent. (planned expenditure for 1999–2000).

Mr. Woodward: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what have been the set-up costs to date of regional development agencies. [96004]

Ms Armstrong: The Regional Development Agencies spent £5.138 million in the four months before they were established on 1 April 1999. In addition to inherited resources, RDAs have £17 million this financial year to spend on administration.

Mr. Woodward: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many meetings *(a)* Ministers and *(b)* officials have had with representatives of each of the regional development agencies. [96009]

Ms Armstrong: Ministers and officials have been involved in a regular, and ongoing, programme of meetings with the Regional Development Agencies.

Mr. Woodward: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many regional development agency strategies he has received; and when and by what method he intends to respond to them. [96011]

Ms Armstrong: Strategies for all eight Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) were presented to Ministers on 26 October. We aim to formally respond to these by the end of the year. A decision on the appropriate method of response will be made after full consideration of the Strategies.

Regional Chambers

Mr. Woodward: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list, by political party, the number of councillors who are members of each regional chamber. [96010]

Ms Armstrong: The current breakdown, by political party, of the councillors who are members of the regional chambers is as follows:

	Conservative	*Labour*	*Liberal Democrat*	*Other*
East	11	10	5	1
East Midlands	17	37	6	8
North East	2	34	4	2
North West	15	38	10	7
South East	33	15	20	5
South West	23	19	30	8
West Midlands	7	27	6	2
Yorkshire and Humber	4	13	2	3

Oxford Traffic

Mr. Woodward: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the Oxford Transport Strategy's impact on traffic congestion in the city. [96597]

Mr. Hill: The Oxford Transport Strategy has been implemented as a rolling programme since its adoption in 1993, supported by a specific central Government funding from 1994–95 onwards. Oxfordshire County Council has established a programme of continuous monitoring to assess the impact of the Oxford Transport Strategy. They estimate that car flows into the central area of Oxford have decreased by about 4.5 per cent. from 1991 to 1998. The Government will continue to assess the results of this monitoring as part of the Local Transport Plan funding regime.

Council Tax

Ms Kelly: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the operation of the council tax benefit subsidy limitation scheme for 2000–01. [96951]

Ms Armstrong: The guideline for the 2000/01 scheme will be the same as last year: a 4.5 per cent. increase in council tax or such higher increase as is necessary to give the council an increase in its budget requirement equal to its full cash SSA increase. As indicated last year, the scheme will operate cumulatively. For each authority, we will use its previous year's council tax at guideline as the starting point.

All other aspects of the scheme will operate on the same basis as last year.

Revenue Support Grant

Angela Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what arrangements he intends to make for the distribution of revenue support grant to local authorities in England. [96952]

Ms Armstrong: I expect to be able to announce to the House full details of the proposed Revenue Support Grant distribution in late November. However it would be helpful both to hon. Members and local authorities to announce now what I am minded to do in terms of grant distribution, phasing in or changes, and consultation.

This year, I propose to set considerable store by stability in the grant system, to help councils plan ahead. In our July 1998 White Paper, "Modern Local Government—In Touch With The People", we said that we would not expect to make fresh changes to the method of calculation of Standard Spending Assessments (SSAs,) except, for example, where there are changes in the functions of councils, or the financing of particular services. We said that the SSAs of individual councils would change to reflect changes in demand for their services as reflected in the data used to calculate the SSAs.

The totals of SSAs will change this year to reflect the increased funding announced last July in the Comprehensive Spending Review. There will be changes to reflect new functions or financing arrangements. The £150 million from the Service Development Fund which we had put in the Education SSA total to help meet the costs of implementing the pay reforms proposed in the Teachers' Green Paper will now be paid as part of a special Grant for that purpose.

Our present intention is that, subject to consultation, and approval by the House, we shall not make any changes to the method of grant distribution generally. We shall need to make some limited adjustments to SSAs to accommodate the establishment of the Greater London Authority (GLA) and related changes, most notably those arising from the alterations to the boundary of the Metropolitan Police area and the Essex, Hertfordshire and Surrey police areas.

We intend to adopt similar rules for Central Support Protection Grant and the SSA Reduction Grant as for this year. This would mean that no authority would receive less central support in 2000–01 than in 1999–2000, and every education authority would receive at least a 1.5 per cent. increase in central support. In both cases, the comparisons must make allowance for the changes connected with the creation of the GLA. The SSA Reduction Grant would operate in the same way as in 1999–2000 but with comparisons moved on a year as necessary.

I am sure that this early indication of our intentions will be welcomed by most authorities for the extra certainty which it gives them in the early stages of their budget decisions for next year.

Given the degree of stability that we propose this year, I do not intend to invite local authorities to hold meetings with Ministers during consultation on the settlement. I expect authorities to put any points in writing; they will all be considered before I finalise my proposals. I shall meet the local authority associations so that they can put any points directly to me. Individual local authorities of course can channel their comments through the associations.

Rail Vehicle Accessibility

Angela Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if there is an exemption order for the fleet of new trains to be introduced into service by Serco Metrolink in respect of any of the provisions of the Rail Vehicle Accessibility Regulations 1998; if he will list all exemption orders from the Rail Vehicle Accessibility Regulations 1998 since 27 July; and if he will make a statement. [96954]

Mr. Hill: As my predecessor explained in her answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow, East (Mr. McNulty) on 9 March 1999, *Official Report*, column *167*, we are expecting to receive a number of exemption applications from train and tram operating companies whose designs for new rail vehicles were well advanced prior to the 1998 Regulations comming into force.

We have received an application from Serco Metrolink relating to the new trams they wish to introduce on the Manchester Metrolink extension to Eccles via Salford Quays. The exemptions, which are of a very minor nature, have been discussed with our statutory advisers the Disabled Persons Transport Advisory Committee. An exemption Order relating to the exemption of these trams has been laid in Parliament today. Copies are available from the Library.

Applications for exemption from certain aspects of the Rail Vehicle Accessibility Regulations 1998 have also been received from both South West Trains Ltd. for their Class 458 rail vehicles and ScotRail Railways Ltd. for their Class 170/4 rail vehicles. The exemptions sought were also discussed with the Disabled Persons Transport Advisory Committee. Exemption Orders relating to the South West Trains vehicles and the ScotRail vehicles were laid before Parliament on 3 September and 13 September respectively. Copies are also available from the Library.

The exemptions will not prevent disabled people from using the new trams or trains. Indeed, we believe that their introduction will make a significant contribution to improving mobility opportunities for disabled people.

DEFENCE

Queen Victoria School

Mr. Russell Brown: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what are the key targets for 1999–2000 for the Chief Executive of Queen Victoria School, Dunblane. [96908]

Mr. Kilfoyle: The Chief Executive of Queen Victoria School has been set the following Key Targets for 1999–2000:

Achieve a staying on rate at School for S4 to S5 of at least 70 per cent. based on a three year trend.

Exceed by 2 per cent. the average percentage pass rate for all Scottish presentations obtaining five or more Credit awards at Standard Grade based on a three year trend.

Achieve a percentage of the presentation at Higher Grade achieving A to C grade greater than or equal to the Scottish average based on a three year trend.

To achieve a pupil per capital cost of no more than £17,415 (at 1998–99 prices) by March 2000.

To generate income to the School of at least £240,000.

Gulf War Syndrome

Mr. Welsh: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many referrals to the Gulf Veterans' Medical Assessment Programme there have been; and what research into Gulf War syndrome the programme sponsors. [96063]

Mr. Spellar: At 27 October 1999 there had been 3,128 referrals to the Gulf Veterans' Medical Assessment Programme (GVMAP). The GVMAP does not sponsor research into Gulf veterans' illnesses. Its two main purposes are:

to investigate patients' medical complaints, make a diagnosis as far as is possible, and recommend appropriate management, or provide reassurance if no illness is found;

to collate statistical information in an anonymised form as a resource for researchers.

As part of this second role, a paper on the clinical findings from the first 1,000 patients seen by the GVMAP was published in the British Medical Journal on 30 January 1999. This was the first time that the results of clinical examinations of a large number of UK Gulf veterans had been published. A paper on the clinical findings from the second 1,000 patients is in preparation and will be submitted for publication later this year.

Defence Evaluation and Research Agency

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if employees of DERA will remain members of the Civil Service Pension Scheme consequent upon his proposals for privatisation. [93705]

Mr. Kilfoyle: Any staff transferring out of the civil service as a result of a Public Private Partnership (PPP) transaction cease to be civil servants and, as such, are no longer eligible for membership of the Principal Civil Service Pension Scheme (PCSPS). The Government Actuary's Department is responsible for certifying that any new scheme they join offers broadly comparable benefits to those offered by the PCSPS. Staff will be treated fairly and in line with the Government's Statement of Practice for Staff Transfers in the Public Sector which sets out comprehensive guidance for the treatment of staff in PPP deals, including new guidance on the protection of staff pensions.

BRC Information System

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on *(a)* the current status and *(b)* the future of the biological, radiological and chemical information system. [95801]

Mr. Hoon: The Biological, Radiological and Chemical Information System (BRACIS) is a computer-based prediction system. If a Biological, Radiological or Chemical hazard were detected, the system would assist commanders in the field to understand the implications of the hazard, and take appropriate action.

BRACIS was acquired in 1995 and is used by all three Services. An updated version of the software was acquired this year and this recently began to be used for training purposes at the Defence Nuclear, Biological & Chemical (NBC) School.

A more capable system is being developed with a communications capability which will enable it to be integrated with other systems contributing towards digitisation of the battlespace.

Under 18-year-olds

Mr. Alan Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many UK service personnel under 18 years of age have been killed in 1998 and 1999 [95630]

Mr. Spellar: Between 1 January 1998 and 26 October, 1999 five UK Service personnel under 18 years of age have been killed, two in 1998 (one drowning, one fall) and three in 1999 (two road traffic accidents, one alcohol poisoning).

Correspondence

Sir Brian Mawhinney: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when the right hon. Member for North-West Cambridgeshire can expect a reply to his letters of 17 June and 1 September on behalf of his constituent, Mr. Allan. [96281]

Mr. Hoon: I replied to the right hon. Member on 23 October.

Sir Brian Mawhinney: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence, pursuant to the Minister's letter of 30 August, when the right hon. Member for North-West Cambridgeshire can expect a substantive reply to his letter of 10 August on behalf of his constituent, Mr. Hall. [96280]

Mr. Hoon: I expect to be in a position to write to the right hon. Member soon.

Departmental Estate

Mr. Randall: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when he expects the review of his Department's estate in London to be published. [95526]

Mr. Kilfoyle: Following on from the Strategic Defence Review (SDR) a detailed Strategic Development Plan for the Greater London area (SDP GL) is being prepared. Substantial progress has been made on this review of the Department's occupancy of its London-based estate and I expect to be able to make a statement early in the new year following our evaluation of its conclusions and recommendations.

Departmental Contracts

Mrs. Ewing: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list for the most recent financial year contracts valued in excess of £10,000 including the value of each for *(a)* London, *(b)* the South-East of England, *(c)* England, *(d)* Scotland, *(e)* Wales and *(f)* Northern Ireland. [95352]

Mr. Kilfoyle *[holding answer 26 October 1999]:* The information requested is available only at disproportionate cost. In aggregate the number and value of prime contracts valued in excess of £10,000 extant in Financial Year 1998–99 by the following locations is listed:

Location	No. of contracts	Value of contracts (£)
London	3,026	3,460,927,447
South-East England	10,734	13,130,333,195
England	34,894	54,202,614,303
Scotland	2,297	3,346,377,904
Wales	923	517,423,851
Northern Ireland	226	587,707,167

Forces Married Quarters

Maria Eagle: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what his Department's policy is on the use of armed forces married quarters by forces personnel, after the breakdown of a marriage, during subsequent relationships. [96432]

Mr. Spellar: MOD policy bans cohabitation in Family Quarters. Occupation is therefore restricted to Service personnel and their spouses, together with dependent children if applicable. While this policy is kept under review, there are currently no plans to change it.

In the event of marital breakdown, the Marital Category of the Service person is changed from married to single. At this point, unless the Service person has custodial responsibilities for a child, they are no longer entitled to occupy a Family Quarter and are consequently required to move into single living accommodation. The estranged family is also required to vacate the Family Quarter, but is given a 93 day notice period in which to do so. However, individual circumstances are given consideration consistent with service requirements.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Education Spending

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list the levels of spending on education per head of the population in each county of England in each year since 1995–96. [94313]

Ms Estelle Morris *[holding answer 19 October 1999]:* The information requested is contained in tables, copies of which have been placed in the Library.

Accurate information per head of population is not available for each of the years requested. Information has, therefore, been provided on the basis of expenditure per pupil. The information contained in the tables shows for each county in England, (i) total spending in primary, secondary and special schools since 1995, (ii) the total number of pupils in those schools, and (iii) the total spending per pupil.

Emotional Development (Children)

Mr. Nigel Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what assessment he has made of the ability of schools to provide conditions for formative emotional development. [95218]

Jacqui Smith: The Government are committed to fostering children's emotional well-being and to doing everything they can to ensure that they have the emotional maturity and security necessary for effective learning. This is a key theme of the Government's booklet "Desirable Outcomes for Children's Learning" and the recently launched Early Learning Goals.

We are making £21 million available through the Standards Fund for 2000–01 to support innovative work in Local Education Authorities on early identification and assessment of emotional and behavioural difficulties. A further £18 million of Standards Fund Grant is available to support implementation of the revised National Curriculum framework. Personal, Social and Health Education (PSHE) in the Curriculum contains provision for pupils to learn how to recognise the symptoms and address the causes of stress and depression.

National Grid for Learning

Mr. Hilary Benn: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many additional personal computers there are in schools as a result of the National Grid for Learning Initiative. [95639]

Jacqui Smith: A Statistical First Release, published in August, indicated that in 1999 there was, on average, one computer for every 13 pupils in primary schools compared to every 18 pupils in 1998. Similarly in secondary schools, there was one computer for every eight pupils in 1999 compared to every nine pupils in 1998. These are the first signs of the effect of the Government's focused investment on ICT in schools through the National Grid for Learning programme and we expect to see further improvement over the next two years.

School Security

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what steps he is taking to assess the threat to security of school premises arising from adjacent public rights of way. [94945]

Jacqui Smith *[holding answer 25 October 1999]:* We treat the issue of school security very seriously and support measures which make schools a safer and more secure environment for pupils and staff. The Department's Working Group on School Security, which includes a representative from the Department for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (DETR), has specifically highlighted public rights of way across school premises an issue to be addressed, and is aware of some local cases. The recent DETR consultation paper, Improving Public Rights of Way in England and Wales, accordingly invited views on proposals to enable highway authorities to divert or close public highways where to do so would protect the safety of the public. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, will announce decisions in the light of the consultations on this in due course. The Department also continues to provide specific grant for school security measures under the Standards Fund : a total of £22 million per year is available specifically for school security improvements, which may include security fencing and other access control measures in order to prevent intrusion.

A/S Levels

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment when he expects syllabuses for A/S level subjects to be available. [95868]

Mr. Wicks: Draft versions of the specifications for all the new Advanced Subsidiary and Advanced level qualifications to be introduced for teaching from September 2000 are now available on the awarding bodies' websites. Synopses of the draft specifications are also available on the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority's website. The finalised specifications will be available to schools and colleges in January 2000.

Franchising

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what representations he has received from the further education sector concerning the proposed changes to the funding arrangements for franchising; and if he will make a statement. [95873]

Mr. Wicks: Representations were invited by the Further Education Funding Council in February 1999 on proposals to tackle the serious problems which had arisen with franchising in some colleges. 153 representations were received of which 136 were from further education colleges. A large majority supported the proposed changes for 1999–2000 which were introduced in July.

PE Teachers

Mr. Spring: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many PE teachers there were in *(a)* primary and *(b)* secondary schools; and what they were as a percentage of the total number of teachers in England, for each year since 1991. [95492]

Ms Estelle Morris: The information is as follows:

PE teachers in secondary schools in England

	Academic year	
	1991–92	*1996–97*
Number of Teachers[1] teaching PE	24,000	20,000
Teachers[1] teaching PE as percentage of all teachers	14	12

[1] Includes teachers without a specific PE qualification

Information about PE teachers in secondary schools for other years, and PE teachers in primary schools is not available.

These reductions took place under the previous administration.

Class Sizes

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment, pursuant to his answer of 27 July 1999, *Official Report*, columns *185–86*, concerning class sizes (ref. 93239), when he plans to write to the hon. Member for Hertsmere. [96479]

Ms Estelle Morris: I will be writing to the hon. Member next week.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

National Lottery

Mr. Spring: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what are, in respect of the revenue in the National Lottery Distributions Fund Reserve *(a)* the amount (1) received and (2) drawn down, *(b)* the percentage drawn down, *(c)* the balance available and *(d)* the amount committed for (i) the Arts Council of England, (ii) the Arts Council of Northern Ireland, (iii) the Scottish Arts Council, (iv) the Arts Council of Wales, (v) the National Lottery's Charities Board, (vi) the National Heritage Memorial Fund, (vii) the Millennium Commission, (viii) the New Opportunities Fund, (ix) Sport England, (x) the Sports Council of Northern Ireland, (xi) the Scottish Sports Council, (xii) the UK Sports Council and (xiii) the Sports Council for Wales and (xiv) the total of the above. [95486]

Kate Hoey: The following table shows the figures requested, as at 30 September 1999. In addition to the figures shown here, the National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts has received an endowment of £200 million from the National Lottery, all of which has been drawn down from the National Lottery Distribution Fund.

Figures for the amount committed are taken from the National Lottery Awards Database using information supplied by the distributors. They do not include money set aside for a specific purpose but not committed to a particular project.

	Amount received (£)	*Amount drawn down (£)*	*Percentage drawn down*	*Balance available (£)*	*Amount committed (£)*
Arts Council of England	1,197,614,609	920,492,229	77	277,122,380	1,132,457,415
Arts Council of Northern Ireland	42,419,281	16,607,723	39	25,811,558	35,467,589
Scottish Arts Council	130,640,795	79,801,991	61	50,838,804	116,821,408
Arts Council of Wales	72,650,470	48,852,619	67	23,797,851	77,310,838
National Lottery Charities Board	1,479,051,437	834,882,356	56	644,169,081	1,384,382,465
National Heritage Memorial Fund	1,497,290,954	614,906,973	41	882,383,981	1,223,222,820
Millennium Commission	1,662,106,529	941,790,686	57	720,315,843	1,744,220,362
New Opportunities Fund	428,058,277	9,768,541	2	418,289,736	12,984,543
Sport England	1,228,733,896	760,081,000	62	468,652,896	959,416,652
Sports Council for Northern Ireland	40,784,238	25,640,265	63	15,143,973	31,634,959
Sport Scotland	131,782,828	58,540,070	44	73,242,758	84,351,394
UK Sport	6,865,190	1,839,362	27	5,025,828	1,394,723
Sports Council for Wales	73,154,628	44,518,258	61	28,636,370	46,176,789
Total	7,991,153,132	4,357,722,073	55	3,633,431,059	6,849,841,957

Mr. Spring: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what assessment he has made of the percentage drawn down for National Lottery expenditure allocations *(a)* in the UK and *(b)* elsewhere; and if he will make a statement. [95493]

Kate Hoey: 56 per cent. of the money paid into the National Lottery Distribution Fund has been drawn down for use by the National Lottery distributing bodies. A further 31 per cent. has been firmly committed but not yet drawn down.

I have made no assessment of the percentages drawn down by lotteries overseas. Given the different ways in which Lottery surpluses are used around the world, I do not believe such comparisons would be helpful. For example, the surplus of many state lotteries are paid straight to the national exchequers, so the question of draw down does not arise.

I am keen to ensure that National Lottery money should be put to effective use as quickly as possible. Many of the reforms that the Government have introduced—such as moving the focus of the Lottery from buildings to people and allowing distributors to delegate their functions—should help to facilitate this.

Sports Strategy

Mr. Spring: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will make a statement on the reasons for the delay in announcing his Department's sports strategy. [95485]

Kate Hoey: The sports policy paper will be published early next year. In order for the paper to be truly effective, it is important that there is the widest possible period in which to consult and canvass opinion.

VAT (Listed Buildings)

Mr. Spring: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what recent representations he has received regarding VAT on work on listed buildings; and if he will make a statement. [95489]

Mr. Alan Howarth: In the year to 26 October 1999, this Department received 13 representations from organisations and individuals on the subject of VAT on work to listed buildings.

Responsibility for VAT rests with HM Treasury. There is no provision in current EC law to apply a reduced rate to all listed buildings.

New Opportunities Fund

Mr. Spring: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what will be the total sums for each of the next four years to be allocated to out-of-school-hours child care places from the New Opportunities Fund. [95487]

Kate Hoey: The New Opportunities Fund is required by the Policy Directions that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has issued to allocate £220 million in total to out-of-school hours child care places by 2002. There is no pre-determined annual profile for expenditure: the actual allocation of funding is a matter for the New Opportunities Fund taking into account the local child care plans drawn up by the local child care partnerships.

Local Authority Funding

Mr. Spring: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what recent discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions regarding the amount of funding provided by local authorities to *(a)* the arts, *(b)* museums and galleries and *(c)* supporting the upkeep of listed buildings. [95488]

Mr. Alan Howarth: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has not had any recent discussions with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions on these subjects. Officials in the two departments keep in regular touch.

Physical Education

Ms Kelly: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what discussions his Department has had with the Department for Education and Employment about the role of physical education and sport in the national curriculum. [95952]

Kate Hoey: Ministers and officials from DCMS and DfEE work closely together and share a common aim to improve the quality of Physical Education and sport provision in schools. DCMS was involved in the National Curriculum Review announced by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Employment in September. We welcome the restoration of the PE programme of study for primary schools, to be re-introduced from September 2000.

On 5 October, the Under-Secretary of State for Education and Employment, my hon. Friend the Member for Redditch (Jacqui Smith), and I both spoke at the Sport England Conference "Education and Sport". We are also working together to develop the Active Schools Sports Co-ordinators initiative in schools. I have met with, and will continue to meet, my hon. Friend to discuss Physical Education and sport in schools.

SOLICITOR-GENERAL

RAF Menwith Hill

Mr. Baker: To ask the Solicitor-General what was the cost to public funds of the prosecution of cases, subsequently discontinued, for contravention of bye-laws relating to RAF Menwith Hill; and if he will make a statement. [95745]

The Solicitor-General: The prosecution costs arising from these proceedings are estimated at £700, which includes the cost of case preparation, conferences, and court attendance by a senior Crown Prosecutor at the magistrates court. The figure does not include work undertaken for the test case at the Crown Court and subsequently in the Divisional Court, neither does it include the costs incurred by the Crown Prosecution Service in discussion with the Ministry of Defence police about prosecution policy in general.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Holocaust Survivors

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what representations he has made to the banking industry concerning the amount of bank charges levied for the conversion to sterling from deutchmarks of sums awarded to holocaust survivors; what response he has received from the banking industry; and if he will make a statement. [94822]

Mr. Byers: I am pursuing this matter with the banking industry and will write to my hon. Friend in due course. I will place a copy of the letter in the Libraries of the House.

Tunisia

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many licences for military, security and police exports to Tunisia have been approved by his Department in the last five years; and if he will list the nature of the equipment, together with any current applications being considered. [95098]

Dr. Howells: The entry in the relevant legislation under which the export of goods is controlled is known as their rating. The Export Control Organisation's computer databases have been interrogated and the following results were obtained. Between 1 January 1994 and 12 October 1999, 57 Standard Individual Export Licences (SIELs) were issued for the export to consignees or end-users in Tunisia of goods subject to export control by being listed in Part III of Schedule 1 to the Export of Goods (Control) Order 1994, commonly known as the Military List. Between 1 January 1994 and 31 December 1998, 71 Open Individual Export Licences (OIELs) were issued for the export to Tunisia of such goods; no OIELs were issued for the export of such goods to Tunisia between 1 January and 12 October 1999.

Details of all SIELs and OIELs issued between 2 May and 31 December 1997 were set out in the Government's Annual Report on Strategic Export Controls, published by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office in March 1999. This Report gives details of the military equipment licensed for export during the period as well as the ratings of these goods. Similar details of the military equipment licensed in later years will be set out in the relevant Annual Reports.

A breakdown of the licences issued between 1 January 1994 and 1 May 1997, and between 1 January 1998 and 12 October 1999 are set out in the table. Individual licences may cover a range of goods with various ratings (and OIELs may also cover a range of countries). Where this is so, the licence is included in the Table in the total for all of the relevant ratings.

Standard Individual Export Licences issued for the export to Tunisia of goods on the Military List

Rating	*1994*	*1995*	*1996*	*1 January 1997 to 1 May 1997*	*1998*	*1 January 1999 to 12 October 1999*
ML1	1	2	2	1	0	0
ML2	1	1	0	0	1	1
ML3	1	1	1	0	0	0
ML4	0	0	1	1	2	0
ML5	1	0	0	0	1	1
ML7	0	2	0	0	1	0
ML9	0	0	1	0	0	0
ML10	2	0	0	0	1	2
ML11	4	2	4	1	2	1
ML13	1	0	0	0	0	0
ML15	0	0	2	1	0	0
PL5001	0	0	0	0	1	0
PL5006	0	0	1	2	0	0
PL5017	0	0	1	0	0	0
PL5027	1	0	0	0	0	0

Open Individual Export Licences issued for the export to Tunisia of goods on the Military List

Rating	*1994*	*1995*	*1996*	*1 January 1997 to 1 May 1997*	*1998*
ML1	1	0	0	1	1
ML2	1	0	0	0	0
ML3	1	0	0	0	0
ML4	5	0	0	1	0
ML5	4	1	2	1	0
ML6	1	0	0	0	0
ML8	6	1	0	1	1
ML9	2	0	1	1	1
ML10	14	3	2	3	2
ML11	6	2	1	1	1
ML13	1	1	0	0	1
ML14	1	1	0	0	1
ML15	1	0	0	2	1

Open Individual Export Licences issued for the export to Tunisia of goods on the Military List

Rating	*1994*	*1995*	*1996*	*1 January 1997 to 1 May 1997*	*1998*
ML16	1	0	0	0	0
ML18	1	0	0	0	0
ML22	3	0	0	1	0
PL5001	1	0	0	0	0
PL5002	0	0	0	0	1
PL5018	0	0	0	0	1
PL5027	2	0	0	0	0

At 12 October 1999, decisions had not yet been taken on seven applications for OIELs to export such goods to Tunisia; there are no such applications pending for SIELs.

Pending applications for OIELs covering the export of goods on the Military List to Tunisia

Rating	*Number of applications pending*
ML9	3
ML10	3
ML18	1
ML22	3
PL5017	1

This information does not cover any Media OIELs that may have been issued during this period. Media OIELs authorise the export to all destinations of protective clothing, mainly for the protection of aid agency workers and journalists, when working in areas of conflict.

This information should be considered in light of the answer I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Kingswood (Mr. Berry) on 27 July 1999, *Official Report*, columns *307–08*.

In addition, Tunisia is a permitted destination on certain Open General Export Licences, covering the export of goods on the Military List; copies of all Open General Export Licences valid at any time during the period are in the Library of the House.

Comprehensive Spending Review

Dr. Gibson: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when he will assess the output of the resource allocation under the comprehensive spending review; and what sectors of the economy he plans to examine as part of this study. [95797]

Mr. Byers: The Department has monitoring processes in place to assess progress against the targets set in its Public Service Agreement on the basis of the CSR settlement for 1999–2001. This work covers the economy as a whole, for example through targets to narrow the productivity gap and improve performance against competitiveness indicators; there are also specific targets covering for example the small firms sector, exporters, uptake of e-commerce, energy and inward investment. Good progress is already being made; for example I have recently increased the target for the number of SMEs wired to the digital market place from 1 million to 1.5 million. Performance against all our targets will be considered in preparation for the next spending review, to set budgets to 2003–04.

As my hon. Friend is aware, the Science Budget underpins all sectors of the economy and the social, health and environmental services. As a result of the science CSR settlement, successful proposals have been announced for the University Challenge and Science Enterprise Challenge initiatives, and for the first round of the now £750 million joint Infrastructure fund. As far as the additional allocations to the Research Councils are concerned, I have asked for a full report on the progress made so far as input to the current spending review.

Trading Names

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what plans he has to establish a statutory register of trading names. [95787]

Dr. Howells: There are no plans to establish a statutory register of trading names.

Fraud

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what plans he has to introduce legislation to prevent trading and advertising of services by individuals who have been convicted for fraudulent behaviour in the provision of those services. [96470]

Dr. Howells: The Consumer White Paper "Modern Markets: Confident Consumers" sets out details of the proposals to amend the Fair Trading Act 1973 to provide powers for the courts to grant injunctions against specific practices carried out by specified traders and to ban from trading for a period traders with a history of disregarding their legal obligations.

Timeshares

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on the implementation of the EU Directive on Timeshares, which was adopted in United Kingdom law in April 1997. [R] [96318]

Dr. Howells: The EU Timeshare Directive was implemented in the United Kingdom by the Timeshare Regulations 1997, which amended the Timeshare Act 1992. The Timeshare Regulations were laid before Parliament on 25 March 1997 and came into force on 29 April 1997.

Indonesia

Ann Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what factors underlay the granting of extensions to the period of validity of standard individual export and transhipment licences for transfer to Indonesia, for a period equivalent to the duration of the EU arms embargo; and what is his Department's policy towards the renewal of the embargo after 16 January 2000. [96114]

Dr. Howells *[holding answer 28 October 1999]:* By a Common Position, adopted on 16 September, EU member states decided to impose an arms embargo to Indonesia for four months. In accordance with this decision, the Government decided that all individual licences covering the export or transhipment to Indonesia of military goods or technology should be suspended for four months and that, because the embargo is time-limited, their period of validity should be extended by four months also. The UK and other EU member states are monitoring closely the situation in Indonesia and East Timor and will take whatever action becomes necessary.

Belize

Mr. Peter Bradley: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry which Ministers in his Department visited Belize in each year between 1990 and 1997; and what support his Department gave Belize in each year. [96211]

Mr. Caborn *[holding answer 28 October 1999]:* No DTI Ministers visited Belize in the period 1990–97.

The full range of official trade promotion and support services is available to British companies who are interested in undertaking business in Belize. This included support for three trade missions which visited Belize during the period in question:

1991: CARITAG (Caribbean Trade Advisory Group) Investment Mission

1996: CARITAG/LATAG (Latin America Trade Advisory Group) Mission

1997: CABCC (Central America British Chamber of Commerce) Mission.

With the exception of the CARITAG investment mission, all the trade missions were non-sector specific and included companies representing a wide cross sector of industries and services.

Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty

Mr. Colman: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry which countries have *(a)* signed and *(b)* ratified the Additional Protocol to the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty. [96422]

Dr. Howells: *(a)* Forty-four States have signed protocols additional to their existing safeguards agreements: Armenia, Australia, Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Canada, China, Croatia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Ecuador, Finland, France, Georgia, Germany, Ghana, Greece, Holy See, Hungary, Indonesia, Ireland, Italy, Japan, Jordan, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Monaco, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Philippines, Poland, Portugal, Republic of Korea, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, United Kingdom, United States of America, Uruguay and Uzbekistan. In addition, Cuba has concluded an Additional Protocol which it has not yet signed.

(b) The Additional Protocols of seven States have entered into force: Australia, Holy See, Indonesia, Jordan, Monaco, New Zealand and Uzbekistan.

Mr. Colman: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what assessment he has made of the effectiveness of the voluntary arrangements by companies and institutions to fulfil the requirements of the Additional Protocol to the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty. [96416]

Dr. Howells: The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) was this week provided with voluntary declarations of information of the type which the UK will have to provide under Article 2 of the protocol additional to the UK/Euratom/IAEA safeguards agreement once the protocol enters into force. The declarations were provided with the full co-operation of the relevant companies and institutions.

Mr. Colman: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what plans he has for bringing forward ratification of the Additional Protocol to the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty. [96420]

Dr. Howells: In order for the Protocol additional to the 1976 safeguards agreement between the United Kingdom, the International Atomic Energy Agency and the European Atomic Energy Community to enter into force, primary legislation is required. The Government are considering how legislation for this purpose may best be brought forward at an early date.

Small Business Service

Mr. Baldry: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list the Government schemes and programmes that will be delivered by the Small Business Service. [96563]

Ms Hewitt: The Small Business Service will provide access to a comprehensive range of information, advice, counselling and support from government, public, private and voluntary sectors.

International Trade Strategy

Barbara Follett: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement about the national strategy for international trade development and promotion. [96906]

Mr. Caborn: I am pleased to announce today, on behalf of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, the publication of the national strategy for international trade development and promotion.

I am arranging for copies of the strategy to be placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

Regional Venture Capital Funds

Dr. Starkey: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what was the outcome of the consultation on the paper, "Addressing the SME Equity Gap-Support for Regional Venture Capital Funds". [96907]

Mr. Byers: I announced to the House on 6 July 1999, *Official Report*, columns *454–55*, that the Government were seeking views on the design and form of the support for the creation of the Regional Venture Capital element of the Enterprise Fund.

During the consultation exercise over 1,000 copies of the consultation document, "Addressing the SME Equity Gap—Support for Regional Venture Capital Funds" were distributed and over 100 replies have been received. The distribution and replies covered a wide range of interested groups and individuals; entrepreneurs, small firms, Regional Development Agencies, the venture capital and finance industries, business support organisations, local authorities, academics and other interested parties.

The proposals for Regional Venture Capital Funds received a significant level of support from respondents. 100 per cent. of SMEs and entrepreneurs supported the outlined proposals as appropriate methods of motivating the creation of viable, regionally based venture capital funds to invest in the equity gap. And over 89 per cent. of all respondents expressed the same view. There was widespread agreement that the lack of small scale equity finance was an inhibitor to growth, especially for SMEs. A full summary of responses to the consultation document have been placed in the Library of the House.

In November, the Government will issue bidding guidance, informed by the responses to the consultation

exercise, to Regional Partnerships proposing to stimulate the creation of Regional Venture Capital Funds.

WALES

Equal Opportunities

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he *(a)* has established and *(b)* published a baseline for policy appraisal against which to measure progress on equal treatment. [94857]

Mr. Paul Murphy: My Department has no executive responsibilities. For the staff of my Department, most of whom are on secondment from the National Assembly for Wales, my office has adopted the policies of the Assembly which are identical to those of the former Welsh Office.

New Deal Environmental Task Force

Mr. Denzil Davies: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what projects are currently being undertaken under the New Deal Environmental Task Force within the Llanelli constituency. [95791]

Mr. Paul Murphy: The contract for the Environmental Task Force option in the Llanelli constituency area is held by Carmarthenshire County Council. The Council then sub contract to:

Carmarthenshire Training—offer fencing/riverbank maintenance/ stream improvement opportunities.

Foothold Crochan—recycle white goods (cookers, fridges, etc.) and furniture at their centre in Trostre.

Princes Trust—offer their 26 week national programme (team building/motivation/employer placement).

National Trust—undertake fencing/planting/chainsaw/footpath maintenance providing an excellent grounding in rural and forestry skills.

Jobforce Wales—is converting the disused Mynydd Mawr railway into a footpath and also operate a woodcraft centre.

British Trust for Conservation Volunteers—are undertaking landscape improvement and nature conservation work at the Mynydd Mawr Woodland/Eco Park at Tumble.

Consultants

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how much money the Welsh Office spent on consultants for each of the last three years up to 7 May. [96551]

Mr. Paul Murphy: The following figures detail Welsh Office expenditure on consultants in the relevant financial years, running from 1 April to the following 31 March.

Year	*£*
1995–97	739,363
1997–98	1,311,459
1998–99	1,836,194

This information is not readily available for periods beginning 8 May and running to the following 7 May, and could be provided in that format only at disproportionate cost.

Welsh Office Contracts (PR)

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what contracts have been awarded by the Welsh Office in the last year to *(a)* the public relations company, Good Relations and *(b)* the public relations company, HHCL. [96553]

Mr. Paul Murphy: Howell Henry Chauldecott Lowry (HHCL) were the advertising agency appointed on behalf of the Welsh Office by the Central Office of Information to work on the Assembly Information Campaign. That is the only contract awarded to this company in the last year.

Bell Pottinger Good Relations were sub-contracted by HHCL to work on "free media", which formed a part of the Assembly Information Campaign. They were also awarded a contract directly by the Welsh Office to assist with the establishment and maintenance of a web-site for National Assembly for Wales.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Deportations

Mr. Malins: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many persons have been deported from the UK in each of the last three years for which figures are available as *(a)* failed asylum seekers and *(b)* others whose appeals under immigration law have failed. [95444]

Mrs. Roche: The total number of people who have been removed or made a voluntary departure from the United Kingdom between 1996 and 1998 is shown in the table. The table also shows the number of asylum applicants who were removed or left voluntarily in each of the three years, the number who were removed or left the United Kingdom as a result of deportation action being taken against them, and the number of people in that group who had claimed asylum at some stage. Information about the number who had appealed unsuccessfully before removal is not collected centrally and could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

Persons [1] removed or departed voluntarily under port or enforcement procedures, 1996 to 1998

	1996	*1997*	*1998*
Total number of persons removed or departed voluntarily from the United Kingdom	26,840	31,150	34,900
Of whom asylum[2,3] applicants	4,840	7,160	6,890
Total number of persons removed or made a voluntary departure as a result of deportation action being taken against them	2,000	2,070	1,710
Of whom asylum[2,3] applicants	400	450	350

[1] Does not include persons who may leave the United Kingdom without informing the Immigration and Nationality Directorate
[2] Asylum removals and voluntary departures excludes dependants
[3] 1998 figures are provisional

Note:
All figures are rounded to 10

Ministerial Meetings (US)

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many times Ministers in his Department have met members and officials of the United States Government since 22 February, specifying the dates and locations of each meeting, the Ministers involved at each meeting; and the names of the members and officials of the United States Government at each meeting. [93951]

Mr. Straw: Information on meetings between my Ministers and members and officials of the United States Government since 22 February are listed in the table.

Name	*Date*	*Location*
Minister: Paul Boateng		
George Dragnich, Labour Counsellor, American Embassy	18 May 1999	London
Elizabeth Fine, Deputy Assistant Attorney General, Office of Policy Development, Department of Justice	3 June 1999	Washington DC
Jeremy Travis, Director of National Institute for Justice	3 June 1999	Washington DC
Jose Cerda, Domestic Policy Adviser to the President	4 June 1999	Washington DC
Eric Holder, Deputy Attorney General	4 June 1999	Washington DC
Jim Robinson, Assistant Attorney General (Criminal Division)	4 June 1999	Washington DC
Mark Richard, Deputy Assistant Attorney General (Criminal Division)	4 June 1999	Washington DC
General Barry McCaffrey, Director, Office of National Drug Control Policy	25 October 1999	London
Possible:		
Lynne Battiglia, United States Attorney, District of Maryland	1 June 1999	Baltimore
Donnie Marshall, Acting Administrator, Drug Enforcement Administration	1 June 1999	Washington DC
Louis Freeh, Director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation	2 June 1999	Washington DC
Minister: Charles Clarke		
United States Attorney Journal, Ms Janet Reno	25 October 1999	United States Embassy Moscow
Officials from United States Justice Department	25 October 1999	United States Embassy Moscow
Embassy officials	25 October 1999	United States Embassy Moscow
United States Drugs Tsar, General Barry McCaffrey	25 October 1999	London
Bob Agresti—Policy Advisor	25 October 1999	London
George Dragnich—United States Embassy	25 October 1999	London

In addition, I keep in regular touch with Ms Reno both by letter and by telephone.

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what meetings he held with members and officials of the United States Government during his visits to the United States on 9–10 December 1997; and if he will list the date and location of each meeting, and the names of the members and officials of the United States Government at each meeting. [93952]

Mr. Straw: When I attended the G8 Ministerial meeting, in the United States of America, in February 1997, I held one meeting with the Director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation and one meeting with the Attorney General. I keep in close and regular touch with the Attorney General by memo, by letter, and by telephone.

Suspended Sentences

Mr. Malins: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to widen the opportunities for the judiciary to impose suspended sentences of imprisonment. [95474]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Suspended sentences may be imposed only in "exceptional circumstances". Widening the opportunities for their use was one of the recommendations in the Home Affairs Committee's Report on Alternatives to Prison Sentences, published in 1998. As the Government's Reply to the Report noted, we are considering this issue, taking account of the Committee's views.

Correspondence

Mr. Sanders: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he expects to reply to the letter from the hon. Member for Torbay of 8 July regarding Mrs. Shani Green's application for British residency. [95763]

Mrs. Roche: Mrs. Green has been granted 12 months leave to remain on the basis of her marriage. I wrote to the hon. Gentleman to this effect on 28 October.

Sir Brian Mawhinney: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when the right hon. Member for North-West Cambridgeshire can expect a reply to his letter of 9 July on behalf of his constituent, Mrs. Newman. [96285]

Mr. Straw: I wrote to the right hon. Member on 28 October in response to his letter of 9 July on behalf of his constituent, Mrs. Newman. I am extremely sorry that I was unable to do so sooner, and would like, through the right hon. Member, to extend my apology to Mrs. Newman.

Sir Brian Mawhinney: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when the right hon. Member for North-West Cambridgeshire can expect a reply to his letter of 5 July on behalf of his constituent, Mr. Pottinger. [96286]

Mr. Straw: I wrote to the right hon. Member on 28 October in response to his letter of 5 July on behalf of his constituent, Mr. Pottinger. I am extremely sorry that I was unable to do so sooner, and, through the right hon. Member, would like to extend my apology to Mr. Pottinger.

Sir Brian Mawhinney: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when the right hon. Member for North-West Cambridgeshire can expect replies to his letters of 6 July, 10 August, 7 September and 27 September on behalf of his constituent, Dr. N. of Stranground, Peterborough. [96284]

Mrs. Roche: I wrote to the right hon. Member on 28 October.

Remembrance Sunday

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to rename Armistice Day and Remembrance Sunday. [96028]

Mr. Straw: We have no plans to rename Armistice Day (11 November) or Remembrance Sunday (the second Sunday in November).

Chinese President (State Visit)

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) what discussions *(a)* he, *(b)* Ministers in his Department and *(c)* officials in his Department hold each year with (i) the Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis and (ii) other senior Metropolitan Police personnel on the policing of state visits to the capital; [96218]

(2) what discussions *(a)* he, *(b)* Ministers in his Department and *(c)* officials in his Department hold each year with (i) the Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis and (ii) other senior Metropolitan Police personnel on the maintenance of public order within (1) the royal parks and (2) the vicinity of the Palace of Westminster; [96214]

(3) what discussions *(a)* he, *(b)* Ministers in his Department and *(c)* officials in his Department had with (i) the Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis and (ii) other senior Metropolitan Police personnel on the plans for policing the recent visit of the President of the People's Republic of China. [96215]

Mr. Charles Clarke *[holding answer 28 October 1999]:* My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary meets regularly with the Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis to discuss policing issues in London, and there are regular contacts with the Metropolitan Police at both Ministerial and official level. There were no specific discussions of the issues specified at my right hon. Friend, the Home Secretary's meetings, prior to the Chinese State Visit nor, as far as can be ascertained, at other meetings between Ministers and officials and the Metropolitan Police. At a regular meeting between my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary and the Commissioner on 27 October, the Commissioner told my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary that the Metropolitan Police were conducting an internal review into the policing of the visit of the President of China.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what guidance representatives from his Department issued to the police responsible for the policing of the visit by the Chinese President pertaining to the treatment of demonstrators. [96581]

Mr. Charles Clarke: None.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what representations were made by his Department to the Royal Parks Police about the policing of the state visit of the President of China. [96490]

Mr. Charles Clarke: None.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what meetings were held between his Department and the Royal Parks Police about the policing of the state visit of the President of China. [96489]

Mr. Charles Clarke: None.

Anti-social Behaviour Orders

Mr. Brady: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how may anti-social behaviour orders have been implemented in each police authority area. [96450]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Information on the number of Orders made is not held centrally, but we are aware of six Orders made since 1 April 1999, as follows:

Avon and Somerset—1

Derbyshire—2

Merseyside—2

West Mercia—1.

Police

Mr. Wilkinson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what estimate he has made of the number of police officers who will leave the police service over the next three years. [95577]

Mr. Straw: Given the uncertainty surrounding the number of officers who take early retirement on medical grounds or who leave the service before normal retirement age for other reasons, it is not possible to project actual wastage in the future. However, the actual wastage over the last three years has been running at around five and a half thousand per year. The hon. Member will wish to be aware of papers and calculations which I presented to the Home Affairs Select Committee on Tuesday 26 October which had been prepared by the Research, Development and Statistics Directorate of my Department and by Professor Buck of Essex University. I am sending the hon. Member a copy, and copies are also available in the Library.

Dangerous Driving

Mrs. Brinton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what research his Department has *(a)* commissioned and *(b)* evaluated on the issue of deaths caused by negligent or dangerous driving. [95110]

Mr. Hill *[holding answer 25 October 1999]:* I have been asked to reply.

Research is currently in progress to study the effect of the Road Traffic Act 1991 on prosecutions for dangerous driving. The project, which is being undertaken for the

Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions by the Transport Research Laboratory, began in May 1998 and is due to be completed in October 2000.

Issues covered by the study include: whether there is sufficiently clear guidance on the law and its purpose, and how this affects the choice of penalty; comparison of sentencing trends before and since the 1991 Act; and how the changes in the definition of "bad driving" offences have been implemented by police and courts.

The aim is to obtain an understanding of what leads prosecutors and courts to select one offence or one penalty rather than another. By examining the whole procedure from charging to sentencing, it may be possible to identify ways of improving practice, so as to deter poor driving more effectively.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Pensioners (Benefits)

Mr. O'Hara: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many pensioners receive *(a)* Income Support, *(b)* Housing Benefit and *(c)* Council Tax Benefit in each region of the UK. [95659]

Mr. Rooker: The information is not available in the format requested. Such information as is available is in the tables.

Pensioners in receipt of income support, housing benefit and council tax benefit by region, Great Britain, May 1998

Thousand

	Income Support	*Housing Benefit*	*Council Tax Benefit*
North East	92	115	151
North West	234	228	349
Yorks and Humberside	160	186	261
East Midlands	111	120	180
West Midlands	172	175	270
Eastern	126	146	210
London	204	231	288
South East	168	188	257
South West	128	124	191
Wales	94	88	134
Scotland	169	225	303
Great Britain	1,659	1,826	2,593

Notes:

1. Pensioners are defined as benefit units where either the claimant and/or the partner is aged 60 or over.
2. Figures are for benefit units which may be a single person or a couple.
3. The Income Support figures are based on a 5 per cent. sample of Income Support claimants, the Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit figures are based on a 1 per cent. sample and as such figures are subject to a degree of sampling error.
4. Numbers are rounded to the nearest thousand.
5. The data for Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit are provisional and may be subject to change.

Sources:

1. Income Support Statistics Quarterly Enquiry, May 1998. Later Income Support data are held, the Income Support Statistics Quarterly Enquiry May 1999 refers.
2. Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit Management Information System Annual 1 per cent. Sample for Great Britain as at 14 May 1998.

Pensioners in Northern Ireland in receipt of income support as at 31 August 1999 and housing benefit as at 31 May 1999

	Number
Income support August 1999	71,308
Housing benefit May 1999	46,012

Notes:

1. Pensioners are defined as benefit units where either the claimant and/or the partner is aged 60.
2. Figures are for benefit units which may be a single person or a couple.
3. Figures are based on a 100 per cent. scan of Income Support claimants as at August 1999 and Housing Benefit Claimants as at May 1999, for Norther Ireland.

Sources:

1. Income Support—General Matching Service 100 per cent. scan, August 1999.
2. Housing Benefit—Northern Ireland Housing Executive 100 per cent. scan, May 1999.

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many pensioners are not yet receiving their full benefit entitlement because of NIRSII computer problems. [96278]

Mr. Rooker: I refer the hon. Member to the Written Answer the then Minister of State, my hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Mr. Timms), gave the hon. Member for Northavon (Mr. Webb) on 22 July 1999, *Official Report*, columns *575–76*.

Benefit Fraud Hotline

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) if he will provide a breakdown of the expenditure on relaunching the Benefit Fraud Hotline; [96277]

(2) what is the period of the Fraud Hotline advertising campaign covered by the expenditure announced on 25 October. [96279]

Mr. Rooker: The National Benefit Fraud Hotline has not been re-launched. It has been running continuously since August 1996. A further marketing campaign will run from 1 November 1999 to 24 March 2000.

The campaign has a budget of £450,000. The breakdown of expenditure is as follows:

	£000
Radio media costs	360
Press media costs	54
Production (including posters for BA offices)	36
Total	450

HEALTH

Merseyside Health Action Zone

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how the Merseyside Health Action Zone programme will tackle ill health, accidents and violence due to alcohol abuse. [94634]

Mr. Hutton: Merseyside Health Action Zone has recognised the effect of problem drinking on the health and quality of life for individuals, their families and the

wider community. The HAZ has developed plans to address this issue which include locally developed interventions whereby each district on Merseyside is developing their own schemes to deal with alcohol, linking to the Drug Action Team Plan and Health Improvement Programmes. The "Arrest Referral Scheme" is a Mersey-wide proposal that will work closely with Merseyside Police and the Safer Merseyside Partnership single regeneration budget to provide support to individuals who have been arrested and to put them in touch with relevant services relating to drugs, alcohol, housing, debt and benefit advice and health care services.

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how the Merseyside Health Action Zone programme will empower people to manage common illnesses. [94632]

Mr. Hutton: The Merseyside Health Action Zone programme includes a number of interventions which will empower people to manage common illnesses. These will complement other Government initiatives like NHS Direct and walk-in centres. An example of a HAZ scheme being developed allows pharmacists to dispense free over-the-counter medication to eligible patients for the treatment of colds and minor ailments without the need to visit their general practitioner.

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how the Merseyside Health Action Zone will ensure equal access to quality services for cardio respiratory disease, cancer, infectious disease and mental health. [94631]

Mr. Hutton: Ensuring equal access to quality services is a main theme of the Merseyside Health Action Zone. Schemes are being developed and implemented to tackle these major causes of ill health. HAZ funding is being used in an innovative way to set up "Community Cardiology Teams" that will help optimise the care of the estimated 600,000 coronary heart disease sufferers on Merseyside. The HAZ has a further scheme to improve the uptake of influenza vaccination within vulnerable groups e.g. people with chronic heart or respiratory disease.

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to improve and modernise health services on *(a)* Merseyside and *(b)* in Sefton. [94652]

Mr. Hutton: Merseyside Health Action Zone is already developing and implementing plans to improve and modernise health services across the whole of Merseyside, including Sefton. The current schemes include £550,000 to tackle coronary heart disease and a further £500,000 to invest in cancer services across Merseyside. The HAZ has also identified £250,000 to support the centralisation of hospital based infectious disease services for Merseyside.

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the progress of the Merseyside Health Action Zone. [94650]

Mr. Hutton: Merseyside Health Action Zone is the largest and most complex in the country. Significant energy is being invested in building the partnership across the whole of Merseyside. The HAZ is already implementing schemes both to modernise services and tackle the underlying causes of ill health. Schemes include work to further tackle heart disease and cancer.

Patient-controlled Analgesia

Mrs. Lait: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what progress is being made in introducing patient-controlled analgesia *(a)* intravenously and *(b)* orally in NHS hospitals; [95080]

(2) how many NHS hospitals or trusts have introduced patient-controlled analgesia *(a)* intravenously and *(b)* orally. [95081]

Mr. Hutton: Oral analgesia, taken regularly or as required, is available in all National Health Service hospitals where surgery takes place. Patient controlled analgesia administrated intravenously is a safe and effective method of delivering pain relief which is becoming the standard method of administering opioid analgesia in hospitals where major surgery takes place.

Nursing Homes

Mr. Blizzard: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to ensure that elderly people in need of places in nursing homes can be transferred from NHS hospitals when they are declared ready to be discharged. [95559]

Mr. Hutton: We are working to modernise health and social services and are undertaking a number of relevant activities. Promoting independence is a joint priority for the National Health Service and social services and a key element of this is ensuring that people are not kept in hospital when they do not need to be there. The Health Act 1999 provides new opportunities for health and local authorities to work together in partnership to improve the health of individuals and communities.

We are developing a National Service Framework for Older People to drive up quality and reduce variation in health care for older people. The National Service Framework is being developed with the assistance of an external reference group which, amongst other things, is considering transitions to, from and within hospitals.

We have allocated £887 million over three years to local authorities to help them work with the NHS to develop services which prevent admission to hospital and facilitate early discharge, which help local authorities and NHS bodies to provide more seamless care and which help and support carers.

NHS Research Scientists

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what is the total establishment of research scientists within the NHS by salary grade; and how many are currently employed at the lowest grade. [95683]

Mr. Hutton: Research in the National Health Service is undertaken by a range of staff groups and grades. Workforce information relating to the number of research scientists employed by the NHS is not available.

Wingrove Nurses Home

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if the sale of the Wingrove Nurses Home, Westgate Road, Newcastle, has been completed; and what is the name of the purchaser. [95875]

Mr. Hutton: The property has been sold subject to contract to Angel Heights Developments Limited. However, contracts have not yet been exchanged, and therefore the sale has not been finalised.

Junior Doctors (Overtime)

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to alter the rules on overtime for junior doctors so that they are paid more for working overtime. [95539]

Mr. Hutton: Traditionally, junior doctors are contracted for duty hours in excess of the standard working week in order to provide continuity of patient care and also to meet their professional and career training needs. These additional duty hours reflect the hours for which the doctor is contracted to be available to work and not the number of hours actually worked.

We have now reached agreement with the junior doctors' negotiators on the principles and structure of a new contract which will replace the old, over-complicated arrangements for next year. We propose a three-year deal to modernise junior doctors' pay, which promises greater rewards for those in the hardest working posts. This will mean that posts will be defined and rewarded according to agreed intensity criteria. Officials are currently negotiating these definitions with the junior doctor negotiators.

Children's Homes

Mr. Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when measures will be in place to regulate the operation of children's homes which cater for under four children; and if he will make a statement. [95663]

Mr. Hutton *[holding answer 26 October 1999]:* We intend to extend regulation to children's homes which accommodate fewer than four children as soon as we have the legislative opportunity. In the meantime we are considering how we might introduce a voluntary accreditation scheme for such homes.

Care Home Fees

Mr. Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the category of persons who are admitted to *(a)* nursing homes and *(b)* residential care homes who are required to pay for their accommodation and care; and if he will make a statement. [95718]

Mr. Hutton *[holding answer 26 October 1999]:* Where a person is provided with accommodation under Part III of the National Assistance Act 1948, section 22 of that Act provides for them to be charged for the accommodation. Part III places a duty on local authorities to provide accommodation:

> for persons aged 18 or over who, by reason of age, illness, disability or any other circumstances are in need of care and attention which is not otherwise available to them;
>
> for expectant or nursing mothers who are in need of care and attention which is not otherwise available to them.

Section 22 requires the local authority to set a standard rate for the accommodation.

The National Health Service may fund placements in nursing homes for people who are eligible for continuing NHS in-patient care.

Dental Services

Mr. Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what steps he is taking to ensure that anyone who requires dentistry work can register with an NHS dentist and receive dentistry work under the NHS; and if he will make a statement. [95667]

Mr. Hutton *[holding answer 26 October 1999]:* We are aware of the existence of problems in accessing National Health dental services in some parts of the country, particularly in some rural areas, which we inherited from the previous administration, and which we have taken positive steps to address through the Investing in Dentistry and Personal Dental Services initiatives.

Schemes approved under the Investing in Dentistry initiative should enable nearly 800,000 patients to access NHS dental services. A first wave of 15 Personal Dental Service pilots began in October 1998, and a second wave of pilots will start later this year. Many of the pilots are in areas where patients have had difficulty finding a NHS dentist.

On the 28 September, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister announced plans to introduce 30 NHS Dental Access Centres over the next two years and the use of NHS Direct to further improve patients' access to NHS dental care. Further measures to tackle the problem of access will be announced in the Government's Dental Strategy, which will be published later this year.

Community Hospitals (Oxfordshire)

Mr. Woodward: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he expects to make an announcement on the future of community hospitals in Oxfordshire; and if he will make a statement. [95984]

Mr. Hutton *[holding answer 27 October 1999]:* My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State fully recognises the concerns of the local community on such an important issue.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State is carefully considering all options before reaching a final decision on the future arrangements for community hospitals in Oxfordshire and the future of Bicester Community Hospital.

Millennium Compliance

Mr. Woodward: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if Oxfordshire Ambulance NHS Trust is millennium compliant. [96005]

Mr. Hutton: On 30 September 1999, the Action 2000 Traffic Light Score, used to assess the readiness of organisations for the Year 2000, was Blue.

A Blue score indicates that assessment of the organisation has not identified any risk of material disruption.

Food Labelling (Nuts)

Mr. Grogan: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he intends to issue guidance on the labelling of nuts

in food products following the report of the Committee on Toxicity of Chemicals in Food, Consumer Products and the Environment. [93554]

Ms Quin: I have been asked to reply.

The European Commission is expected to bring forward a proposal by the end of the year which will extend current labelling requirements for pre-packaged foods so that the presence of added allergens such as nuts will always be declared. Organisations representing UK manufacturers and retailers have already produced general guidance notes for their members on allergens and are preparing specific guidelines on labelling. We are continuing to urge industry to take action on so-called 'defensive labelling' such as 'may contain nuts' so that it is restricted to cases where it is absolutely essential.

SCOTLAND

Timor Gap

Ms Roseanna Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what meetings were held by his *(a)* ministers and *(b)* officials to discuss Scottish investment in oil or gas developments in the Timor Gap; with whom these meetings were held; when they were set up; what the precise purpose of the meetings was; what involvement there was of Indonesian (i) Government ministers (ii) officials and (iii) businesses; and if he will make a statement. [95268]

Mr. Wilson *[holding answer 26 October 1999]:* Neither my right hon. Friend nor I have held any meetings to discuss Scottish investment in oil or gas developments in the Timor Gap. However, I hosted a dinner with an Australian delegation, led by Mr. Darryl Manzie, the Minister for Resource Development for the Northern Territories, on 3 September 1999. The delegation was visiting the UK to seek partnerships with British companies in relation to oil and gas developments in the Timor Gap and elsewhere. No Indonesian government ministers, officials or businesses were involved in this meeting.

Departmental Research

Mr. Welsh: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how many civil servants his Department employs in a research capacity *(a)* part-time and *(b)* full-time; and if he will list his Department's contracts for outside research since May. [96064]

Dr. Reid: There are no civil servants currently employed in my Department in a full-time or part-time research capacity. I will write to the hon. Member on the question of contracts for outside research since May.

TREASURY

National Insurance Fund

Mr. Stevenson: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) what was the surplus or deficit in the National Insurance Fund for each of the last five years; and what are the expected surpluses or deficits for each of the next five years; [94916]

(2) what was the total amount of the National Insurance Fund for each of the last five financial years; and what is expected to be the total amount for each of the next five years. [94917]

Mr. Field: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what is the current surplus in the National Insurance Fund; and if he will estimate what the surplus will be for each of the next five years. [96056]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 28 October 1999]:* The available figures for Great Britain are provided in the table.

£ million

Year	*[1]Surplus/Deficit*	*[2]Fund Balance*
1993–94	1,112	4,549
1994–95	2,279	6,828
1995–96	1,008	7,836
1996–97	–98	7,737
1997–98	1,871	9,608
1998–99	2,565	12,173
1999–2000	1,529	13,702
2000–01	1,630	15,330
2001–02	1,390	16,730

[1] Excess of receipts over repayments
[2] At the end of the year

National Insurance Contributions Holiday

Mr. Rowlands: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many *(a)* companies and *(b)* individuals have benefited from the national insurance contributions holiday since its inception. [94693]

Dawn Primarolo: The NIC holiday scheme was introduced in April 1996. By October 1999, only 16,175 individual holidays had been awarded. No information is available on the number of different employers benefiting from the scheme. NIC holidays were available only for jobs starting before 1 April 1999. The New Deal now provides much better methods of encouraging employers to take on the long term unemployed.

The New Deal for young unemployed people was introduced nationally on April 6 1998. It had already been operating since January 5 in 12 pathfinder areas. The New Deal for Long-Term Unemployed People aged 25+ was introduced nationally on 29 June 1998. By the end of August 1999, 58,200 employers had signed a New Deal employer agreement, and by the end of July 1999, 18,660 young people had obtained a subsidised job through the New Deal. A further 4,630 people had gone into subsidised employment from the New Deal for Long-Term Unemployed People aged 25+.

Air Passenger Duty

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on the present state of discussions with the European Commission regarding infraction proceedings relating to air passenger duty. [95149]

Mr. Timms *[holding answer 25 October 1999]:* The Government are considering their response and will make an announcement in due course.

VAT (Church Repairs)

Mr. Baldry: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what power the Government have to reduce VAT on church repairs and maintenance. [95466]

Dawn Primarolo: European law does not offer a reduced VAT rate for church repairs and maintenance.

Double Taxation Agreement (Georgia)

Mr. Baldry: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer when the Government of Georgia first approached the UK Government to agree a double taxation agreement; and when he estimates such an agreement will be concluded. [95469]

Dawn Primarolo: The Georgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs sent a draft agreement for consideration in June 1997. This is being studied carefully. The UK's programme of Double Taxation Agreement negotiations is planned well in advance and we have received no recent representations for an agreement with Georgia.

Cigarette Import Prices

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on Government policy towards implementation of Council Directive 1999/81/EC (OJ L211 of 11 August 1999); what was the vote of Her Majesty's Government on this issue; what assessment he has made of cigarette import prices consequential to this ruling, via accompanying tax-take effects; and if the matter was discussed with the Department of Health. [95499]

Dawn Primarolo: The provisions in Directive 99/81/EC, which was agreed unanimously in Council, do not require any change to UK legislation nor to Government policy. There are no practical implications for the UK tobacco market and, therefore, no effect on tobacco prices or on revenue receipts.

Contributions Agency

Mr. Field: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many of his Department's staff were employed in the Contributions Agency a year before the passing of the Social Security Contributions (Transfer of Functions, etc.) Act 1999; how many are currently so employed; and what the projection is one year hence following the transfer of functions to the Treasury. [95501]

Dawn Primarolo: The following information relates to staff in Contributions Agency/National Insurance Contributions Office at:

31 March 1998, shortly after the Budget announcement of Contributions Agency/Inland Revenue merger;

31 March 1999, date of merger;

1 October 1999, latest position;

31 March 2000, forecast 12 months after merger.

Information from 1 April 1999 is for National Insurance Contributions Office only as former Contributions Agency staff in Field Operations are now included in Inland Revenue Regional Organisation and subject to their resource plans. The information for 31 March 2000 takes into account the re-organisation of National Insurance Contributions Office/Head Office from 1 November 1999.

	Contributions Agency including Field Operations		*National Insurance Contributions Office*	
Grade	*31 March 1998*	*31 March 1999*	*1 October 1999*	*31 March 2000*
E2	2,362	2,350	1,333	1,847
E1	3,145	2,714	2,264	2,372
D	2,010	2,187	633	598
C2	443	455	231	193
C1	105	115	71	72
B	49	53	48	26
SCS	4	6	5	4
Total	8,118	7,880	4,585	5,112

Company Accounts

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer with regard to the taxation of companies, what his policy is on the accounting treatment of provisions in company accounts and its effect on capital allowances; and if he will make a statement. [95920]

Dawn Primarolo: A provision made in the accounts of a company carrying on a trade will be allowable for tax purposes if:

the provision is in respect of allowable revenue expenditure

the making of the provision accords with UK generally accepted accounting practice

the timing of the expenditure in question is not affected by any specific tax rule

the provision is sufficiently accurate.

Capital allowances, by contrast, give relief for capital expenditure. The tax treatment of provisions, which, as the hon. Member will know, is affected by recent judicial decisions, therefore has no effect on the availability of capital allowances. The Inland Revenue continues to monitor developments in the law in this area.

Tax Starting Rate

Mr. Hilary Benn: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what would be the estimated cost to public funds of reducing the starting rate of tax on savings by half. [96184]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The starting rate of tax does not apply to savings.

Care in the Community

Dr. Brand: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what recent representations he has received about the adequacy of the census data relating to the level of, and need for, care in the community; what guidance he has given to those answering census questions on care; what information he plans to collate with a view to submitting evidence to the Commission on Long-Term Care; and what discussions on the above matters he has held with the Department of Health. [96446]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The White Paper on the 2001 Census, published in March, announced the Government's proposals with respect to the questions to be asked in the next Census. This included, for the first time, a question on provision of care. This followed a lengthy and detailed consultation period including representations from both central and local government and others for a question on provision of care to be asked.

The question on which the Department of Health has been fully consulted, and which has been successfully tested, focuses on the number of hours of care provided per week (defined as help or support to others with long-term physical or mental ill-health, with a disability, or with problems related to old age) in three bands for 1–19 hours, 20–49 hours and 50 or more hours.

Final details will be announced in the Census Order and Regulations to be laid before Parliament shortly.

Correspondence

Sir Brian Mawhinney: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer when the right hon. Member for North-West Cambridgeshire can expect a reply (1) to his letter of 6 August on behalf of his constituent, Mr. Jackson; [96282]

(2) his letter of 10 August on behalf of his constituent Mr. Field; [96513]

(3) his letter of 8 September on behalf of his constituent, Mr. Gauvey; [96283]

(4) his letter of 2 September on behalf of his constituent, Mr. Perkins. [96290]

Mr. Andrew Smith: I wrote to the right hon. Gentleman yesterday.

VAT

Mr. Spring: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what discussions he has had with his counterparts in other EU countries about EU proposals to enable a reduced rate of VAT to apply to *(a)* labour-intensive industries and *(b)* work on listed buildings. [95490]

Dawn Primarolo: The terms of a draft Directive to allow member states to apply a reduced rate of VAT to certain labour-intensive services have been discussed by the European Council of Finance Ministers on several occasions this year: final agreement was reached on 22 October.

There have been no discussions specifically about a reduced rate for work on listed buildings.

Debt Management Office

Mr. Caplin: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement about the UK Debt Management Office's annual report and accounts for 1998–99. [96909]

Mr. Alan Johnson: The DMO's annual report and accounts for 1998–99, its first year of operation, are being published today. Copies will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

Tax Law Rewrite

Mr. Caplin: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if there have been further developments on the Tax Law Rewrite project. [96953]

Dawn Primarolo: I am pleased to be able to tell the House that the Tax Law Rewrite project is continuing to make good progress. The Inland Revenue today published the project's eighth Exposure Draft, containing draft rewritten clauses on the savings and investment income of individuals. In due course, these clauses will be included in a Bill which will completely rewrite income tax legislation. Copies of the Exposure Draft will be placed in the Libraries of the House.

Pensioners (Tax)

Mr. Field: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many pensioners will be paying tax at the higher rate in *(a)* 2010, *(b)* 2020, *(c)* 2030, *(d)* 2040 and *(e)* 2050, assuming that tax bands for pensioners are indexed to prices. [95537]

Dawn Primarolo: Reliable estimates cannot be given, due to uncertainty about levels of pensions and other income so many years ahead.

Mr. Webb: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will estimate how many, and what percentage of, pensioners paid income tax in *(a)* 1997–98, *(b)* 1998–99 and *(c)* 1999–2000; and if he will estimate the number who will pay tax in 2000–01. [95733]

Dawn Primarolo: The numbers and percentages of pensioners paying tax in 1997–98, and those estimated to pay tax in 1998–99 and 1999–2000, 2000–01, are as follows:

Year	*Number of pensioner taxpayers (million)*	*Percentage of all pensioners*
1997–98	4.0	37
1998–99	4.1	39
1999–2000	3.8	35
2000–01	4.0	37

Notes:
1. The numbers are based on the 1997 Survey of Personal Incomes.
2. Pensioners have been defined as women aged 60 and over and men aged 65 and over.

Mr. Field: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what marginal tax rates are faced by pensioners in different income groups, taking into account the payment of tax and the loss of eligibility for means-tested assistance. [95518]

Mr. Rooker: I have been asked to reply.

Average Marginal Reduction Rates across more than one benefit are not readily available. The information requested therefore could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

Retraining Assistance

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what assessment he has made of the advantages and disadvantages of providing retraining assistance by *(a)* tax allowances or rebates and *(b)* facilitating career development loans at lower than commercial rates of interest for individuals in employment but at risk of becoming unemployed; and if he will make a statement. [94811]

Mr. Wicks: I have been asked to reply.

Vocational Training Relief (VTR) is currently available to individuals paying for their own training/retraining in certain circumstances. Individuals who undergo retraining provided by their employer or former employer around the time of redundancy are exempt from income tax on

the benefit of that retraining. This is in addition to the general tax exception for employees on the benefit in kind of work-related training funded by their employer.

A national framework for individual learning accounts will be launched in 2000. Under this framework, individuals will be able to obtain 20 per cent. discounts, rather than tax relief, on the first £500 a year of a wide range of learning which they pay for—with 80 per cent. discounts for certain key courses, including computer literacy. Contributions paid by employers towards eligible learning for employees who hold individual learning accounts will qualify for a deduction from taxable profits. They will also be tax and NICs free in the hands of their employees, provided employers contribute to the learning accounts of their lowest paid workers on similar terms. Individual learning accounts will promote lifelong learning and encourage individuals to take responsibility for their own training and development.

The Chancellor announced in this year's budget that VTR is to be withdrawn sometime in 2000–01, when the national framework for individual learning accounts is launched. The incentives announced for individual learning accounts provide a better means of targeting support from public funds than VTR.

There are no immediate plans to change the terms under which loans are offered by banks under the Career Development Loan (CDL) scheme. However, we are actively looking at what improvements can be made to the provision of support for learning, to help individuals to access training. As part of this, we are keeping under review the operation and terms of the CDL scheme, and consideration of the terms under which individual learning accounts should be introduced, in accordance with the proposals in "The Learning Age" Green Paper.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Special Advisers

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, pursuant to his answer on 25 June 1999, *Official Report*, column *483*, on special advisers, how many meetings his Special Adviser David Clark held with members and officials of the United States Government during his visit to the USA on 19 to 24 April, indicating the date and location of each meeting, and the names of the members and officials of the US Government at each meeting and the name of the US department to which they belong. [93963]

Mr. Robin Cook: David Clark, Special Adviser to the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, accompanied the Secretary of State to the NATO Summit in Washington from 19 to 24 April. He was a member of the Foreign Secretary's official delegation, and, in this capacity, he attended official meetings with the Foreign Secretary.

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, pursuant to his answer of 25 June 1999, *Official Report*, column *483*, how many meetings his special adviser Andrew Hood held with members and officials of the United States Government during his visit to the USA on 20 to 23 June 1997; and what were the dates and locations of each meeting, the names of the members and officials of the US Government at each meeting and the name of the US department to which they belonged. [93912]

Mr. Robin Cook: Andrew Hood, Special Adviser to the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, accompanied the Foreign Secretary to the G7 Summit in Denver in June 1997. He was a member of the Foreign Secretary's official delegation, and, in this capacity, he attended official meetings with the Foreign Secretary.

EC Directorate General

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what the breakdown is by nationality of the senior grades in each EC Directorate General. [95408]

Mr. Vaz: We have obtained the information on the breakdown of nationality in each Directorate General from the European Commission. This information has been placed in the Library of the House.

Georgia

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what reports he has received on the conduct of the general election in Georgia and on the activities of the Revival Party. [95815]

Mr. Vaz *[holding answer 28 October 1999]:* Voting will take place in the Georgian parliamentary elections on 31 October. We have reports of some intimidation and obstruction of candidates and supporters on all sides during the campaign, as well as a single violent incident when a hand grenade was thrown into the garden of one of the candidates of the Socialist party, fortunately not resulting in any injuries. As well as observing the conduct of the election through the British Embassy in Tbilisi, the Government have committed £70,000 towards the OSCE monitoring mission for the elections, which will fund UK personnel in the management team and both long-term and short-term observers. We welcome the appointment of my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall, South (Mr. George) as Special Representative of the Chairman in Office of the OSCE: he will co-present the findings of the monitors after the elections. We intend to wait until the official OSCE report on the elections is published before commenting more generally on the conduct of the elections.

Sri Lanka

Mr. Colman: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations he has made to the Government of Sri Lanka concerning the treatment of the Tamil minority. [96418]

Mr. Hain: We maintain a dialogue with the Sri Lankan Government on a wide range of issues including human rights. We shall continue to monitor the situation and will raise our concerns whenever appropriate.

Chinese President (State Visit)

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (1) what meetings took place between his Department and the Metropolitan

Police at which the policing and public order implications of the state visit of the President of China were discussed; [96408]

(2) what representations his Department made to the Royal Parks Police about the policing of the State Visit of the President of China; [96488]

(3) what meetings were held between his Department and the Royal Parks Police about the state visit of the President of China. [96492]

Mr. Nicholls: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what meetings took place between Foreign Office officials and the police to discuss the policing of protestors during the visit of the President of China; if he will publish the minutes of those meetings; and if he will make a statement. [96458]

Mr. Battle: I refer the hon. Members to the answer given to my hon. Friend the Member for Cynon Valley (Ann Clwyd) on 28 October 1999, *Official Report*, column *993*.

Immigration

Mr. Wood: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what is the waiting time for interviews for settlement purposes at posts in *(a)* India, *(b)* Pakistan and *(c)* Bangladesh. [95947]

Mr. Vaz: The waiting time figures as at the end of September were as follows:

Waiting times for interviews for settlement purposes

weeks

Post	*Q1*	*Q2*	*Q3*	*Q4*
India				
Bombay	0	4	4	4
New Delhi	0	16	21	25
Pakistan				
Islamabad	8	40	42	50
Bangladesh				
Dhaka	17	26	11	49

Notes:

Queue 1–4 System

Queue 1—Right of Abode cases and Dependant Relatives over 65;
Queue 2—Spouses and Children under 18;
Queue 3—Fiance(e)s and other First Time Applicants; and
Queue 4—Re-applicants.

The visa sections at Calcutta, Madras and Karachi have a standard single queue for all settlement applications. Their current waiting times are:

Calcutta: currently no queue

Madras: 2 weeks

Karachi: 8 weeks.

European Union Programme

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list *(a)* the forthcoming business in the Council of the European Union for November and *(b)* the major European Union events for the next six months. [96950]

Mr. Vaz: The information is as follows:

Monthly forecast of EU Business: November 1999

November 1999

2 November—Dubai—EU-Gulf Co-operation Council (EU-GCC 9th Joint Council)

Opening Statement by the President of the Meeting (United Arab Emirates) and reply by the EU Presidency
Adoption by the Agenda
Implementation of the Co-operation Agreement
Free trade agreement negotiations
Exchange of views on developments in the two regions:
European Union; Gulf Co-operation Council
Exchange of views on political questions of common interest
Approval of the Joint Communique and agreed minutes
Any other business

3–4 November—Brussels—European Parliamentary Plenary

Consultation Procedure

(possible) Proposal for a Council Decision concluding the Agreement for scientific and technological co-operation between the European Community and the People's Republic of China

(possible) Proposal for a Council Decision concluding the Agreement on co-operation for science and technology between the European Community and the government of the Russia Federation

(possible) Proposal for a Council Decision concluding the Agreement for scientific and technological co-operation between the European Community and the Argentine Republic

Codecision Procedure

Second Reading

(possible) Common position adopted by the Council with a view to adopting a European Parliament and Council Directive concerning the enforcement of seafarers' hours of work on board ships using Community ports

(possible) Common position adopted by the Council with a view to adopting a European Parliament and Council Directive amending Directive 93/104/EC concerning certain aspects of the organisation of working time to cover sectors and activities excluded from that Directive

(possible) Common position adopted by the Council with a view to adopting a European Parliament and Council Directive relating to the availability of consumer information on fuel economy in respect of the marketing of new passenger cars.

8 November—Brussels—ECOFIN Council

Adoption of the provisional agenda

Approval of the list of "A" items

The Tax Package

(a) Taxation of Savings

Key issues; reports on Dependent or Associated Territories

(b) Code of Conduct on business taxation

state of play

(c) Interests and Royalties

(possible) Energy Taxation

Economic policy co-ordination

Draft Council report to European Council

EIB lending: Renewal of Community guarantee for projects in third countries

(possible) HIPC-initiative

The introduction of euro notes and coins

Common statement

Risk capital: Implementation of the Action Plan—Communication by the Commission

(possible) Own Resources Decision

The Employment package

Revised Joint Employment Report

Joint opinion of the EPC/ELC on the Employment Guidelines and Recommendations

AOB (p. m.—Euro 11; Macroeconomic dialogue)

8 November—Brussels—Consumer Affairs Council

Adoption of the agenda

(possible) Approval of the list of "A" items

Amended proposal for a European Parliament and Council Directive concerning the distance marketing of consumer financial services and modifying Directives 97/7/EC and 98/27/EC (Legal basis proposed by Commission: Articles 47[2], 55 and 95) (Item on which a vote may be called for)

Common position

13097/98 CONSOM 76 ECOFIN 239 CODEC 622

10505/99 CONSOM 46 ECOFIN 136 CODEC 456

Implementation and application of consumer protection legislation

Information from the Commission on the implementation and application in the member states of certain Directives, in particular Directives on time-sharing and package holidays

Consumer access to justice

(a) Information from the Commission on the follow-up to its recommendation on the principles applicable to the mechanisms responsible for out-of-court settlements of consumer disputes

(b) Information from the Presidency on the European Council meeting in Tampere on 15 and 16 October 1999 as regards the item on citizen's access to justice

Food security

(a) Information campaign on food security in the member states

Progress report from the Commission

(b) "European Food 2000" seminar

(Helsinki, 23 and 24 September 1999)

Presidency briefing on the outcome

(c) Discussion

(15.00–16.00: open debate)

Consumer protection and services of general interest—Discussion

11682/99 CONSOM 49 MI 93

Other business

Transparency for the consumer in regard to civil liability for motor vehicles (automobile insurance)

contribution by the Italian delegation

9 November—Brussels—Industry Council

Adoption of the agenda

(possible) Approval of the list of "A" items

Competitiveness and entrepreneurial policy of the European Union

Debate and Council conclusions

(a) Commission communication entitled "Structural change and adjustment in European manufacturing"

11552/99 ECO 309

11706/99 ECO 317

(b) Competitiveness in the Information Society

(c) Medium-term programme for the organisation of an ongoing debate on industrial competitiveness

(d) SME

SME forum: Rapid growth and competitiveness through technology

Commission report on concerted action with the member states

Integration of sustainable development into EU industrial policy

Report to the Helsinki European Council

State of the competitiveness of the EU forest-based and related industries

Commission communication

Council conclusions 11707/99 ECO 318

Steel industry

(a) State of the competitiveness of the steel industry in the EU

Commission communication

Commission presentation

11708/99 SID 32 SOC 332 FIN 374 ECO 319

(b) Commission report to the Council on the monitoring of aid for steel covered by Article 95 of the Treaty

Information from the Commission

Shipbuilding

Commission report on the international shipbuilding situation

Council conclusions 11919/99 RC 24

(b) Fourth Commission report to the Council on the monitoring of aid to certain shipyards currently being restructured in Germany and Spain

Commission presentation 11921/99 RC 26

White Paper on the modernisation of the rules laid down by Articles 85 and 86 of the Treaty—Commission briefing

Other business—State aids

Note from the Danish delegation

11855/99 ECO 323 FIN 379 RC 23 EEE 99

11 November—Brussels—Development Council

No agenda yet available

11 November—Brussels—Standing Committee on Employment

Rules of procedure

Confirmation of the Council's position

Co-ordinated strategy for employment

Commission Communication on Employment Guidelines for 2000

Draft Joint Report on Employment for 1999

Commission Recommendation for a Council Recommendation on the implementation of member states' employment policies

The discussion will take account of the Community's economic and social objectives (i.e. the Broad Economic Guidelines).

11–12 November—Helsinki—Ministerial Conference on the Northern Dimension

No formal agenda

12 November—Brussels—Accession Conference

No formal agenda

12 November—Brussels—Labour and Social Affairs Council

Adoption of the provisional agenda

(possible) Approval of the list of "A" items

Employment

Proposal for Guidelines for Member States' Employment Policies 2000

doc. 10992/99/ SOC 302 ECOFIN 159

Draft Joint Employment Report 1999

doc. 10993/99 SOC 303 ECOFIN 160 + COR1 (f)

Commission Recommendation for Council Recommendations on the Implementation of Member States' Employment Policies

doc. 10994/99 SOC 304 ECOFIN 161

Any other business

15–16 November—Brussels—Agriculture Council

Adoption of the agenda

Approval of the list of "A" items

Strategy on environmental integration and sustainable development in the common agricultural policy (in preparation for the Helsinki European Council on 11 and 12 December 1999)

12082/99 AGRI 165 ENV 360

Beef labelling

(a) Report by the Commission to the European Parliament and to the Council on the situation regarding the implementation of beef-labelling systems in the different Member States (Art. 19(3) of Council Regulation (EC) No 820/97) 12031/99 AGRILEG 163

(b) Proposals for Regulations of the European Parliament and of the Council

establishing a system for the identification and registration of bovine animals and regarding the labelling of beef and beef products and repealing Council Regulation (EC) No 820/97

amending Council Regulation (EC) No 820/97 establishing a system for the identification and registration of bovine animals and regarding the labelling of beef and beef products 12030/99 AGRILEG 162 CODEC 583

Progress report

Proposal for a Council Regulation on measures to promote and provide information on agricultural products in third countries (Item on which a vote may be requested)

(Legal basis: Art. 37 of the Treaty)

5386/99 AGRI 7 AGRIFIN 7

(possible) Proposal for a Council Regulation amending Regulation (EEC) No 1765/92 establishing a support system for producers of certain arable crops (non-food) (Item on which a vote may be requested)

(Legal basis: Art. 36 and 37 of the Treaty)

11375/95 AGRIORG 249 AGRIFIN 220

(possible) Cotton: Proposals for Council Regulations

adjusting, for the sixth time, the system of aid for cotton introduced by Protocol 4 annexed to the Act of Accession of Greece

relating to the production aid for cotton

(possible) Commission information on the banana dossier

Extension of State aid for small producers

Austrian delegation's request for authorisation

Items Within the Competence of the Permanent Representatives Committee

Dioxin: Progress report

(possible) Proposal for a Directive of the European Parliament and of the Council amending Directive 64/432/EEC on health problems affecting intra-Community trade in bovine animals and swine

Other business

Use of hormones as growth promoters (request by the Danish delegation)

Equal opportunities for men and women and rural development (request by the Swedish delegation)

Organisation of future work

15–16 November—Brussels—General Affairs Council

Adoption of the provisional agenda

Approval of the list of "A" items

Horizontal Issues

Resolutions, decisions and opinions adopted by the European Parliament at its part-sessions in Strasbourg on 417 and 25129 October 1999

Electoral procedure

European Security and Defence Policy: elements for the Presidency report on military and non-military aspects of crisis management

Common Strategies

External Relations

Negotiations for a development partnership agreement with the ACP states

preparation for the next Ministerial Conference

Follow-up of the EU-Russia Summit

Pakistan; Western Balkans; Indonesia

Bananas

WTO: Ministerial Conference in Seattle

AOB

Items Likely to Become "A" Points

Adoption of the EU position for the 12th meeting of the EEA Council

Adoption of the EU position for the Association Council with Tunisia (16 November 1999)

Adoption of the EU position for the 5th Association Council with Bulgaria (16 November 1999)

Adoption of the EU position for the second Co-operation Council with Moldova on 16 November 1999

(possible) European armaments policy: adoption of the common position

15–19 November—Strasbourg—European Parliament Plenary

No agenda yet available

16 November—Brussels—EEA Council

No agenda yet available

18 November—Brussels—Health Council

No agenda yet available

22 November—Brussels—Fisheries Council (possible)

No agenda yet available

23 November—Brussels—Culture/Audiovisual Council

No agenda yet available

23 November—Brussels—Youth Council

No agenda yet available

25–26 November—Brussels—Budget Council

No agenda yet available

26 November—Brussels—Education Council

No agenda yet available

29 November—Brussels—Labour and Social Affairs Council

No agenda yet available

29 November—Brussels—ECOFIN Council

Preparation of the European Council in Helsinki

Economic policy cooperation, report by the Council

Employment

Joint annual employment report of Council and Commission

Employment Guidelines 2000

Report on reinforced tax policy co-operation

Effective fight against fraud

Report by the Council

Tax Package

Code of Conduct (Business Taxation)

Final report

Taxation of Savings—Political agreement on Draft Directive

Interest and Royalties—Political agreement on Draft Directive

Implementation of Stability and Growth Pact

Financial Services Policy Group
Report by the Commission

Amendment of the UCITS Directive
Political agreement

Annual Report of the Court of Auditors concerning financial year 1998

EURO 1—Joint meeting with Labour and Social Affairs Council (Employment Guidelines 2000 and joint annual employment report)

30 November—Brussels—Telecommunications Council

No agenda yet available

30 November-3 December—Seattle—WTO Ministerial Conference

No formal agenda.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Hill Farmers

Mr. Blizzard: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what will be the deadline for responses to the consultation paper on payments to hill farmers under Agenda 2000. [97030]

Mr. Nick Brown: I intend to issue the consultation paper on payments to hill farmers in England next week. We will be seeking responses by 3 December.

Veterinary Surgeons

Mr. Paterson: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what discussions he has had with *(a)* the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons and *(b)* the British Veterinary Association concerning the English language skills of foreign-trained veterinary surgeons seeking employment in this country. [88294]

Ms Quin: I can confirm that the Minister and appropriate officials have regular contact with representatives of both the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons and the British Veterinary Association.

The Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons is obliged to register Veterinary Surgeons who have qualified from recognised establishments within the European Union. This is a reciprocal arrangement. Veterinary Surgeons who have qualified from non-European Union non-recognised establishments are required to pass a written examination (in English) before they can be registered with the college. Registration with the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons is a pre-requisite to practising veterinary surgery.

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what regulatory powers he has over the level of fees charged by veterinary surgeons; and if he will make a statement. [89967]

Ms Quin: We have no regulatory powers over the level of fees charged by veterinary surgeons in private veterinary practice. There is a free market in the provision of private veterinary services and animal owners may choose the veterinary practice which treats their animals.

Bovine Tuberculosis

Mr. Nigel Jones: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what was the cost in 1997 of compensating farmers for *(a)* cattle compulsorily slaughtered after testing positive in the tuberculin skin test and *(b)* cattle which were found not to be infected on post-mortem and culture examination. [93738]

Ms Quin: A total of £2.38 million was paid out in 1997 in compensation for 3,298 reactors and 462 contact animals, of which £1.02 million was for reactors subsequently found in post mortem and culture examinations not to have been infected with TB.

Mr. Nigel Jones: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what research the Government are conducting on the pathogenesis and epidemiology of bovine tuberculosis in cattle. [93739]

Ms Quin: A wide range of research activity is in progress in this area, as set out in the reply given to the hon. Member on 20 July 1999, *Official Report*, column *495*. In addition, the Independent Scientific Group has recently made recommendations on further research needs relating to the pathogenesis of *M. bovis* and MAFF will shortly be inviting applications for research proposals.

Mr. Brake: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what progress has been made in the development of a tuberculosis vaccine for cattle. [94922]

Ms Quin: The Government are funding expenditure of about £1.4 million a year on vaccine development. The main thrust of the programme in its first five-year phase is to identify vaccine candidates. The work is being carried out by the Veterinary Laboratories Agency and the Institute of Animal Health, drawing on work carried out internationally and in related fields, such as human vaccines, as appropriate. Emerging findings will be published as and when appropriate.

Milk Imports (Stansted)

Mr. Evans: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how much milk was imported through Stansted airport from Holland in the last 12 months for which figures are available. [93733]

Ms Quin: No figures are available for imports of milk through individual airports.

Discarding

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what is the publication date for the research study commissioned from Nautilus Consultants in June on economic aspects of discarding. [95404]

Ms Quin: The research study is jointly funded by MAFF, the Commission and the Dutch and French Governments and involves consultants from UK, France and Netherlands. Nautilus Consultants is the UK Contractor. The project commenced in June and is expected to take about 18 months to complete. It is intended that the results will be published but it is too early to give a precise date for publication.

Cattle Passports

Dr. Fox: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how the cost of cattle passports is calculated; and what is the cost of similar arrangements in each EU member state. [94289]

Ms Quin: My right hon. Friend the Minister announced on 20 September 1999 that the Government would not now be proceeding with their proposals to charge for cattle passports. In the current depressed state of the market this would be an additional burden on farmers. The Government will continue to meet the running costs of the Cattle Tracing System and will not impose charges before 2002–03 at the earliest.

Regarding charges in other member states, I refer the hon. Member to the reply given to the hon. Member for Totnes (Mr. Steen) on 22 July 1999, *Official Report*, column *660*.

GM Crops

Joan Ruddock: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what representations he has received from *(a)* retailers and *(b)* consumer representatives on the thresholds of genetically modified material in food currently subject to consultation by the European Commission; what advice his Department has given to the Commission; and if he will make a statement. [94872]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 21 October 1999]*: MAFF received a number of responses from retailers and consumer representatives in response to the recent EC Commission proposal on thresholds for GM material in food. The vast majority of these supported the threshold of 1 per cent. contained in the proposal as being a practical upper limit taking into account the current situation with regard to analytical methods and supply chain. It was recognised that this threshold would apply to food ingredients so that the level in the final food would be much lower.

The proposal was agreed in Brussels on 21 October with only minor changes.

In agreeing to the 1 per cent. figure we made clear that actual levels of GM material in non GM soya and maize ingredients should be kept as low as possible and that the threshold itself should be reviewed within two years. The Commission will be drafting a statement to accompany the Regulation to cover this point.

We shall be continuing to press strongly for clear EC rules to be agreed on GM free labelling and the labelling of animal foods containing GM material as quickly as possible.

Animal and Food Exports

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (1) what plans he has to make bilateral agreements with *(a)* Poland, *(b)* Hungary, *(c)* the Czech Republic, *(d)* Estonia, *(e)* Slovenia and *(f)* Slovakia to minimise regulation and to expedite veterinary inspection relating to the export of UK animal and food products; and if he will make a statement; [94609]

(2) if the EU Commission is seeking to reach agreement with applicant countries for EU membership, in advance of their accession, to minimise regulation and to expedite veterinary inspection relating to the export of EU animal and food products; and if he will make a statement. [94610]

Ms Quin: There are already agreements between the European Union and the applicant countries. One of the objectives of these agreements is a free trade area to establish progressively between the European Union and each of the applicant countries. In addition, Accession Partnerships offer applicant countries EU assistance in meeting priorities for adoption of the Community acquis, including trade rules which underpin the operation of the Single Market.

In the case of the Czech Republic there is a specific Protocol to the Europe Agreement concerning sanitary, phytosanitary and animal welfare measures in relation to trade. Under the terms of the Protocol, there are reduced frequencies for physical checks on certain products traded between the parties. The European Commission has discussed the possibility of similar protocols for trade with Slovakia, Hungary and Poland but these have not yet been concluded.

Correspondence

Sir Brian Mawhinney: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (1) when the right hon. Member for North-West Cambridgeshire can expect a reply to his letter of 1 September on behalf of his constituent, Mr. Doyle; [96287]

(2) when the right hon. Member for North-West Cambridgeshire can expect a reply to his letter of 2 September on behalf of his constituent, Mr. Newman; [96289]

(3) when the right hon. Member for North-West Cambridgeshire can expect a reply to his letter of 7 September on behalf of his constituents, Mr. and Mrs. Smith. [96288]

Mr. Nick Brown: I wrote to the right hon. Member on 28 October 1999 in response to the letters to which he refers.

Portugal (BSE)

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if his Department is to provide assistance to the Portuguese Government for the incineration of carcases to combat BSE; and if any such carcases will be imported for destruction in the United Kingdom. [95298]

Ms Quin: Should the Portuguese Government ask for technical assistance on incineration of carcases, or on any other matter, we would endeavour to provide it. But we have not been asked to take any bovine carcases from Portugal for destruction and we have no plans to offer this facility.

Departmental Twinning

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many requests there have been to his Department for placement of officials from Central, East European and CIS states as twins of his officials; how many such officials have been accepted as twins; and from which countries *(a)* those who were accepted and *(b)* those who were not accepted came. [94007]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 25 October 1999]:* I refer my hon. Friend to the answer given by the Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester, East (Mr. Vaz) on 25 October 1999, *Official Report*, column *739*.

CAP

Mr. Todd: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will place in the Library a copy of the Coopers and Lybrand review of Common Agricultural Policy administration. [95454]

Ms Quin: A copy of the Coopers and Lybrand review of Common Agricultural Policy administration has been placed in the Library of the House. The review was completed in April 1998, and the Department is now developing an integrated IT system for administering CAP schemes, including a geographical information system (GIS) for the Integrated Administration and Control System.

As part of the Ministry's programme for Modernising Government, and to meet its commitment to review at least 60 per cent. of services by March 2003, the Ministry has now embarked on a wide-ranging review of how aid schemes under the Common Agricultural Policy are administered in England, taking account of the opportunities for improving service delivery which the new IT system will offer. PricewaterhouseCoopers have been commissioned to help with this review. The review is currently under way and PricewaterhouseCoopers are due to report their findings before the end of the year.

Poultry Imports

Mr. Robertson: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what assessment he has made of the *(a)* veterinary drug policies and *(b)* farming practices used in countries from which the UK imports poultry; and if he will make a statement. [95713]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 26 October 1999]:* Imports of fresh poultry meat must originate only from third countries on a list drawn up by the European Commission. In drawing up the list the Commission must take account of the state in that country of:

- the health of poultry, other domestic animals and wildlife;
- the supply of information relating to the existence of contagious animal diseases;
- rules and organisation on, and implementation of, disease prevention and control;
- the structure and powers of the veterinary service;
- legislation on the use of banned substances;
- the guarantees the country can give with regard to compliance with EU import rules.

In addition, any third country wishing to export fresh meat to the European Union must submit veterinary drug residue testing plans to the Commission. These describe the residue testing programme to be undertaken in respect of their food production and must provide guarantees which are at least equivalent to the requirements of the Community on EC producers. Commission inspectors verify compliance with residue testing plans when they carry out periodic checks on third country slaughterhouses authorised to produce meat for export to the Community.

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PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

OFFICIAL REPORT

SIXTH SERIES **VOLUME 336**

SESSION 1998–99

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This index to the daily parts and weekly Hansard is derived from the House of Commons Library's Parliamentary On-Line Indexing Service (POLIS), and the subject terms used are based on those used in POLIS. There are often changes in column numbering, etc., between the daily part or weekly Hansard (which simply collects together the daily parts without revision) and the bound volume. The index for the bound volume is revised to take account of these changes, and cannot, therefore, be used in conjunction with the daily part or weekly Hansard. For these versions use the Fortnightly Index.

Scope and arrangement of the Index

Oral and Written Parliamentary Questions are indexed under subject headings and the names of Members asking and Ministers replying to them. Questions are not listed under the names of Departments replying. Departmental listings can be arrived at indirectly by looking under the names of the Minister(s) of that Department. There will, however, be headings 'Northern Ireland', 'Scotland', and 'Wales' under which one will find not only Questions answered by the Northern Ireland Office, Scottish Office, Welsh Office but also Questions about these areas of the United Kingdom which are answered by other Departments. Ministerial statements are indexed under subject headings, under 'Ministerial statements' and the names of Ministers making them and Members speaking on them. General debates are indexed under broad subject headings and under the names of all Members and Ministers taking part. Debates on legislation (Bills, Orders, Regulations etc.) are indexed under the name of the Bill, Statutory Instruments etc., under subject headings and under the names of those taking part.

Contributions by Speaker and deputies are brought together under the heading 'Speaker and deputies'. Significant rulings and statements are indicated by the sub-heading 'Rulings and statements'.

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Members' names are given in the form by which they prefer to be known and are printed in bold italics. Under their names, entries are arranged under one of the two headings *Debates, etc.* (to include interventions on statements, points of order and so on) or *Questions.*

Abbreviations

Bills 1R = first reading, 2R = second reading, Com = Committee stage, Rep = Report stage, 3R = third reading, res = resolution, amendt/amendts = amendment/amendments, * = matter taken formally, without debate.

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